

Retreat of the President of ECOSOC
The 2016 high-level political forum on sustainable development
(meeting under the auspices of ECOSOC)
Tarrytown, 21 – 22 November 2015

Report from representatives of major groups and other stakeholders¹

1. Introduction

The President of ECOSOC is mandated by the General Assembly to convene the HLPF and organize its activities, while coordinating with the bureaux of ECOSOC, Second and Third Committees, conducting consultations and benefitting from the input of the UN system, major groups and other stakeholders. Consultations are being undertaken to support the President in ensuring that his vision on the preparations, focus and shape of the 2016 session are consistent with the views of Member States. A retreat with delegations and other actors was organized on November 21-22 2015 to allow delegations to share their views and ideas on how to conceptualize, prepare, and shape the 2016 session of the HLPF.

The retreat aimed to inform and guide the preparations of the 2016 HLPF session by the ECOSOC President. Discussions focused on how to ensure that the forum's 2016 session is productive, action oriented, innovative, forward looking and faithful to the transformative nature of the Agenda. It explored ways to ensure that the session resulted in a science- and evidence-based outcome to help advancing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The ideas emerging from this retreat were meant to inform the President and contribute to other consultations he will have with Member States.

Below follows the report from the representatives of major groups and other stakeholders. Considering that the meeting was held under "Chatham House" rule, apart from the opening session, comments are not attributed to specific participants of the event.

2. Opening Session²

ECOSOC President - The ECOSOC President began his opening statement with an explanation of his plans for the coming year. He explained that the HLPF and Financing for Development Forum will both take place under the auspices of ECOSOC in 2016 and he is eager for them to be as successful and substantive as possible. In terms of the two previous HLPFs, he mentioned that those were in the context of preparing for the SDGs. Now that we are in the mode of "implementing and reviewing" these goals, the subsequent HLPFs will be much more substantive. He also explained that unlike the MDGs, whose first review conference took place four years after adoption, we will begin the review process of the SDGs immediately. Once the Secretary General's report on the HLPF is released by the end of 2015, the UNGA will take action and produce a formula for all the HLPFs for the next 15 years.

Nevertheless, the ECOSOC President explained that he is keen on beginning preparations for the 2016 HLPF as soon as possible in order to ensure success. He has already written to all Member States requesting volunteers for the first round of reviews at the HLPF next year. He then stated that the purpose of the retreat was to begin constructing the 2016 HLPF. The ECOSOC President ended his speech by asking a number of broad questions as food for thought:

¹ Chris Dekki, Naiara Costa and John Romano - attended the event on behalf of major groups and other stakeholders. This report reflects their review and analysis of the discussions.

² The two statements on the opening session refer to the speakers due to their formal and introductory character.

- In terms of the thematic reviews, do we want to go through all SDGs every year? Or do we cluster them according to theme?
- In terms of national reviews, do we review all 193 countries every year? Or do we ask for volunteers? Will there be a peer review?
- What kind of outcome do we seek to have?

President of the General Assembly - The PGA began his speech by recognizing that the 2030 Agenda is as large and complex as the challenges it seeks to address. He urged the retreat participants to keep the momentum going, to finalize the indicators framework and operationalize the Technology Facilitation Mechanism (TFM), among other things. He also urged the UN to operate as a single system. The PGA mentioned that he will host a high-level meeting in April 2016 to see where implementation is already taking place and look to see how to more deeply involve the private sector in this work.

Finally, the PGA explained that for the HLPF to succeed, Member States must empower the HLPF to take decisions on the details of how to do its work. He grouped these missing details into three broad clusters:

- 1) We need to clarify the method of work of the HLPF. How often and what is the format of the country reviews? At this year's HLPF, Member States from across the world will hopefully volunteer and show that these reviews are neither punitive, nor toothless.
- 2) While the HLPF is the center, it is only part of the overall follow-up and review (FuR) at the global level. We need to make sure that the entire architecture works together and adds value. We need to agree on how other processes will relate to the HLPF.
- 3) We need to determine how the multi stakeholder process will work. How do we engage with civil society? How do we review the actions of the private sector?

