



GROUNDING THE HIGH LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM; HIGH TIME FOR REFORMS

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A. INTRODUCTION

The UN High Level Political Forum on the SDGs ended on 18th July, 2018 with the adoption of the Ministerial Declaration. The HLPF is the institution tasked with providing political guidance and implementation, follow up and review of the SDGs. Every year the HLPF has a particular theme and conducts reviews of a cluster of goals besides undertaking thematic discussions related to the SDGs. The main outcome from the HLPF is the Ministerial Declaration, which takes note of the progress, identifies challenges and provides guidance to overcome the challenges.

This year's theme was "Transformation Towards Sustainable and Resilient Societies." The HLPF conducted in depth reviews of SDG 6 (water and sanitation), SDG 7 (access to sustainable energy), SDG 11 (sustainable cities), SDG 12 (sustainable consumption and production patterns), and SDG 15 (life on earth) along with SDG 17 (Means of Implementation for the SDGs), which is reviewed every year. With 46 countries also presenting their Voluntary National Report (VNR) on how they are implementing SDGs more than half of the member countries have already presented their progress towards achieving SDGs beginning 2016. 42 countries including Israel, Kuwait, Pakistan, New Zealand, South Africa, UK, Chile, France, Indonesia and Philippines have also committed to present VNRs in 2019. However, some of the major countries like Russia and USA have not yet presented their VNRs neither have they confirmed to do so in 2019.

Every year, the HLPF ends with the Ministerial Declaration, invariably the essence of which is that "we are doing good but need to do better." However, this year the Secretary General in his closing speech noted "there is progress in reduction in maternal and child mortality and access to electricity, however, at the same time there are areas where countries are lagging or backtracking in areas fundamental to the to the shared pledge to leave nobody behind." He referred to runaway climate change, expanding conflicts, inequality and persistent pockets of poverty and hunger and the need to address gaps opening up during an extraordinary expansion of economy.

By far 111 countries have shared their progress in achieving SDGs enthusiastically. They have referred to micro case studies projecting them as best practices or inspiring stories. They have also presented challenges like finance, data, technology, capacity, mobilizing people and stakeholder to support the SDGs etc. in a side event titled "Of Sugarcoated VNRs and National Realities," organized by the author in the HLPF 2017, more than 20 CSO participants from Asia Pacific countries highlighted that for most of the countries VNR remains a public relations exercise. Besides hunky-dory stories of what they perceive as progress; none of them have actually acknowledged or even mentioned the areas where there is no progress or where countries are regressing. In the absence of rigorous review, inclusive debate, identification of cutting edge success factors and critical challenges, the HLPF runs the danger of being reduced to a "mutual admiration club" rather than main political body to implement and promote implementation of the SDGs. The humdrum created by the HLPF may be rather counter productive to promote urgent measures that need to be taken by the global community to reverse climate change, reduce inequality, conflicts and gender violence, reduce number of people exposed to disasters and ensure access to food and water and health services.

As a matter of fact sustainability and human rights conditions in the world have worsened over last few years. In 2017 the number of hungry people rose, greenhouse gases emissions increased, the number of people forced to migrate increased, number of human rights and environmental defenders persecuted increased. There is also increasing informalization of work, less and less working population have social

protection covers and decent income. While the SDGs talk about leaving no one behind simultaneously we are also witnessing further concentration of wealth and power. In these circumstances there is an urgent need for reforms at the HLPF to bring it closer to the ground realities, enhance accountability standards, and appreciate critical success factors and real challenges.

B. HLPF, THE MANDATE AND THE FUNCTIONS

The first UN High Level Political Forum was held in 2013 and since then it has been organized in July under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and every four years it is to be organized at high level under the auspices of the UN General Assembly. The HLPF offers the official platform for monitoring progress on the SDGs each year. It takes its mandates from the UN GA resolution (A/Res/67/290) and Outcome document of the Rio+20 Meeting, and seeks to perform following functions

- Provide political leadership and recommendations for sustainable development
- Follow up and review progress in implementing sustainable development commitments
- Enhance the integration of the economic, social, and environmental aspects of sustainable development
- Consider new and emerging sustainable development challenges
- Provide a forum for the Voluntary National Review (VNR)

Besides these, identifying success factors and challenges to inspire action and ensure stakeholder participation is also implicit function of the HLPF. It is also pertinent to mention that the HLPF replaced the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), which was created from the mandate of the Rio Conference. The last session of the CSD was organized simultaneously with the opening session of the HLPF. CSD was credited with reasonable success during its first ten years, however, it has been limping since 2003-04 and faded fast into oblivion during its last days as it failed to arrive at any concrete agreement.

