

The HLPF We Need to Support the 2030 Agenda

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Key Note to the 2018 Sustainable Development Transition Forum: Accelerating Progress towards the SDGs: Enhancing the Role of the High-Level Political Forum

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I thank you for this invitation. This meeting comes timely. Because we do not yet have the HLPF (UN High Level Political Forum) we need. But we may be capable to add impactful features. To do so, decisions must be taken right now in order to ensure a meaningful and ambitious preparation of the two 2019 HLPF sessions taking also into account the 2020 ECOSOC reform and the UN's 70th anniversary which will also take place in 2020.

Addressing the Transition Forum 2018 is a privilege. I still remember very well the heartfelt appreciation as reply to my think piece on SDG number 18¹. Please, once again, be reminded that I am speaking on behalf of the German Council for Sustainable Development, the national advisory body reporting to the German government. Thus, for our recommendation on the multilateral dimension of the 2030 agenda and on the HLPF in particular², our prime addressee is Ms. Merkel, the Germany Chancellor.

I

I will make two points today. The first is on mindset or attitudes, the second on momentum and action.

However, before I will go into the matter itself, please allow me to make a personal remark on the state of democracy and social progress. I just received word from Alessandra Nilo, speaking on behalf of Gestos and of the organized civil society in Brazil. During the recent elections campaign in Brazil she experienced threats and in her mail she now expresses that

¹ Bachmann, Guenther (2016) The 18th SDG. Sustainable Development in a Changing World: A Changing Perspective on Sustainability. Think piece presented at the UN OSD's Sustainable Development Transition Forum, SDTF, Incheon, PRC, 2016

² Steering global sustainability away from a dead end. The RNE's recommendations to the German federal government for enhancing multilateralism for the 2030 Agenda; https://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/RNE_statement_HLPF_Governance.pdf

she fears imprisonment or being driven into exile once the far right, even (in her words) fascist candidate wins the elections - which he did yesterday night. I think I should make this known to all gathered here. Democracy and social progress, SDG 16 and 17, are under attack. This attack is a menace to the public and to us all, at universities, in the streets, in administrations, in politics, in enterprises. We are all concerned.

That brings me to my first point on mindset.

Let us be honest, we are currently heading into a 5 degrees world. That would turn almost everything upside down. We also have to be honest: Many people have lost trust in the conventional politics, and the concept of future they are displaying: as in longterm thinking and sustainable development. There is uncertainty on what is this all about, even among experts. In addition, we see in many countries a growing disconnect between politics and the expectations of people. People feel being left out by what they perceive is a global elite that talks about future and hops from conference to conference without any reliability for what happens on the ground. I do not accept all these arguments, but I think the fact that such critics surface should be taken serious.

Uncertainty is always a precursor to change as upheaval or fear often precede transformation. We know this from history. That, in itself, comes as no surprise. But reality reacts in different ways: More reflection and management or more resignation.

II

So, when assessing the HLPF³ the overall mindset is key. Are we going to join the uncertainty party telling everybody that the HLPF is boring, that the VNR are window dressing, their presentation close to beauty contest, that it lacks of credible results, that it is a talk shop with no landing.

All this is true. But instead of only talking about the shortcomings I suggest an attitude that would complete the view.

Based on prior history, the HLPF is a success. It is the institutional home to the 2030 agenda. It displays a positive dynamic. The growing number of country reports hints to the fact that a growing number of people engage in implementing the SDGs. There is more space for civil society than is currently used in a meaningful way. The HLPF emerges in a hub for networking. The quality of reports and reviews is meandering and the good and ambitious one's give hope or more. Mutuality, multilateral cooperation, and transition governance are navigating uncharted waters. No wonder, the governance approach is „in the making“. The HLPF might be seen as an initial step into a new policy style.

Thus, I think, overall we are not doing bad. The establishment of the 2030 Agenda marks a valuable and important achievement in our collective effort to keep the planet in balance. The

³ The High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) is in existence since 2012 for monitoring and reviewing the 2030 agenda and action taken on national level. It replaces the Commission on Sustainable Development. The HLPF convenes under the auspices of the UN's ECOSOC. Back in 2015, no decision was taken to add a transformational Council for Sustainable Development or regulatory instruments to the UN Charter. As a "forum" HLPF has no far-reaching resolution rights. It is informed by the reports of the UN Secretary-General and the Statistical Commission and by the scientific four-year progress report (Global Sustainable Development Report, GSDR), the report of the Forum on Financing for Development, the regional forums, the thematic reviews and the voluntary national reviews (VNRs).