3. Living up to the ambition of Agenda 2030: What would an ideal 2016 HLPF look like?

In this session participants brought their views on an "ideal" 2016 HLPF, including the criteria to determine if it was successful and responded to expectations. Participants discussed the need for the HLPF to demonstrate/reiterate the commitment from governments to the ambitious Agenda 2030 and for the Forum to provide political leadership and guidance on the follow up and review.

HLPF 2016 was considered by many as another "transitional session", since it will be too early to measure and review implementation of the SDGs. Some elements were presented as key for a successful HLPF 2016:

- 1) An outward looking - not only focusing on its internal organization of work but deciding on a substantive theme that could do justice to the diversity of Agenda 2030 as well as conducting the first thematic and national reviews;
- 2) A vision: HLPF 2016 must provide a broad picture of where we stand at year "0" of implementation of Agenda 2030; and
- 3) On implementation: send a clear message that MS have moved from the conception to the implementation phase.

Participants discussed the challenges of a siloed approach and how the HLPF will have a role to play in providing guidance on cross-cutting issues that require collective efforts across ministries and levels. Also, the HLPF can discuss how the SDGs are being localized and adapted to national circumstances; set up new and innovative partnerships and promote capacity building initiatives.

One of the concerns of participants was the capacity of the HLPF to engage ministers from several areas (including finance) to attend the Session. Several participants raised the point about the importance of bringing inputs from the UN system and entities to the HLPF. They could be tasked to present their inputs as a “System” and also on how they were coordinating and avoiding a “siloes approach”. The connection between the UN “fit for purpose” and the HLPF was raised at several sessions.

Additionally, participants discussed the importance of bringing stakeholders (including civil society, the private sector, parliamentarians and others), who have been active during the post-2015 negotiations to the preparation and HLPF 2016 session. The need to build upon methods of engagement of stakeholders pioneered during the post-2015 processes were flagged. Stakeholders representatives called the attention to the importance of keeping the momentum generated by the post-2015 process and the Summit and on the need to set up clear mechanisms for consultations with major groups and other stakeholders in preparation and during the HLPF. Member States could also “challenge” stakeholders to bring inputs on how they were adapting and responding to Agenda 2030. A clear focus on those “furthest behind” should be a principle for the preparations and for HLPF 2016, including its ministerial declaration. Participants also flagged the importance of making the HLPF discussions appealing to people on the ground, beyond New York.

Ensuring coherence with other follow up and review mechanisms and levels as well as finding creative ways of integrating those inputs was one of the challenges to be dealt with by the HLPF and an issue flagged several times during the retreat - although no clear proposal was presented. Some participants reminded that the HLPF was not supposed to replace all other mechanisms of follow up and review but to set up appropriate linkages with those and avoid having an overloaded agenda.

4. Theme: Substantive focus of the 2016 HLPF session

In this session, participants discussed proposals for a substantive theme for HLPF 2016 which could allow for the HLPF to start delivering on its mandate, where each dimension of sustainable development would be given equal attention and which reflected the transitional aspect of this session. Participants called for a substantive theme that would send a clear signal, from the very beginning, that the vast new agenda and its principles was being embraced.

A proposal was to have “Ensuring that no one is left behind” as the substantive theme for 2016, given its cross-cutting nature and practical focus. Although several participants demonstrated support to this idea, others cautioned that 2016 could be too early for such a theme, especially considering the uncertainty around the work on indicators or that this theme was “too vague”.

