

Expert group meeting on the high-level political forum

Summary

New York, 3 – 4 April 2013

The Division for Sustainable Development, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DSD/DESA) organized an expert group meeting on the high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF) on 3 and 4 April 2013 at the UN Headquarters in New York. The meeting was attended by about 100 participants including representatives of Member States, United Nations system organizations and non-state actors, including from the nine major groups.

The meeting addressed seven topics in order to reflect on the various aspects related to the HLPF and its role in the wider institutional framework for sustainable development. Each topic was introduced by two panelists (see programme) followed by interactive discussions. At the closing session, the chairs of the various sessions – all of whom were from the United Nations system - summarized the key points from each topic.

The following key points emerged from the discussions.

Opening session

Marion Barthelemy, Chief of Intergovernmental and Interagency Branch of DSD, as a host welcomed the participants to the meeting underlying that this meeting can contribute to the thinking on what the HLPF could do and how it could do it in the best possible way.

The meeting was opened by Antonio Bernardini, Deputy Permanent Representative of Italy to the United Nations on behalf of Ambassador Cesare Maria Ragagnini, the co-facilitator of the General Assembly consultations on the format and modalities of the HLPF. He presented the non-exhaustive elements for a draft resolution on the HLPF that have been prepared by the co-facilitators. He explained that there seems to be an emerging agreement among Member States for a hybrid option whereby the forum would have links to both the General Assembly and the GA. There was also a growing convergence of views that the forum should not be a new body, but rather a platform allowing political leadership on sustainable development. He also explained a diagram prepared by the co-facilitators whereby the HLPF would have (i) a high-level meeting at the level of heads of state and government every four years in the General Assembly, (ii) a ministerial level meeting every year in ECOSOC and (iii) a preparatory process under ECOSOC. The outcome of the high-level meeting would be a concise political declaration, while the ministerial meeting would result in a President's summary, and the preparatory process would produce a report with recommendations that would go to the General Assembly through

ECOSOC. He stated that these elements are still under discussion. Member States need to determine what would be the best way to address sustainable development issues including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the institutional framework for sustainable development.

Topic 1: Correcting shortcomings in international governance for SD: positioning and role of the HLPF

The chair, Joao Alberto Dourado Quintaes, Adviser to the President of the General Assembly, highlighted the various processes to follow-up on the Rio+20 Conference and develop the post-2015 development agenda and the SDGs. He underlined the unique opportunity to elevate sustainable development as well as the need for the HLPF to build on lessons learned of CSD and.

The first panelist, Steven Bernstein from the University of Toronto, focused on *correcting shortcomings in international governance for sustainable development: positioning and role of the HLPF*. He stressed that creating a forum with the same limitations as the CSD, which it is supposed to replace, would undermine its legitimacy. The new institution should bring advances in the areas of agenda-setting, reviewing progress and capacity, integration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions, and implementation. The forum had to integrate states and stakeholders who will drive implementation. There is a need for enhanced review mechanisms, for which the OECD, ECOSOC and the regional commissions could help. The agenda for the forum needed to be driven by the three dimensions. The forum will be well to enhance the relationship with the Bretton Woods institutions and WTO. Links could be made to the Spring meeting of ECOSOC with those institutions. The relation to UNEP should not be overlooked.

The second panelist, Chee Yoke Ling from the Third World Network, said the HLPF should be a strong institution placed directly under the UN General Assembly so as to ensure universality and leadership. She stressed the need for an effective and well-supported HLPF secretariat, as well as the important role of the private sector and the need for an accountability framework for public-private partnerships. Also important is to engage not only major groups but also the people who are marginalized and do not participate in UN processes. This requires appropriate funding. She also mentioned the importance of trade and finance and how these all need to be integrated into agenda setting.