2030 Agenda is „the“ political alternative to the current betting on aggressive nationalism. Its universality focuses on national reliability and action, as well as on international rules, peace and partnerships.

If we look back all the way to 1987 (Brundtland) and 1992 (Rio) we can see that the notion of sustainable development is being kept on the highest political agenda ever since. Whereas, the notions of globalization and neo-liberalism faded away. So, what I am saying is that in terms of public policies, not economically, not in terms of cash flow, the sustainability community is stronger than often perceived within the community.

III

This is the backdrop against which we may tackle the shortcomings. So, I come to my second point on momentum and action.

I now refer to the recommendation on advancing the German Council just came up with in September. We had been encouraged by the Peer Review⁴ from Helen Clark and ten international peers, commissioned by our Chancellor. Two gentlemen present here in the audience have been Peers and have added their views to the Peer Review. I once again thank Adolfo, Mexican Presidency, and Jan Gustav, Stakeholder Forum Norway.

The Council recommends providing fresh views and a political wake-up call through a “Makers Panel”. We advocate establishing this panel as a wake-call and a driver for the momentum of managing change 2018–2020. We are fully aware of the UN’s commissions fatigue.

What we propose is different. The panel should be characterised by authentically embodying makers expertise. That means panellists should be of an age which means they can and must realise the SDGs over the course of their working lives or political commitments up to 2030. They stand for a political culture that communicates and implements the SDGs in the „real world“; of course, the panel’s composition should balance gender and global regions and featuring representatives of the major groups.

I am happy to tell you that the German government is now officially suggesting the panel concept to the UN DSG, completed with a financial package for implementation.

Our rationale behind our idea is as follows: If there is any major leverage for the HLPF it has to come from the national level, so matching up with the „DNA“ of the SDGs as it is the national level where SDG are to be implemented.

IV

There are also additional recommendations with high political significance:

- We suggest developing a platform for partnerships. In particular “coalitions of early achievers” should commit to realizing sub targets to the 2030 Agenda long before 2030.

⁴ “Change – Opportunity – Urgency: The Benefit of Acting Sustainably. The 2018 Peer Review on the German Sustainability Strategy; Report by the International Peer Group chaired by Helen Clark Berlin”, May 2018, cf. https://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/2018_Peer_Review_of_German_Sustainability_Strategy_BITV.pdf presented by the German Government to the HLPF 2018, with contributions by Helen Clark as Chair, and Heidemarie Wiczorek-Zeul as Member of the German Council for SD

- We suggest bringing the finance sector in and to use the momentum of „sustainable finance“. We like to see the 2030 Agenda as a European project reaching out to Africa.
- As the VNRs vary greatly in quality we suggest coming up with guidelines in materiality and process, informal minimum requirements and mutual learning groups.
- We assume that turning the HLPF into a global sustainability council is currently not on the UN’s agenda. Nonetheless, we recommend that this option not be completely abandoned. More investment in the UN system and its reform is urgently needed.
- The stakeholder groups’ procedural rights should be expanded.
- Referring to the HLPF’s internal work processes we ask for more interaction and dialogue during the VNR presentation.
- Reporting sessions should be made more interactive and need more space for discussions.
- Workflows must ensure that the documents be made available much earlier than is currently the case.
- Thematic reviews must look systematically at the interdependency of the SDGs.
- The VNRs should state what multilateral support they believe is necessary and desirable, and what connections they see with the thematic reviews.
- We suggest adjusting the institutional statics between HLPF and Ecosoc. Participation of non-state actors is inadequate. A fundamental institutional reform is not in sight, for the time being. But still, there is considerable scope for improving the coordination between the ECOSOC and the HLPF.

For Germany, we like to see a national HLPF prep conference. That should be instrumental for more significant resonance of sustainability policies. We also advocate using more national peer reviews.

V

Having laid out the rational and content of our plan to empower the HLPF I would like for you to keep in mind that oppression and deterioration are no match for compassion. That we can silence the shouts of the fanatics and bullies of the world and in our respective nations if we unify voices of decency and ambition, empathy, compassion, tolerance. Combining creativity and empathy enlightens our future.