Regarding the thematic reviews, a proposal was to group the goals by pillar of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental), having one group reviewed each year (3 years under ECOSOC), leading up to the HLPF under the auspices of the GA on the fourth year. Goals 16 and 17 could be reviewed every year due to their special nature. This approach would demand specific arrangements to cover the cross-cutting aspects of the agenda. For Member States reviews, the proposal presented was to organize them in four-year cycles, with around 50 MS reviewed each year, although recognizing that less MS would be ready in the first year.

An alternative main theme was the “Transition from the MDGs to the SDGs”. Several flagged the concern about clustering the goals under the sustainable development pillars and on giving different levels of importance to goals. SIDS countries called for a theme with a “SIDS perspective”. Others supported a focus

on “preparing for implementation of the 2030 Agenda” as a more reasonable theme, as our transition to the implementation phase requires a more enriched discussion on how to go about implementation. There were other proposals to instead focus on sharing of best practices.

Some participants reflected on the need to start thinking about the sequencing of the substantive themes for the following years, to avoid spending too much time on those types of negotiations. Some reminded the importance of setting aside some time for “procedural” discussions and for the HLPF to discuss its own requirements and supporting structures as well as to keep the flexibility to address the challenges to implementation as they come up.

Participants also reminded the need to adapt HLPF 2016 to the ECOSOC agenda/theme to avoid duplication. Several called upon creativity and innovation, even for a transitory session such as HLPF 2016.

Another point raised several times during the retreat was the role of the regional level, the need to integrate the inputs from regional forums into the HLPF and to set up a dedicated space at the HLPF agenda for regional reviews and discussions.

5. Thematic Reviews at the 2016 HLPF

Building upon the previous session’s discussions on the “theme of the 2016 HLPF,” questions arose around how to properly balance the integration of the 3 dimensions of sustainable development and all 17 SDGs across the entire Agenda and scope of work of the HLPF, with the necessary time and focus that will be needed on specific issues. Some expressed a desire to see thematic reviews of the HLPF cover all issues each year for sufficient integration, with others highlighting that these deliberations and reviews on specific topics happen in other processes outside of the HLPF and that the HLPF’s role would be mainly to bring these processes together to ensure coherence.

The bulk of the discussion focused on how the HLPF could draw upon existing mechanisms and fora that focus on specific issues – such as the new FfD Forum, the TFM, STI Forum, UNEA, etc. – and avoid duplication and overlapping discussions on these issues. Along these lines, many also discussed the need for coherence and collaboration between UN agencies to work together on various thematic issues that they work on – so it was proposed that the UN Task Team approach might be a good practice to carry over from the Post-2015 process.

Additional questions were raised in a discussion on the need for the HLPF theme to be integrated with the overall theme of ECOSOC, with no emerging consensus on this topic. However, paragraph 7c of Resolution 67/290, the HLPF thematic reviews should be “in line with the thematic focus of the activities of the council and consistent with the Post-2015 development agenda.”

Again, the critical element of engaging stakeholders in these thematic reviews was highlighted by many people throughout the discussions, with most using the Open Working Group and Post-2015 IGN process as setting a good example and precedent for the “added value” that stakeholders can bring to these thematic discussions.

6. National reviews of the 2016 HLPF session

Very closely linked with the discussions on the thematic reviews in the previous session, the national review discussions explored some of the key issues that governments will need to come to agreement on

for a successful review process through the HLPF in 2016 and beyond. The general sense gathered from these discussions were that governments and the UN seem to be waiting on the SG's report for recommendations on follow-up and review to take positions on some of these issues. Various options for addressing national reviews at the HLPF were presented and discussed throughout the entire day's discussions – including peer reviews, group presentations, with no consensus emerged on preferences for any of these options.

Also referred to in previous sessions, many believed that it was too early to begin any substantive reviews of SDG progress (both on thematic issues, and for national implementation) only months into the 2030 Agenda adoption and start of implementation. Instead, some supported stakeholders' and others' proposals for the 2016 HLPF "reviews" to focus on national governments presenting their plans for implementation, mainstreaming of the 2030 Agenda into national development plans, and also how to engage with stakeholders in all of these planning and reporting processes. This was seen as a way to set the stage for implementation and for the international community to share experiences and best practices for implementation (particularly building upon experiences from MDGs), while also having a positive and action-oriented outcome of the 2016 HLPF.