In the ensuing discussions the following main points emerged:

- The creation of the high-level political forum presents a unique and historic opportunity to not just reform an ineffective body, but create a new institution that can effectively achieve sustainable development goals and meet new and emerging challenges;
- Form should follow functions. If there is agreement on the functions of the forum, a robust institutional framework is needed.
- Decision-making should be an integral part of the work of the HLPF;
- The HLPF should be a platform to provide political leadership and enhance the integration of the three pillars of sustainable development. It is critical to strengthen participation of civil society, relevant UN bodies, the Bretton Woods Institutions and all stakeholders in implementation of sustainable development;

- The HLPF should build on lessons learned from the Commission on Sustainable Development but also go beyond CSD on agenda setting, review of progress, integration, and implementation;
- The Forum should find a balance between regularity of meetings and the ability to attract high-level participation.
- The HLPF could have three co-chairs to reflect different dimensions of sustainable development;
- Without concrete decisions and adequate time and resources, the HLPF will become even weaker than the CSD;
- Some said that the HLPF should be under the General Assembly in order to reflect universality, leadership and legitimacy. It should have a robust preparatory process;. Others said that the HLPF may act as a bridge between ECOSOC and the GA, and that it could operate under ECOSOC in terms of preparations and support. They felt that the HLPF needs to be conceived as part of the effort to improve the whole institutional framework for sustainable development. Therefore the role of ECOSOC, the GA, the UN Development Group and all other relevant bodies should be fully examined.
- The forum needs to give high-level guidance to the UN system. It can create a space for a meaningful dialogue with the BWIs. UNDG could be reframed as a “sustainable development group”.
- Large support was expressed for regional preparatory meetings and an increased role of regional commissions, based on the successful experience of CSD. This would allow bringing a regional dimension to the global level and to engage regional actors, both state and non-state;
- In order to strengthen the science-policy interface, UNEP and other intergovernmental organizations such as IUCN can play a significant role;
- There is a relation between the forum and the post-2015 development agenda and there must be coordination between the different tracks of the follow-up to Rio+20 since future work on SDGs should be part of the work of the HLPF.
- The system of major groups may need to be rethought;
- A strong and reformed secretariat was important.

Topic 2: From local to national, regional and global: towards more integrated governance

The session was chaired by Andrew Allimadi, UN Regional Commissions, New York Office. He spoke of the disconnect between the local and global levels for the implementation of sustainable development. The first panelist, Brendan Gillespie from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), presented the OECD’s environment performance peer review model as one mechanism the HLPF could possibly use for evaluating policies. These reviews emphasize cooperative support between countries and a “learning by doing” process of implementation. They address broad trends, governance arrangements, progress towards achieving inclusive green growth, and mainstreaming the environment in other policies. Countries were invited to report back on follow-up to the reviews. UN regional commissions have been engaged. These reviews are resource intensive but there is no one size fits all model. Reviews in the forum could focus on one SDG for example. Civil society could be engaged more effectively.

The second panelist, Martin Khor, Director, South Centre, stressed that the starting point should be the 12 important functions given to the Forum by Heads of States at Rio+20. Those range from providing political leadership - through setting the agenda for action - to monitoring and evaluating results. He called for a dedicated and strong institution that would elevate sustainable development and make decisions leading to effective implementation by all. He also said that there should be more than two weeks of preparatory meetings. Meetings were needed on governance, on UN system coherence and coordination, and on means of implementation. There could be ad hoc meetings outside the GA to respond to emerging issues. The forum could have subcommittees dedicated to each pillar of sustainable development and one subcommittee on their integration. A large, dedicated HLPF secretariat was needed to adequately support the work of the HLPF.

The following main points emerged in the subsequent discussion:

- Peer reviews were also part of the CSD-led process, leading to multi-stakeholder collaboration at the national and local levels and to progress in implementation. This experience should be reflected in the HLPF;
- Coherence from the local to international level has to be ensured. Regional commissions have an important role in this regard;
- The Forum can cooperate with and complement existing structures, ensuring coherence and respecting the principle of subsidiarity;
- It could aim for bottom up political leadership and decision making;
- Weakening ECOSOC should be avoided;
- Equal representation and integration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development must be ensured.
- UNEP and other international bodies should be used for strengthening the science-policy interface;
- Means of implementation will be central to progress on sustainable development. Development cooperation itself must be transformed and some suggested a re-examination of the 0.7 percent target of GNI to ODA; which is outdated.

