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**The review of the HLPF  
as an opportunity to  
strengthen multi-stakeholder  
participation & improve SDG  
implementation**



## 1 Introduction

The High-level Political Forum, is the United Nations (UN) central platform for follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Forum provides for the “full and effective participation of all States Members of the United Nations and States members of specialized agencies”. (**UNGA Resolution 67/290**). The establishment of the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) was mandated in 2012 by the outcome document of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), «The Future We Want».

The format and organizational aspects of the Forum are outlined in General Assembly Resolution 67/290 entitled: “**Format and organizational aspects of the high-level political forum on sustainable development**”. This resolution anticipated the need for an overall review of the HLPF several years after it was established, and stated that the UNGA :

**“29. Further decides to review at its seventy-third session the format and the organizational aspects of the forum, unless otherwise decided;**

**30. Emphasizes that the review of the implementation of General Assembly resolution 61/16 should take into account the present resolution in order to avoid duplication.”**

A subsequent UNGA Resolution 70/299: “**Follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the global level**”, expanded on the purpose of the proposed review of the HLPF, explaining that the UNGA:

**«21. Decides to review progress in implementing the present resolution and resolution 67/290 on the format and organizational aspects of the High-level Political Forum at its seventy-fourth session, in order to benefit from lessons learned in the first cycle of the forum as well as from other processes under the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council related to the follow-up and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.»**

In addition to the annual July HLPF under ECOSOC auspices, it will also convene for 2 days in September 2019, under UN General Assembly auspices. Only one outcome document, a ‘Political Declaration’ on progress of the entire agenda, will result from the two sessions.

## 2 Key Forus Advocacy Messages for the HLPF Review

**The HLPF Review must:**

### **2.1. Be an inclusive and transparent process**

Civil society is calling for greater transparency in relation to the process of HLPF review. It would appear that this process will not be limited to UNGA in September 2019 but will involve a longer process. Given the importance of this official review of the HLPF, civil society must be fully informed, in advance of the launch of the process being launched, of how it can best engage with and influence it.

### **2.2 Ensure more meaningful and effective participation by civil society in next HLPF cycle**

The overall focus of civil society advocacy is to ensure that the 2019 review results in a reformed HLPF which allows for more meaningful and effective participation by civil society in all parts of the world and at multiple levels (local, national, regional and global) in the full cycle of monitoring and implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

### **2.3. Achieve fundamental reforms to the format and functioning of HLPF in its next cycle**

The UNGA's planned review of the HLPF must go well beyond a superficial reflection process. The review should identify a range of fundamental and necessary reforms to the format and functioning of the HLPF, in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders. A clear timetable and outline of responsibilities for the reform process should also be developed as part of the overall review.

### **2.4 Ensure a multi-level review of the HLPF monitoring cycle**

The review of the HLPF must not focus exclusively on the global level but should be multi-level and include the national, regional and global levels of the overall HLPF monitoring cycle. This is because, as part of its follow-up and review mechanisms, the 2030 Agenda encourages Member States to "**conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels, which are country-led and country-driven**" (paragraph 79). These national reviews are expected to serve as a basis for the regular reviews by the HLPF.

A multi-level approach to the review should include: **(i)** the Voluntary National Review processes, **(ii)** the regional level peer review processes that take place

through the UN's Regional Sustainable Development Forums and **(iii)** the global level HLPF annual peer review system that takes place at the UNHQ in New York. In the first HLPF cycle, these three levels have appeared to have been poorly connected. There is a significant opportunity to improve the interconnected nature of the reviews and ensure that peer learning can be embedded at the level of each region, both before and after the UN Regional SD Forums.

### **2.5. Ensure that the HLPF becomes more policy-oriented:**

The activities of the HLPF should go beyond review and create spaces for much more in-depth policy discussions. UN Member States should be supported in accessing clear policy guidance and support in target-setting to achieve greater sustainability across different policy areas at national and regional levels.