Again, there was widespread support for the engagement of stakeholders through the 2016 HLPF and beyond, as well as their importance in the national review processes – which would be particularly important for ownership for implementation of the Agenda. Additionally, many highlighted that broad participation of stakeholders in the 2016 HLPF and beyond would further "incentivize" the high-level of participation via government ministers that MS are hoping to attract with the HLPF, as it provides an opportunity for learning from lessons and experiences from a much wider perspective.

Representatives of major groups and stakeholders highlighted that to properly include broad participation of stakeholders at national review processes, governments and the UN System must dedicate sufficient time, capacity and resources to meaningful engagement with these stakeholders – particularly to reach the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind, as agreed in Agenda 2030. To this end, governments were encouraged to contribute resources to the HLPF trust fund which was carried over from the the CSD, to help support engagement of stakeholders in the HLPF. Stakeholders representatives highlighted that governments should not merely see the engagement of civil society as an "accountability" mechanism – and instead see it as a platform for meaningful and constructive dialogue between all stakeholders, particularly since all are aligned in the ambition of fully implementing this Agenda in partnership. Finally, the 2016 HLPF should provide an opportunity for stakeholders to look at plans for implementation from national governments, and that discussions should be held on the kind of data the HLPF review processes will be using for future successful reviews – embracing an "all hands on deck" approach by harnessing data and reports from a wide range of stakeholders and multilateral institutions.

7. Building on the new forums on FFD and STI in 2016

This session focused on the need to align the outcomes of the 2016 FfD and STI Fora with the work of the HLPF. Currently, the ECOSOC is in a transition phase and has as its theme "moving from commitments to results." There will be a focus on "gearing up for implementation," along with "leaving no one behind." As a result, issues of coherence, integration, and inclusion will be key going forward.

Some concerns voiced during this session were:

- Segmentation of the agenda, which take away from integration;

- An ECOSOC “process” burden, with ECOSOC becoming a central actor in all of these issues, without sufficient political attention from Member States;
- Challenges of efficiency, effectiveness, and added value of the FfD and STI Fora;
- Mobilizing and sustaining government and stakeholder momentum after these major conferences;
- Balance between integration and working on specific issues.

Throughout the session, there was discussion around the need to think about what kinds of outcomes will move the agenda forward, but not restrain flexibility and responsiveness. Also, there was a question about overlap between secretariat functions and the need to address this issue, as well as integration between the FfD Forum and HLPF as to avoid duplication. The burdens on the system are going to become even greater and preventing duplication of work will help the system to cope with the stress of the review process. In terms of the Technology Facilitation Mechanism (TFM), it was mentioned that the results of the open call would be released soon by DESA.

During the intervention from major groups and stakeholders in this session, it was stressed that linkages must exist between the FfD Forum and follow-up and review of Goal 17 Mol. For the STI Forum, it was flagged that the forum must help address and inform the HLPF on emerging issues, particularly on science. In terms of stakeholder engagement, it was expressed that participation is not only giving space to intervene and take part in the discussion at the meeting itself, but making stakeholders part of everything - from agenda-setting, planning, the actual meetings, and of course, the outcomes. Consultation is one thing, but participation is so much more.

Concerns of some colleagues around accessibility were also expressed by stakeholders, highlighting that meetings needed to be accessible to people with disabilities, especially in the context of a discussion on technology and science. It is critical to ensure that marginalized communities are engaged in the process and the outcomes, and Member States have a role in helping to make this happen. MS and the UN must put money where the mouth is and see how can increase access to the most marginalized.