C. PERFORMANCE OF THE HLPF AND MAJOR CRITIQUES

C.1 VARIED POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

The first and foremost task of the HLPF is to provide political leadership to the Agenda 2030 (SDGs) and institutionalization of the SDGs in national policies and institutional structures. Many of the countries have associated leadership of the SDGs implementation at the highest executive level, which manifests that SDGs have attracted highest political attention in many countries. However, many others have also assigned responsibility at Ministerial levels so that specific goals are addressed by relevant agencies. This runs counterproductive to the spirit of the Agenda 2030, which has integrated implementation at its heart. Biesheim (2016) says that transformational impact of the SDGs will be lost without high level political will to coordinate efforts across ministries. In creating institutional structures also, there is highly varied understanding of the institutionalization among the countries. While some countries have reportedly created new structures (Egypt, Germany), many others have referred to taking SDGs to the sub national levels (Brazil, Kenya), while yet others have referred to institutionalization as aligning national existing policies and priorities with the SDGs with very little details on how this alignment will work out in future. Still some other countries have focused more on gap analysis (finance, technology, capacity, measurement etc.). Obviously, none of these approaches alone are disruptive enough to drive the transformation that Agenda 2030 demands.

At the global level, political leadership is also being challenged by putting the Ministerial Declaration to vote. In 2018, US raised objection on two paragraphs, though changes proposed by the US (and Israel) were defeated but the Declaration had to be put to vote. Austria for the EU expressed “deep regret” that the Declaration was put to vote, especially regarding the references to human rights, rule of law and justice at all levels. Those attending HLPF would also remember that Declaration was also put to vote in 2017. The HLPF does not have any negotiations and all the members are supposed to agree to Ministerial Declaration. The member countries have opportunity for mild critic or highlighting deficiency through their statements in the session. Putting harmless Declaration to vote manifests that countries ready to backtrack even on this moral commitment.

C.2 WEAK REVIEW AND FOLLOW UP

HLPF has been able to encourage more and more countries to report voluntarily. However, beyond that monitoring and review, the most important function of the HLPF has been seen as inept as many. VNRs are seen as attempts by countries to showcase their efforts in a rosy manner without providing much details and showing much commitment. Despite largely following the UNSG guidelines; VNRs yet remain highly varied, incomparable and sans any evaluation. Most of them still detail their planning/alignment rather than reporting progress. The limited time for the VNR and the official setting does not allow meaningful or inclusive discussion. Few questions asked by member countries are prepared in advance and shared with the presenting country. While the Agenda 2030 challenges the prevalent development paradigm; in the VNRs presented there is no way to determine what policies/practices SDGs challenge, call into question and disrupts. Practically, there is no follow up on the reports presented. Thematic review does not have much depth either. Organized on a four year cycle basis, thematic reviews around the goals feature three hour discussion. It idea is to review each goal three to four times till 2030. However, participants feel that discussions acknowledge the challenge without providing much insight on how to overcome. The discussions on goals, which have other homes (energy, biodiversity, chemicals and pollution etc.) have also failed to attract disruptive and radical thinking in the HLPF.

C.3 ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS NOT YET AT CENTRE

Traditionally rich and industrialized countries have been poor in integrating environmental concerns. SDGs index and dashboards and a growing number of other reports highlight poor state of environment and climate related goals (SDG12, SDG13, SDG14 & SDG15) in industrialized countries. Manifestly, HLPF has delivered little in brining industrialized countries from their MDG-ish thinking. Growing recognition of the interrelatedness of the SDGs alone will not lead to coherent policies. HLPF as a collective should have a clear stand on many synergies and conflicts within the agenda 2030, some of which are critical but contentious issues (viz. hydropower, nuclear power, green bonds, technology tradeoffs, health care vs. health services, GMOs/synthetic biology, gene editing and so on). Without a clarity on these several issues, environment will always be subservient to economic goals and vested interests.