Topic 3: Keeping the compass on the SDGs and the Post-2015 development agenda: what role for the HLPF

Veerle Vandeweerd, Director, Environment and Energy Division in UNDP chaired this session. The first panelist, Kate Higgins, North-South Institute, underlined the importance of acknowledging that global politics is multi polar. The participation and engagement of different actors will thus be crucial to advance sustainable development-. Sustainable development is intended to encompass and integrate economic, social and environmental dimensions. However, there is a concern in overemphasizing the three pillars of sustainable development in devising future goals, targets and measures of progress. It may be beneficial to strive to identify goals that encapsulate the three dimensions – rather than aiming a balance among the various goals-. There should be a reflection on how to devise the appropriate frameworks for implementation in particular at the national level. Peer review mechanisms may need

to be explored more systematically. The question is however whether governments are ready to have their policies reviewed.

The second panelist, Jeff Huffines, CIVICUS UN representative, talked about the importance of taking stock of and finding the complementarities among the important processes that Rio+20 set in motion. Those include the HLPF, the open working group on SDGs and the sustainable development finance committee – all of which are relevant to the post-2015 agenda. The HLPF needs to be a cornerstone of the institutional framework for the post-2015 development agenda. It needs to be properly equipped to integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development, to deliver on the future SDGs, identify a robust financing support and strengthen the participation of stakeholders through enhanced multi-stakeholder engagement modalities as done at the UNEP governing council. Synergies could be built between the HLPF and ECOSOC's Development Cooperation Forum.

The following main points emerged from the discussions:

- The world would need a robust post 2015 development agenda, with sustainable development and its three dimensions at its core, with global goals to be universal applicable to all countries by relevant to national contexts, bringing complementarities among existing intergovernmental processes and with strong institutions to support the future framework. However, details on how this vision would be achieved need further discussions.
- Some said that while paying attention to the post-2015 development agenda and post conflict issues, it is important to keep in mind critical social development or gender issues. A goal on partnership should not be limited to aid. It should build on the Monterrey consensus.
- A peer review process could evaluate implementation and help to address the issue of accountability. SDGs would provide a natural framework. Decisions would have to be made on whether it would be a voluntary system, a self assessment or an assessment by another party, an intergovernmental or a broader process as well as on how many countries would be engaged.
- Participation of different stakeholders and partnerships should be enhanced.
- MDG 8 could make a significant contribution to enhanced collaboration.
- Some said that it should be considered how the HLPF could link better with existing processes, while others cautioned against having the HLPF as a subsidiary body of ECOSOC.
- The forum should have the prerequisite authority to impact on coherence and have a real impact on the ground.

Topic 4: Positioning the HLPF in relation to other Rio+20 follow-up processes (Sustainable Development financing strategy, Sustainable Consumption and Production, technology transfer, effort to strengthen the science-policy interface, and the Global Sustainable Development Report)

The Chair, Marion Barthelemy, Chief Intergovernmental Support and Interagency Branch of DSD, gave an overview of the on going Rio+20 follow-up processes (consultations on the HLPF, GA open working

group on SDGs, establishment of the GA committee of experts on a sustainable development financing strategy, mainstreaming of sustainable development into the UN system). The first panelist, Marianne Beisheim, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Germany, described how ECOSOC's Annual Ministerial Review (AMR) could be used for voluntary peer reviews within the HLPF. Such reviews would be geared towards constructive learning and mobilizing effective support and funding. National pledges and benchmarks could be defined on which countries would report at a subsequent session of the forum. There could be a role for regional commissions in such reviews and a need to engage civil society.

The second panelist, Mohammed Messouli, University cadi Ayyad, Morocco, proposed mechanisms for strengthening the science-policy interface throughout the sustainable development agenda, notably scientific assessments and scientific advisory bodies. There is rich experience in using such mechanisms. Research and scientific information has to be made more policy relevant. He also advocated for a comprehensive Global Sustainable Development Report.