## 3 Specific Forus Advocacy messages for the HLPF Review

**Forus is calling for:**

### **3.1 A strengthened multi-stakeholder dimension of the HLPF**

#### **3.1.1. A reformed HLPF peer review process to strengthen multi-stakeholder participation**

Civil society is also calling for the format of the HLPF to be reviewed and adjusted in the interests of promoting greater multi-stakeholder involvement



in its processes, and to expand the largely state-led processes that currently apply. At present the format of the global HLPF includes an annual meeting held under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council for eight days. The HLPF review should give consideration to expanding this format so that it can comprise several discrete stages:

During the **first stage (2 days)** stakeholders should convene their own HLPF-related forums to discuss and agree common positions. These forums could include the existing **Business Forum**, a newly created **Civil Society Forum** and other relevant stakeholder forums. The **second stage (2 days)** should facilitate multiple stakeholders to subsequently convene a **HLPF Multi-Stakeholder Forum** involving all stakeholder groups to discuss and negotiate certain issues/common positions relevant to each year's HLPF. The **third stage (5 days)** should include

**Thematic Reviews**, including cross-cutting issues, should continue to take place.

A roadmap should be published by the UN and its relevant institutions on preparatory and follow-up process for thematic reviews in good time, including online engagement, and a much greater focus should be placed on actionable results. A much wider range of formal and informal side events should also be facilitated.

**The inter-ministerial meeting (5 days)** should form the core of the **fourth stage** of the process, but the national VNR delegations should comprise diverse stakeholders, and their participation should be facilitated during this stage.

The **Inter-Ministerial Declaration** is the major output of each year's HLPF. Civil society is calling for the declaration to become much more "action-oriented". Civil society and other Stakeholder Groups should have the right to a **published response or parallel statement** to the official Ministerial text. The Inter-Ministerial Declaration agreed by the UN Member States should be used as a springboard for the following year's HLPF Review. Civil society should have the right to publish its Alternative Reports each year in a relevant section of the UN's website.

### **3.1.2. Official status for CSO**

#### **Alternative Reports within the HLPF cycle**

Furthermore, and despite the 2030 Agenda emphasis on multi-stakeholder participation in monitoring and implementation activities, the growing number of high-quality, Civil Society Alternative or 'Spotlight' Reports produced in parallel to official VNRs submitted to the HLPF are given no official status of any kind in HLPF processes and are only rarely displayed on UN DESA's website, depending on each UN Member State. For this reason, civil society is calling for the review of the HLPF to create spaces in its overall processes to allow for the presentation of consolidated and representative CSO reports reflecting national level voices, in addition to the existing official report produced by the UN Major Groups & Other Stakeholders (MGoS). Official online spaces should also be created by the HLPF to allow for the public sharing by national and regional CSO networks of their Civil Society parallel reports, which provide for a 'whole of society' view on implementation with essential information on national experiences. The timeline of submission of civil society reports shall be developed in line with VNR submission timeline, so that civil society report can substantially reflect upon the national VNR report, highlighting identified aspects of significant progress, but also gaps and bottlenecks in the 2030 Agenda implementation on national level. At the same time, the civil society reports submission timeline should allow for timely publication of these reports, in order to inform and influence the HLPF discussions. Emphasis should be put on dissemination of information on avenues of participation of civil society in HLPF process - on national, regional and global level.

### **3.1.3. Reinstatement of privileges formerly available to civil society under the CSD**

The HLPF as it is constituted and functions at present is state-led and state-centred. This is despite the 2030 Agenda's emphasis on the centrality of a multi-stakeholder approach to SDG monitoring, review and implementation. The UN's Major Groups and other Stakeholders include non-governmental and non-profit organisations, business and industry, and local authorities, among others. In accordance with General Assembly resolution 67/290, (paragraph 15), the HLPF is open to the Major Groups, other relevant stakeholders and entities having received a standing invitation to participate as observers in the General



Assembly, building on arrangements and practices observed by the Commission on Sustainable Development.

To enhance the consultative role and participation of the major groups and other relevant stakeholders at the international level in order to make better use of their expertise, the HLPF allows for the MGoS to (a) attend all official meetings of the forum; (b) have access to all official information and documents; (c) intervene in official meetings; (d) submit documents and present written and oral contributions; (e) make recommendations; and (f) organize side events and round tables, in cooperation with Member States and the Secretariat.

However, compared to the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) which preceded the establishment of the HLPF, civil society is aware that some of the former privileges it enjoyed within CSD have been lost, including access to and participation in all rooms, negotiations and meetings, and access to all delegates on the floor. It is calling for the reinstatement of these privileges so that it can be more effective in contributing to the overall functioning of the HLPF.

## 4 More focus on ensuring effective VNR processes

### **4.1 Presenting VNRs for debate and approval by national parliaments**

Although all levels of the HLPF monitoring cycle are equally important, particular attention needs to be paid to the VNR process in order to ensure that it becomes a national and locally-owned process. With this objective in mind, governments should

present a draft VNR to be debated and approved by the national parliament and by official national multi-stakeholder Sustainable Development Forums at a national level before it is submitted for HLPF peer review at the global level.