C.4 VERY LITTLE RECOGNITION AND HEADWAY INTO NEW AND EMERGING CHALLENGES

Disasters, forced migration, run away climate change, peak oil, gas and mineral resources, disruptive and exponential technology, big data, rising military budgets and expanding conflicts, ever increasing inequality of wealth, income and opportunity, shrinking civic space and neo-nationalism and rise of the right, human rights violations etc. are only some of the challenges that threaten achievement of the SDGs. Addressing these challenges require responses to systemic inequalities and marginalization among asymmetric power structures at all levels (global to local) and across wide sectors (aid, trade, technology, military power). These challenges have been alluded to several times in the documents and debates, but there have been no in depth discussions with the objectives of addressing these fundamental drivers of poverty, discrimination, inequality and lack of sustainability.

C.5 FINANCING CHALLENGE OVERPLAYED

Sustainability is more of a policy and ambition challenge than financing challenge. It's true that finances will be needed to expedite low carbon and resilient development pathways and countries in special circumstances like LDCs, SIDs and countries in perpetual conflicts need finances to come closer to achieving at least some of the SDGs. However, the perpetual rant that SDGs implementation might require 5-7 Trillion Dollars every year till 2030, masks the challenges like policy coherence, ambition, and other emerging challenges mentioned before. The meek acceptance of the fact that SDGs cannot be implemented with public finances alone puts business and private in an unduly favorable position vis a vis state and other stakeholders. Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA) is replete with references to "implementing SDGs are country's responsibility," "various kinds of resources including public, private and innovative finances need to be mobilized," "and countries should improve their tax GDP ratio," etc. the Third Conference on Financing for Development (Addis Ababa July, 2015) defeated developing countries efforts to have an intergovernmental tax body to stop illicit financial flow. Efforts towards global tax co-operation have stalled with the Platform for Collaboration on Tax (PCT), which is an initiative reducing UN to one of the four players besides, WB, IMF and OECD, and this is not accountable for the SDGs implementation (GPW, 2016). In fact there is no dearth of money in this world. Financing for Development: Progress and Prospects 2018" a report by the UN Inter Agency task Force on FfD estimates that "pension funds, insurance companies and other institutional investors hold around US\$ 80 trillion in assets." This surplus capital is aiming to make more money from the catalogue of interesting investment opportunities that SDGs are. The UN is urged to convert development activities into a pipeline of bankable projects, embrace PPPs while avoiding the analysis of off-book liabilities that have turned this modality into a pipeline of debt creation and public service erosion (BAD, GPW, 2018). According to Tax Justice Network at least USD 36 Trillion unreported private financial wealth owned by wealthy individuals was stashed away in tax havens by the end of 2015. If the world leaders can have little political will much of this this can be harnessed for more meaningful purposes.

C.6 SDG MARKETPLACE AND HUGE BUSINESS FOOTPRINT

SDGs have become a marketplace for anything and everything. With countries admitted failure to support SDG financing, governments are more than keen to give all concessions and their original functions. The first casualty is basic services (education, water, health services) which with the SDGs now the governments will find absolutely logical to privatize. In fact, with more access to UN and governments, business has more elaborate plan to engage with the SDGs. In 2014, UN Business Action Hub was developed by the UN Global Compact, Global Hand and 20 UN agencies. Business members include DHL, BASF, Ikea and Bank of America. SDG Fund was also founded by the UN in the same year, with the initial contribution from Spain. It has a private sector advisory group including H&M and Intel. The UN Private Sector Forum organized every year by UNSG and Global Compact since 2008 where Anglo American, Facebook, MasterCard, Nestle and Siemens play prominent roles. Since 2016, HLPF is also accompanied by a Business Forum co-hosted by International Chamber of Commerce (ICC), UN DESA and the Global Compact, where speakers include Pfizer, Citigroup, Finnair, and Danone. More than 1500 representatives registered for the Forum in 2017. The Business and Sustainable Development Commission (BSDC), a two year initiative launched in 2016 says achieving SDGs could unlock as much as 12 Trillion USD market opportunity in 4 sectors alone; food and agriculture, cities, energy and materials and health and wellbeing.