8. Ensuring a science- and evidence based policy discussion

This session revolved around how the Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) and the SG’s SDG Annual Progress Report should support the work of the HLPF. Participants were reminded that the outcomes of Rio+20 and Agenda 2030 both stressed the need to reinforce the links between science and policy. The following questions were asked to help frame the discussion:

- How should the two reports in question input into the HLPF?
- How can the science and academic communities be organized to support the HLPF?

The comments made around the SG’s SDG Annual Progress Report focused on the need to feed it into the GSDR, thus strengthening the link between science and data collection and the policy discussion. On the GSDR, there was some mention that it should be the document that forms the basis of the debate to be held in the HLPF. Thematic reviews to be done by the UN System should be part of this report.

In terms of inputs into the GSDR, there was a focus on the need for inclusion. Review should not only be done by DESA or the Secretariat, review should be supported by an external advisory group made up of scientists, academics and civil society representatives. Also, the GSDR must arrive on time to support the discussions of the HLPF. During the HLPF, there is a need to set up a block of time to discuss the report

and have an exchange amongst Member States to discuss recommendations and show support for the link between science and policy.

During the discussion, there was a call for the GSDR to be more analytical and have some policy oriented recommendations. Also, Member States should be able to identify experts to contribute to the work. Some even mentioned that the GSDR should be raised to the same level of recognition as the IPCC. The discussion around an independent panel for the GSDR raised a number of issues:

- Its composition, role, authority, and mandate;
- The IPCC can operate as a panel because the subject and scientists remain the same, while the GSDR will change themes very often so the panel will need to change to gather the right expertise;

A question arose around the themes of the report. Some mentioned that Member States should have a say in the themes selected. Points were raised on the need to make the recommendations less political and more objective, as well as on the need to connect the TFM with the GSDR. The intention here should not be to centralize all data, but to energize expert spaces so that those inputs contribute to the HLPF. A communicable programme is key here in order to allow those spaces to engage.

The process of producing the GSDR is as follows:

- DESA engages with organized science, beginning with the Science and Technology Major Group, ICSU, SDSN, and Future Earth;
- DESA engages with various parts of the UN system;
- DESA worked with some organizations like UNEP and UNCTAD on a few specific chapters;
- The Peer review process varied from chapter to chapter.

The intervention from major groups and stakeholders stressed the importance of stakeholders in the peer review process and the contributions already made by colleagues, namely from the Science and Technology Major Group, the Major Group for Children and Youth, and the Indigenous Peoples Major Group. It was flagged that the GSDR should set the context of where the SDGs should operate and thus bring the science perspective on issues like carrying capacity and planetary boundaries, which are crucial for sustainable development. Finally, stakeholders called for the the GSDR to play a role in “depoliticizing” some issues, as its observations and conclusions are based on evidence.

9. Outcome, broad lines of HLPF 2016 programme and possible sessions formats

This session addressed some of the structural aspects of the HLPF, including the distribution of the days and on the ministerial declaration. A proposal of “blocs” was presented for discussion: 1) Follow up and review regarding MoI and outcomes of the FfD; 2) Review of commitments on sustainable development; 3) Outcomes of regional preparatory processes; 4) Thematic reviews; 5) Science and policy interface and the GSDR - including to identify emerging issues; 6) Annual SDG progress report; 7) Focus on countries in special situations, including middle income countries and mandates related to SCP; 8) Inputs from stakeholders.

It was recognized that addressing all those blocs may not be possible in the first year but 2016 could focus on initial steps for implementation, integration and mainstreaming into national development strategies. Another proposal was for HLPF 2016 to consider a substantive bloc on the global indicator framework - although some participants questioned this need assuming that the indicators framework would be defined by the time the HLPF met. The engagement of the UN and stakeholders in the preparations of HLPF was mentioned once again as critical.

During the debate, the concern about not diluting the agenda too much was raised - 8 days of meetings, around 32 sessions. A question was raised about the possibility of setting up a specific session for each SDG during the HLPF.