Discussion after these interventions underlined the following main points:

- The HLPF needs to find a distinct space and have a distinct identity. It needs to build on the strength of existing bodies and to revamp the entire UN system.
- Intergovernmental bodies and the HLPF should aim to get the best and most independent scientific advice to inform their decisions;
- Scientific knowledge should come from everywhere: geographic balance must be ensured. Advice has to be provided from scientists in all three areas of sustainable development;
- Policy making bodies can benefit from scientific assessments but also possible scenarios.
- Good governance and transparency of institutions are important if policy is to draw on scientific advice;
- UN system expertise should also be used in strengthening the science-policy interface. The strong scientific base of UNEP was mentioned in this regard;
- The UN system has a role to both implement the guidance of the forum and support its work.
- Efforts could be made to raise awareness about the conclusions of the HLPF – and make its reports relevant for policy makers;

Topic 5: Integrating the 3 dimensions of sustainable development in the HLPF (agenda setting, leadership arrangements, decision-making, reviewing commitments, coordination and coherence, and engaging all relevant actors)

Chairing the fifth session, Marion Barthelemy cited several elements that could promote integration, including agenda setting, attracting the economic and financial community, getting greater support from the UN as a whole, engaging all actors, and having chairs representatives from the three sustainable development dimensions. The first panelist, Nick Manning, Head Governance & Public Sector Management Practice of the World Bank, stressed the need to embed sustainable development policy decisions in the core planning systems and institutions of countries, including financial ministries. The capacities of these institutions to promote sustainable development through adequate decisions has to be developed given the growing complexity of these issues. He talked about complex trade-offs and the importance of transparent budgets. He also noted the importance of public awareness to influence decisions and the usefulness of environmental-economic accounting systems.

The second panelist, Tania Raguž, Rapporteur of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), raised the question of who will set the Forum's agenda and how. She called for a bottom-up approach to agenda-setting. She also highlighted the importance of: ambitious agenda-setting for effective decision-making; regional specificities and barriers to sustainable development implementation; and greater engagement of all actors, including from the economic and financial sectors as well as regional commissions.

Following these interventions the main points raised were the following:

- There is need for a more robust multi-level review and agenda-setting that includes regional, national, sub-national, local and global issues with engagement of actors at all levels including regional development banks. The agenda of the forum could be set by the meeting of Head of State and Government, but also through a bottom up approach;
- The concern for sustainable development should guide decisions on how money is raised (e.g. environment related taxes) and spent (eg. Harmful subsidies);
- There is need for a mechanism to enhance collaboration with financial and economic institutions. The forum could meet in Washington on some occasions.
- The forum needs novel leadership arrangements. A steering committee with some ex-officio members (such as the Presidents of the GA and ECOSOC, the chairs of the second and third committees and other stakeholders), rather than a Bureau may be more conducive to good agenda setting
- The forum could have a multistakeholder advisory body;
- There should be strong links between the forum and the country level;
- Dedicated attention needs to be given to sustainable development: issues that get "mainstreamed" are at risk of getting lost.

Topic 6: Spurring implementation of policy decisions - what have we learned from CSD (UN system, partnerships, voluntary commitments, and voluntary national reviews, outcomes)

The chair, Juwang Zhu, Head of the Office of the UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, stressed the need to continue building on the CSD's strengths while avoiding its weaknesses. The first panelist, Felix Dodds, Associate Fellow at Tellus, focused his intervention on lessons learned from the role of CSD regarding the implementation of sustainable development, in particular the implementation gap. He highlighted the role and institutional set up within the UN system, the impact of national reviews and reporting. He also mentioned the lessons learned from the use of partnerships and how this mechanism could add value to the implementation of the future global goals. His suggestions included a new body on sustainable development under the UN System Chief Executives Board (CEB) to strengthen coordination within the UN system; national reviews that are country driven and participatory; robust accountability mechanisms; and successful partnerships. He also stated the importance for the HLPF to meet throughout the year.

The second panelist, Marianella Feoli, Partners in South-South Cooperation, outlined lessons learned from successful partnerships that could be considered by the HLPF. Those related to: ensuring that partnerships are based on reciprocity, equality and participation; ensuring greater autonomy and responsibility among partners; the need to learn from equals and to understand differences such as

cultural, religious and geographical ones; providing adequate funding and means of implementation; and ensuring follow up and accountability.