C.7 INSENSITIVE TO CSOS PARTICIPATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERNS

The biggest criticism of the HLPF is around the limited space for participation of the CSOs. Their participation has moved little beyond 1-2 minutes statement in sessions. They don't have yet seat on all roundtables, thematic reviews, and VNR presentations. Representatives from indigenous populations, community affected by development projects, CSOs from countries in conflict and from countries where CSOs face additional repression from the government etc. find it extremely difficult to participate due

to lack of resources and support from the UN agencies. Many of the CSOs also reported to have faced intimidation from the country delegations in the corridors of the UN. Human rights concerns and call to address these have also remained only in the periphery of the HLPF considerations. Many of the CSOs believe that SDG16 is the bed rock of the human rights in the agenda 2030 and are significant improvement from the MDGs. However, they allege that they remain inadequately addressed. There is very little attention on peace, justice, corruption, human and environmental defenders rights, inclusive and transparent institutions etc.

C.8 LARGE MAJORITY OF PEOPLE BEING LEFT BEHIND

Leave No One Behind is a commitment which can be implemented in numerous ways to achieve 3 objectives, (i) ending absolute poverty in all forms, (ii) halting group based discrimination, and (iii) prioritizing and expediting action for the poorest groups. Despite explicit commitment of the Agenda 2030 to leave no one behind, a huge sea of people is invisible in the process and HLPF has not helped this cause either. VNRs the main tool for assessing countries commitment and implementation have very little information on how the most poor, marginalized and discriminated against groups are being included in the new development agenda. UKSSD and Bond (2016) note that whole few countries mention the phrase leave no one behind, not many of them provide any details on how they plan to deliver this. Similarly, Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC, 2018) observes that while almost all the (43) reviews presented in 2017 recognized the principle of leaving no one behind, only 14 of them reported on strategies to put this principle into practice. (CCIC, 2018). While many of the VNR talk about including CSOs, disadvantaged populations and ethnic groups, none of them actually speak of how they participated in the discussions, what are their concerns and how they are reflected in the report or national strategies?

D. HLPF; ENOUGH REASONS FOR REFORMS

SDGs are comprehensive, all-encompassing agenda that seeks to address economic growth and social equity within planetary boundaries. This is a humongous task in limited times and requires urgent and sincere reforms (if not radical) at all levels. HLPF which is a monitoring body should be equal to the task. Many believe that HLPF did not anticipate magnanimity of the task, as it pre dated adoption of the SDGs. Three years into the HLPF under the ECOSOC have elicited a wealth of experience which harnessed with the insights from other UN institutions of similar nature can make HLPF more effective in providing political leadership, providing review and follow up, ensure stakeholder participation and improve VNRs to serve the purpose of measurability better. In this regard, there are a number of proposals worth considering. Since many of these also inch on UN reforms, leaving those, we present few options which focus on organization of the HLPF, VNRs, Follow up and review, and CSO participation.

D.1 REINSTATING THE TRANSFORMATIONAL POTENTIAL OF THE SDGS

For many the only novelty in the SDGs is the integrated and harmonious implementation of all the goals. till now states have focused much on goals and targets that pushes the transformational potential in the backdrop. Countries should be asked to report on the interlinkages along with the specific goals. The HLPF should also encourage discussions on interlinkages within the thematic areas to see their synergy, conflict and complementarity. The HLPF should also set up joint working groups to expound better harmonization among closely related goals and sift successes, failures and best practices.

D.2 IMPROVED GUIDELINES FOR VNRS AND LNOB REPORTING

UN SG should provide comprehensive guidelines to make VNRs comparable and amenable to systematic assessment for progress. Countries should also report on all goals and interlinkages rather than picking

and choosing their favorites or specific goals under review in the HLPF, which creates fragmentation and prevents an overall picture. They should have explicit guidelines to report LNOB.

D.3 SETTING UP MULTI STAKEHOLDER COMMITTEES TO SUPPORT COUNTRIES

HLPF is inappropriately staffed and DESA incapable of providing hand on support, analyzing reports and providing recommendations. HLPF should set up groups of committees and drawn from various stakeholders including CSOs who can provide (virtual and remote) support to countries in preparing main messages and VNRs. These committees can analyze VNRs and support countries in filling up gaps. While this would have the benefit of having less political and public relations and accurate VNRs, it may require more time.

D.4 PER REVIEW MECHANISM FOR VNRs

HLPF should set up peer review mechanism for the VNR where countries on similar development levels/ or same region are taken together. Rather than large plenary, it can be held in smaller rooms allowing more time for discussions and insights and should be inclusive.