Stakeholders representatives called the attention to points related to:

- a) Transparency - and the need for dedicated time for consultations and access to all information related to the HLPF (including draft resolutions);
- b) Inclusion - on creating appropriate mechanisms for engagement, including new and accessible technologies and platforms;
- c) Predictability - setting up a clear calendar and mechanisms to collect inputs from broader constituencies beyond NY;
- d) Innovation - encouraging MS to facilitate open platforms for reporting by all stakeholders;
- e) Funding - need to provide resources in a trust fund to support stakeholder participation at all levels and
- f) Outcome - for national reviews to focus on national implementation plans, how Agenda 2030 is being mainstreamed and how stakeholders are being engaged at national reviews.

Some participants questioned if the necessary resources for a secretariat support - especially for UN DESA - were being allocated, including to coordinate the inputs from UN agencies. One participant considered that since there would be a FfD Forum in April, the HLPF should not dedicate space to follow up on the AAAA or of MoI and cautioned that Agenda 2030 (para 75) does not connect the work of indicators with the HLPF.

Other proposal was to dedicate the five initial days to “technical issues and reviews” and the 3 high level days to political discussions and outward looking efforts, including a focus on partnerships.

There were different views on the ministerial declaration (the outcome document) with some calling for a negotiated document whereas others would prefer a “call for action” regarding implementation, avoiding another round of high level debate amongst ministers.

Several participants considered that the 8-days of HLPF 2016 should be the “culmination” of other processes feeding into it, avoiding re-hash all issues again and using other meetings throughout the year to deepen discussions on specific themes. Some cautioned that Ministers would not come to discuss “procedural issues” but would be interested in highlighting successes and partnerships.

The President of ECOSOC informed about his intention to define the theme for HLPF 2016 as early as possible, and before the end of 2015. HLPF will be prepared through many other platforms, including through the regional commissions which will convene regional forums on sustainable development (by May 2016). Informal gatherings and retreats will be organized in the run up to the HLPF, including, for instance, a retreat for countries that are volunteering for review at the HLPF so the first round of review can be as successful as possible. The President of ECOSOC encouraged major groups and other stakeholders, including the Global Compact, to organize informal meetings and coordinate inputs to the HLPF. Participants called for a clear timeline with the roadmap to HLPF.

10. Conclusion, Next Steps, and Analysis:

This retreat was seen as a “first step” in inclusive and transparent preparations for the 2016 HLPF and an opportunity for informal dialogue to discuss some of the tricky issues left to be decided before then. Between now and the 2016 HLPF, many processes will have to fall into place for a clearer picture of what the 2016 HLPF will look like, as well as the future reviews and HLPFs in 2017 and beyond. This includes processes to define the working methods and architecture of the FfD Forum, the TFM, and STI forums, the global indicators process, all of the work to be undertaken by the ECOSOC Function Commissions, as well as negotiations on the follow-up and review mechanism through the HLPF, which is expected to be convened in the Spring of 2016 by the PGA.

There was a general sense that inclusivity of stakeholders should underpin all of the efforts by Member States (both from developed countries and within the G77) in shaping the 2016 HLPF and the 2030 Agenda Review architecture. However, major groups and other stakeholders will need to collectively ensure that governments stick to this commitment when the discussions get “political” through negotiations on these processes. Important work will of course have to be undertaken within the stakeholder community to explore how to self organize around the HLPF, including coordinating common advocacy to push for additional space and very concrete and explicit modalities for engagement in the review processes, at the national, regional and global levels. Undoubtedly, once the “political” side of the discussions are injected into negotiations, some governments will start calling for a “less prescriptive” approach on engaging stakeholders in the national and global review process, respecting “national circumstances and priorities,” as they have in the past. In response to this, stakeholders will need to be ready to show them concrete ways and examples of how they can positively contribute to complementing and strengthening government’s own work and capacities, both in implementation and follow-up and review.