### **4.2 Inclusive outreach strategies for public engagement with VNR processes**

Sub-national, national and regional outreach strategies should be developed with the objective of engaging all stakeholders from different local areas and regions in the VNR process. Opportunities should be provided to all stakeholders including marginalised groups (eg those suffering from poverty, violence or discrimination, persons with disabilities and/or persons from ethnic minorities) to participate in the VNR process. Access should be guaranteed to people with disabilities and outreach provided in a range of relevant languages and in accessible formats which are adapted to the needs of people with various disabilities. Opportunities should also be provided to all stakeholders to participate in formal VNR-related meetings, including ongoing institutional review mechanisms (eg SD platforms or councils, use of information and communication tools).

### **4.3 Inclusive consultation and capacity-building processes linked to the VNR**

All stakeholders should be facilitated in submitting independent evidence, assessment and reports to the VNR process, and in receiving a formal response or recognition from the relevant authorities. Funding should be provided to different stakeholders to participate in official meetings. Support and training should be provided to strengthen the capacity of national and local stakeholders to engage in VNR-related processes.

### **4.4. More focus by VNRs on challenges and obstacles to implementing 2030 Agenda**

UNGA Resolution 67/290 emphasized that “the Forum shall provide a dynamic platform for regular dialogue and for stocktaking and agenda-setting to advance



sustainable development”. Civil society’s experience of the presentation of VNRs to the HLPF is that it often provides a platform for UN Member States to engage in what amounts to a positive public relations exercise about their progress on implementing the SDGs. However, little opportunity is provided to other stakeholders to dialogue or question the official account of progress presented. There is very limited discussion about the kinds of challenges or obstacles being experienced in the national implementation of the SDGs.

**4.5 Follow-up on VNRs following submission to international peer review process**

The experience of civil society has also been that once the VNR has been presented at the HLPF, follow-up by governments at national levels can be weak or non-existent. The review of the HLPF should examine the extent to which VNR follow-up processes at the national level have been properly planned. Stakeholders should have opportunities to participate in updates to the national implementation plan or strategy following the presentation of the VNR at the HLPF. Public outreach and information campaigns should be launched following the official presentation of the VNR. The follow-up process after the official presentation of the VNR should be discussed with the national SD committee/council.

**4.6 Ensuring the HLPF becomes a more dynamic platform for presentation of VNRs**

There is also considerable scope for the HLPF to become a much more dynamic platform through (i) encouraging the presentation of challenges as well as successes where the VNRs are concerned, (ii) allowing other

stakeholders to engage in dialogue in response to the VNRs presented, and (iii) developing innovative mechanisms such as the VNR Labs in which government representatives and other stakeholders such as civil society, the private sector, trade unions, academia etc. can explore creative ways to tackle the challenges that have been identified through the VNR process. It is clear that the current

three days of the HLPF at which governments present their VNRs are clearly insufficient, and should be lengthened (as suggested previously) to 5 days at least.

**4.7 Evaluating the extent to which VNRs have fulfilled their mandate**

The extent to which VNRs have fulfilled their mandate to strengthen policies and institutions of governments and to mobilize multi-stakeholder support and partnerships for the implementation of the SDGs, should also be evaluated as part of the HLPF review, and on a regular basis after that.

## **5 Strengthened regional SD follow-up and review mechanisms**

UN regional follow-up and review processes are currently often under-utilised and could provide a useful additional opportunity to ensure shared learning between countries and key stakeholders in each region. These regional processes should provide sufficient opportunities for dialogue, sharing of lessons learnt and identification of good practices from current and previous VNR countries. Outreach to stakeholders should be conducted in different languages and should ensure full access to persons with disabilities. Sufficient funding should be provided to enable stakeholders to participate in official regional meetings. Online platforms to support remote participation in UN regional follow-up and review mechanisms should be provided.

UN regional follow-up and review mechanisms should provide structured opportunities for the assessment of regional challenges and for the development of shared regional targets. They should also provide opportunities for the exploration and development of multi-stakeholder partnerships at the regional and national levels.

**5.1 Resourcing civil society to organise itself at regional level**

At the regional level, civil society should also be properly resourced to organize itself across sub-national, national and sub-regional boundaries. Multi-annual funding should be provided to resource permanent secretariats for the new Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanisms



(RCEMs) that are being established in each region..

### **5.2 Regional Sustainable Development Exchange & Learning Hubs**

Regional SD exchange and learning hubs should be resourced and established in each region in which diverse stakeholders can participate and develop their capacities to promote more effective 2030 Agenda monitoring and implementation across each region.