Participants underlined the following main points in their discussion:

- Challenges have dramatically changed in 20 years. Present challenges facing the world would need a renewed political commitment to reinvigorate the institutional framework for sustainable development enabling follow-up of the SDGs. This would have to be supported by enhanced financial mechanisms and enriched by voluntary collaborative arrangements such as partnerships;
- It is important to have mechanisms to promote partnerships and enhance monitoring and accountability of partnerships. It would be useful to map what currently exists in the UN in order to clarify gaps that could be addressed by the HLPF by giving the appropriate space and opportunity to report on and review partnerships' contributions.;
- Partnerships cannot replace government commitments, but can make tangible contributions at the national and local levels.
- There is a need to clearly identify the most important elements to retain from CSD and to have enough ambition to provide the HLPF with the institutional capacity to enhance implementation;
- It is important to benefit from existing processes and institutions already working on some of the dimensions of sustainable development;
- There is great interest in creating a body better than the CSD, to provide it with appropriate modalities of work that could advance action, and to ensure that it has the respect and recognition to can attract the participation of Heads of State and Government. The support of a resourced secretariat is required;
- Implementation at the country level must be enabled and enhanced.

Topic 7: How to increase the role of major groups and other non-state actors in the HLPF

Chair Zak Bleicher, Partnership Officer at the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), observed that non-state participation is now a given, which is different from 20 years ago. He asked how to “update our modalities of engagement to meet our current needs in a larger and more diverse development landscape.” The first panelist, Brice Lalonde, Special Adviser on sustainable development to UN Global Compact, outlined the importance of aligning poverty reduction and sustainability, and said the HLPF should focus on implementation, including of the SDGs. He advocated for accountability and review, and for a multi-stakeholder approach such as an advisory committee to not only involve governments but also other stakeholders, such as civil society, finance and development banks, business and local governments. He stated that while all of the UN system should be involved in sustainable development, especially in the SDGs, the system is geared more towards MDG framework. This is why a dedicated body to advance and follow-up on sustainable development is needed.

The second panelist, Jan-Gustav Strandenaes, Senior Policy Adviser on Governance at Stakeholder Forum, expressed concern regarding major groups' participation under the auspices of ECOSOC and the UN General Assembly, noting that these entities do not allow for easy interaction. He said that to give the new body the name of "high-level political forum" is not enough to elevate it. He expressed the concern about positioning the Forum under the ECOSOC, considering the already heavy work load of the Council. Noting the rights to information and participation in decision-making acquired in the CSD, he advocated for the full participation of major groups in planning processes, agenda-setting, policy-making, implementation and evaluation.

In the ensuing discussions, the following main points were made:

- Some questioned how negotiations on the HLPF could end by May 2013, considering the numerous modalities and functionalities that still need to be agreed upon, with one suggesting that Member States could agree on general elements by the end of May and address details later on;
- Some talked about the use of existing mechanisms, especially ECOSOC to deal with sustainable development, while others expressed concern that ECOSOC with its heavy load may not be able to carry on all CSD mandates and follow-up to Rio+20;
- A number of participants stressed the importance of mobilizing and providing appropriate funding, strengthening regional voices at the global level including marginalized groups, and taking into account the opportunities provided by internet and other information technology tools;
- Many stressed the need of full engagement of non-state actors including the nine major groups and underlined that the engagement needs to build on CSD practice, but go beyond it. Some suggested that the Secretariat map out the best practices for civil society engagement in intergovernmental entities, such as the modalities currently in place in the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM), the Committee on World Food Security of FAO, and the Peacebuilding Commission.

Closing session

During the closing session, Jose Raphael L. Mendes de Azeredo, Minister-Counsellor of the Permanent Mission of Brazil to the United Nations made a few remarks on behalf of Ambassador Maria Luiza Ribeiro Viotti, the other co-facilitator of the negotiations on the HLPF. He stressed the importance of the expert group meeting to inform the intergovernmental discussions and to hear different views. He said that paragraph 84 of the Rio+20 outcome document on the establishment of a high-level political forum should be taken very seriously. Its implementation should build on the experience of the Commission on Sustainable Development, but also be more than the CSD. He also emphasized the need for effective participation and engagement of civil society, the private sector and the UN system. He said that to oversee the SDGs is a huge task. The post-2015 development agenda may have an impact on the HLPF.

Closing the meeting, Marion Barthelemy summarized that the meeting showed that there are many common views and a shared feeling that the creation of the forum offers unique opportunities. She highlighted some characteristics of the HLPF identified by many participants

during the meeting, including the need for it to be innovative, ambitious and have its own identity. Quoting one panelist, she added that the Forum should be designed “not for failure” but “for the future.”