

2018 Sustainable Development Transition Forum

Reflections on how to enhance the HLPF's thematic reviews:

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In 2018, I attended the High-Level Political Forum for the second time. The 2018 version of the forum drew attention to numerous challenges linked to the implementation and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): hunger in the world is increasing, the water crisis is alarming, space for civil society is shrinking, and so on. **Despite this disturbing state of affairs, the HLPF in its current format produces little in the way of commitments or new actions.** For me and my colleagues at IDDRI, this reveals a worrying picture not only of global progress towards sustainable development, but also of the HLPF as a credible mechanism for monitoring progress on these various challenges by the countries. The first part of this Forum, the technical segment, which involves the thematic reviews is an essential part of it.

However, **thematic reviews, as they are organized today, have little added value.**

A wide range of issues are treated, which are inevitably given only brief, superficial attention. By way of example, in its report on SDG 6 on Water and Sanitation, UN-Water stressed that the targets under SDG 6 will not be met by 2030 if current trends continue. Despite this alarming diagnosis, water operators and specialists who were relatively active and present during the Forum, expressed concern about the superficial nature of the talks and the fact that discussing these issues for three hours every four years was not enough.

Where the other SDGs are concerned, the general level of the talks, summarizing what is being discussed elsewhere attracted very few specialists, actually at the HLPF you typically find specialists on the panel and generalists in the audience, and those that did attend expressed their disappointment that nothing new was said and that no action is generated.

I would like to make **three proposals** to enhance the role of thematic reviews:

First, one could **distinguish between SDGs already well covered** by other international conferences and others that are kind of **orphanage or new on the international agenda**, such as inequality. The latter category should be given **more time**.

Second, we need to **better bridge thematic reviews and Voluntary national reviews (VNRs)**. Chancel, Hough and Voituriez (2017) have assessed the potential of the SDGs for reducing domestic inequalities – a new issue on the global agenda. They find that, although theoretically SDGs provide three contributions that could lead to change: 1) a common metric, 2) peer pressure and 3) a learning framework – the two latter are not sufficiently developed in today's HLPF format.

How could thematic reviews contribute to peer pressure? This would require a more detailed diagnosis of where we stand, it should identify targets most lagging behind and call out for coalitions of action. This proper diagnosis should also not just focus at the global but also on regional and national levels on a given SDG. Although politically difficult, this calls for **ranking** countries on specific targets, for example the target 10.1 and the results of these rankings to be integrated into thematic reviews.

How could the thematic reviews become a real space for peer learning? They should not only provide a more accurate diagnosis of the challenges but also be **solution-oriented**. Comparative studies are needed to **evaluate the effectiveness of policy solutions**. I suggest to invite experts to the panel that are charged to look **in advance** at the VNRs and to give a feedback on the most promising but also on the least ambitious policy solutions presented there on the given topic. In addition, one country having recently achieved great progress in one of the goals could be featured at each thematic panel, for goal 10 this could be Chile for example. This might be a way to foster peer learning and a small incentive for countries to perform well. In the sense of partnership, one could also include a “change maker” from civil society or the private sector that has developed an innovative solution to the challenge of the thematic review.

A third proposal would be to use the thematic reviews to **work on the interlinkages between SDGs**. Instead of being organized SDG by SDG the reviews could focus on subjects at the crossroads between different SDGs but in a very specific way. It is good that awareness about interlinkages has increased but now it is time to move from simply acknowledging the importance of interlinkages to actually working on them. Between others, last year’s HLPF focused on the SDGs 7, 12 and 15. Instead of treating them in a fragmented way the HLPF could have provided an opportunity to work on the synergies and antagonisms between these different goals, by organizing the thematic reviews around challenging cross-cutting issues like: How to achieve the energy transition while achieving biodiversity conservation targets? A joint round table between biodiversity actors and those involved in the energy transition would, for example, have increased the added value of discussions. Or crossing goal 12 and 15, another panel could have discussed the question: “How to reduce the ecological footprint of agricultural and industrial sectors?” and mix experts and policy makers from these different communities. We need to work on the conflicts and synergies between SDGs **in a tangible manner**, the HLPF would be an opportunity to start this and if maybe even to initiate joint work programs between sectors that go beyond the HLPF, for example on dams held up by some as a renewable source of energy and by others as a cause of biodiversity loss.

To sum it up, I will not repeat myself but just state what, in my eyes, an ideal thematic panel should look like: **One type of ideal panel would mix experts and makers from different communities on cross-cutting themes. A second type of ideal panel would feature independent experts, that give a detailed diagnosis if possible down to the country level, showcase one country of best practice and change makers from civil society or the private sector.** Keynote speakers should identify where there is the greatest need for change and call out for **coalitions of action**. And finally when it comes to the moderators, they should be journalist to increase the chances that the results of the panel are **disseminated to media** – which isn’t much the case at the moment.

Thank you very much and happy to discuss this further.