### **5.3 More priority for outcomes & summary reports of the UN regional SD Forums**

In order to make a clearer link between the regional and global levels, a much greater focus should be placed on the outcomes and summary reports of the UN regional sustainable development follow-up and review mechanisms. The summary reports should form an important element of the discussions at the HLPF, including key presentations at the official sessions, as well as sharing amongst the MGoS and the inter-ministerial discussions, and ultimately their findings should be reflected in the political declaration that is the main outcome of the HLPF.

## **6 More representative and co-ordinated engagement by stakeholders**

### **6.1 Right to self-organisation of stakeholder groups & adequate representation of local and national partners**

UNGA Resolution 67/290 on the format and organizational aspects of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development encourages the major groups identified in Agenda 21 and other stakeholders, such as private philanthropic organizations, educational and academic entities, persons with disabilities, volunteer groups and other stakeholders active in areas related to sustainable development, to autonomously establish and maintain effective coordination mechanisms for participation in the High-level Political Forum and for actions derived from that participation at the global, regional and national levels, in a way that ensures effective, broad and balanced participation by region



and by type of organization. Civil society is calling for the right of each stakeholder group to self-organise to be fully recognised by the HLPF and the adequate representation of local and national partners to be respected. Specific proposals include; recognizing national coalitions and their right to submit national Civil Society reports; ensuring greater support for the participation of national partners at HLPF and the clear rotation of representatives from each of the MGoS.

### **6.2 Better balance between different dimensions of sustainable development**

#### **6.2.1 UN system-wide coherence**

The planned review of the HLPF needs to address how real balance and integration between the three dimensions of sustainable development can be ensured in both its format and its functioning so that system-wide coherence and the coordination of sustainable development policies can be achieved. The HLPF should have a “helicopter view” of UN system and should aim to promote Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development across the system.

#### **6.2.2 Connecting with other UN agencies, funds and programmes**

If real balance and integration between the different dimensions of sustainable development is to be achieved, the contribution of other organisations of the UN system to the HLPF is an important requirement. The review of the HLPF should identify how the high-level, system-wide participation of UN agencies, funds and programmes can be encouraged. Other relevant multilateral financial and trade institutions and treaty bodies should participate in the HLPF, within their respective mandates and in accordance with UN rules and provisions. Civil society is calling for the upcoming review to promote better links between the thematic



bodies of the UN system and the HLPF. For example, the Committee on World Food Security provides a contribution to the Forum every year, but it is unclear what impact, if any, these contributions have on HLPF outcomes. There is a real need for structured feedback mechanisms that can provide feedback to these thematic bodies and their stakeholders afterwards. The connection with other UN processes is also critical - FAO, WHO, UNEA - and all of the UN organisations involved in implementing different aspects of the 2030 Agenda. Much stronger links and more regular coordination between the HLPF and the UNFCCC must be created. Better synergies should also be achieved between the HLPF and the Addis Ababa Financing for Development agenda. Similarly, clear links between the UN Human Rights Council's findings and from other relevant human rights treaty body reports should be made to the HLPF. These additional UN agencies and programmes should contribute to the functioning of the HLPF in a regular, timely and predictable way.



## **7 More focus on policy discussions and processes within the HLPF that will support and steer changes in policy direction by the UN Member States**

Spaces should be opened up in the HLPF annual cycle for CSOs and other stakeholders to become involved in policy discussions to a much deeper extent. The Ministerial Declaration document produced at the end of the HLPF Peer Review process in New York each year, for example, needs to become a much stronger document and play a role in stimulating and realising the policy changes required. The concept of focused "Policy Years" needs to be introduced into the HLPF, which should result in clear policy recommendations about how to best move forward in different policy spheres. The HLPF needs to be more forward-looking in relation to what policies need to be changed and how. The example of the Nationally Determined Contribution Schemes from the Paris Agreement could be used as a possible model for how to proceed. Countries would share through the HLPF Peer Review mechanism what policies they need to, or are planning to change in order to contribute to the achievement of the SDGs.

## **8 Greater strengthening of accountability mechanisms within the HLPF**

A much greater strengthening of accountability mechanisms within the HLPF is required. The lack of any real accountability linked to the HLPF is one of its greatest weaknesses. A good example of the kind of accountability mechanisms that could be used where SDG implementation is concerned are international human rights mechanisms. Relevant human rights

mechanisms could include peer review, expert mechanisms such as UN Special Rapporteurs reports on specific countries or themes, and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanism.