D.5 PARLIAMENTARY OVERSIGHT OF NATIONAL REPORTS

The UNSG guidelines for the VNR resolution talks about national reports being enriched with consultations with the Parliament. Many CSOs have been also demanding parliamentary oversight of the SDG process and the national reports besides making it more inclusive. The legislative oversight will have the effect of enhancing accountability of the governments towards the SDGs and commitments on sustainability.

D.6 OUTCOME OF THE VNRs

Country reviews should be follow up oriented. Currently VNR presentations remain a friendly discussion with no expected outcome. Peer Review groups should come up with concrete recommendations (something like recommendations from the UPR at HRC, Geneva) for follow up which should be reviewed in the next cycle.

D.7 CREATE A HOME FOR SHADOW/PARALLEL REPORTS

There is a growing demand among the CSOs for official recognition of the parallel/shadow or CSO country reports. While this proposal has been rejected in the earlier discussions, and UN is more likely to protect its intergovernmental nature in future also, what is actually feasible is to put all the shadow reports on a web portal. Also, if there can be a physical space in the UN reserved (to be availed on reasonable charges) for the CSOs to present VNRs, that will better justify efforts made by CSOs or national/ regional networks in coming up with parallel reports.

D.8 BEING INCLUSIVE IN TERMS OF DATA

HLPF should also create an open portal with all main messages, VNRs and data from other sources (research institutes, UN agencies, IFIs and MDBs, and credible CSOs) which all can access. This will help to countries to access better data, and will also enhance quality of review and analysis and ensure better follow up.

D.9 MAJOR GROUPS/CSOS FORUM TO PRECEDED HLPF

UN should help organize a Major Groups Forum before the HLPF. This has been an old practice at many important forums (regional APFSD, UNEA etc.). This can be a self organized event facilitated by DSD-DESA. This would require a larger financial support however; it would also ensure that many of the stakeholders/communities who are not represented at the HLPF will have at least a voice.

D.10 MORE EMPHASIS ON EMERGING CHALLENGES

As stated earlier there are a number of long standing challenges as well as new and emerging challenges which threaten reversal of little gains made through the entire process. This should be taken up more rigorously rather than just attracting insignificant attention in the background notes or Ministerial Declaration.

D.11 ENHANCING LINKAGES AMONG SUB REGIONAL, REGIONAL AND GLOBAL PROCESSES

Regional Commissions have been organizing regional APFSD for few years. Sub regional Consultations are also being organized since 2017. These sub regional and regional Forums are supposed to feed the HLPF process. However, till now there doesn't seem to be a clear linkages in the process. Regional priorities seem to fade into oblivion in global HLPF debates. It is recommended that HLPF have better strategy to make use of the outcomes from the sub regional and regional SDG Forums. Similarly, cross-exchange of learning's from regional platforms, known as RCEMs could be explored for capacity building of institutions, stakeholders and RCEM itself.

D.12 CLEAR FOCUS IN SDG17 REVIEW

SDG 17 remains the most important goal and is taken up for review in every HLPF. However, in the absence of a clear focus, there are no strategic insights from the discussions, neither they seem to be heading in any positive direction. Definitely, a more structured and planned review on the SDG 17 is the required.

D.13 SETTING STANDARDS OF WHAT IS A SUCCESSFUL HLPF

All HLPF end with the message of more ambition, commitment and action required. This seems to be of very little value for assessment or future guidance. HLPF should determine what are minimum expectations or guidelines for a successful HLPF. This would provide a better understanding of the role, expectations and achievements from the HLPF.

E. CONCLUSION

The SDG index and dashboard reports 2018 says that none of the countries is on the path of achieving all SDGs by 2030. That should be a loud enough call for more ambitious reforms. The review of HLPF modalities in HLPF 2019 and end of the first cycle of the HLPF reviews at UN General Assembly High Level Session in September 2019 provides an excellent opportunity to bring in desired reform in the implementation, monitoring and review of the Agenda 2030. There have been growing disillusion among the countries, stakeholders and CSOs and that makes the reforms urgent. The opportunity lost could be the costliest failure not only for the HLPF but for the entire Agenda 2030 process.

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Public Advocacy Initiatives for Rights and Values in India

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