## **9 Strong focus on Human Rights incorporated into HLPF monitoring, review and reporting**

The review of the HLPF should examine how human rights can be incorporated to a much greater extent into way in which the Forum operates, as human rights processes are currently overlooked when assessing SDG progress. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is anchored in international human rights and affirms that the SDGs “seek to realize the human rights of all”. Consequently, the SDGs reflect key provisions of international human rights and labour standards. More than 90% of the SDG targets are linked to international human rights and labour standards.

### **9.1 Use of national, regional and international human rights mechanisms to assess and guide SDG implementation**

The high degree of convergence between human rights and the SDGs points to the potential of using national, regional and international human rights mechanisms to assess and guide SDG implementation. Arising from their ratification of specific human rights treaties, states are required to report to specific bodies mandated to supervise the application of these treaties. Such supervisory bodies include, for example the UN treaty bodies, the ILO’s supervisory bodies, and regional supervisory bodies such as the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

### **9.2 Contribution of HR mechanisms to follow up and review processes**

Other international human rights mechanisms include peer review and expert mechanisms such as UN Special Rapporteurs on specific countries or themes, and the Universal Periodic Review mechanism. Since the SDGs are anchored in human rights, States and other actors can use the analysis, data and recommendations that are already being produced by these institutionalised human rights



mechanisms, for their SDG monitoring. Human rights monitoring and reporting mechanisms can contribute to follow-up and review by providing: (i) systematised qualitative analysis and data through institutionalised reporting mechanisms by States, UN bodies, National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) and civil society (ii), Identification of specific and systemic implementation challenges, as well as recommendations and guidance to overcome these, (iii) Expertise on developing national monitoring systems that are aligned with global standards, and best practice on peer review mechanisms, expert and thematic reviews, (iv) Best practice on systematic engagement of stakeholders in monitoring, reporting and follow up, guided by Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) principles of accountability, transparency and access to information.

### **9.3 Integration of a HRBA in SDG follow up and review cycles**

The review of the HLPF should recommend the integration of a HRBA in SDG follow-up and review cycles (monitoring, evaluation and reporting) at national, regional and global levels. This should include using human rights mechanisms for SDG monitoring, using National Human Rights Institute’s recommendations to guide SDG implementation, recycling human rights reporting and incorporating a HRBA into national, regional and global SDG follow up and review processes.



## **10 Establishment of a specific multi-stakeholder mechanism for an annual review of Goal 17**

The mandate of the HLPF includes considering Goal 17 of the SDGs each year. This goal is an extremely important one and its regular review should ensure that areas such as Capacity Building, Finance, Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships, National Sustainable Development Strategies, Science, Technology and Trade receive the political attention they deserve. However, no specific mechanism has been agreed within the frame of the HLPF to ensure the effective annual review of this goal by governments and the MGoS. Civil society is calling for a specific Goal 17 review mechanism to be established by the HLPF as a matter of urgency, and for the MGoS to be fully involved in this mechanism.

## **11 Consider Goal 16 for annual review**

Goal 16 is a critical enabler and accelerator of all goals, and its transversal nature means that it cuts across many themes and SDGs. However its implementation has been neglected or ignored by many Member States. An annual review of Goal 16 by the HLPF would ensure that greater political attention was paid to the implementation of this important goal.

## **12 More focus needed on challenges facing most vulnerable countries**

The review process needs to examine the extent to which the HLPF regularly facilitates sufficient, structured discussion on the sustainable development challenges facing developing countries, including the most vulnerable countries, in particular the least developed countries, small island developing states, landlocked developing countries

and African countries, with the aim of enhancing engagement and implementing commitments, and on the particular challenges facing the middle-income countries in achieving sustainable development.

### **13 Better synergies with the Addis Ababa Financing for Development agenda**

In paragraph 132 of the annex to UNGA Resolution 69/313, Heads of State and Government decided that the High-level Dialogue on Financing for Development of the Assembly would be held back-to-back with the HLPF under the auspices of the Assembly when the HLPF is convened every four years. There is a need for much greater synergies between the HLPF, its annual review of Goal 17, the Means of Implementation for the 2030 Agenda and the Addis Ababa Agenda on Financing for Development.

### **14 Strengthened secretariat of the HLPF**

A better staffed and more experienced Secretariat should be provided for the HLPF, including a Bureau. This would mean that Member States would be supported in preparing its agenda, thus ensuring that the process becomes more engaging and better supported.

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