



UNITED NATIONS OFFICE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
INCHEON, REPUBLIC OF KOREA

CONCEPT NOTE

2018 Sustainable Development Transition Forum

*Accelerating Progress towards the SDGs:
Enhancing the Role of the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF)*

29-31 October 2018, Incheon, Republic of Korea

1. Background

The UN Office for Sustainable Development contributes to building, exchanging and facilitating the use of knowledge in support of transitions to sustainable development paths in all countries. UNOSD specialises in mapping, assessing and improving the exchange of knowledge resources, providing advice to Member States and the broader policy communities on applying such knowledge, and conducting research and capacity development in areas of the sustainability transition.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted by UN Member States in September 2015. Included in the Agenda are 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 associated targets, described as “integrated and indivisible, global in nature and universally applicable, taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities.” Furthermore, in the Agenda Member States note the following: “We are determined to take the bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world onto a sustainable and resilient path. As we embark on this collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind”.

Given the integrated and indivisible nature of the SDGs, the SDTF endeavours to examine the Agenda as a whole and the 17 goals in relation to one another. It also looks at cross-cutting issues which have a bearing on the achievement of most if not all of the goals, like poverty eradication, gender equality, tackling climate change and promoting sustainable patterns of consumption and production.

The 2030 Agenda designates the High-Level Political Forum on sustainable development (HLPF) as having “the central role in overseeing the follow-up and review [of the SDGs] at the global level” [para 47]. The HLPF has been meeting each year since 2013, when it first met under the auspices of the UN General Assembly, and for the past few years (beginning in 2016) it has been meeting under the auspices of ECOSOC to review progress towards achieving the SDGs which were launched in January 2016. In 2019 the HLPF will have completed a full cycle of thematic reviews of the 17 goals, and next year, in addition to the HLPF meeting under the auspices of ECOSOC, there will be another meeting of the HLPF under the auspices of the General Assembly – a so-called ‘SDG Summit’ which is expected to attract many Heads of State and Government.

2. The Experience and Future of the High Level Political Forum (HLPF)

This year’s Sustainable Development Transition Forum (SDTF), then, comes at a crucial time, leading up to the HLPF’s watershed year of 2019. Next year, it is expected that the General Assembly will mandate an assessment of the HLPF’s experience during its first four years of reviewing the SDGs (2016-2019) with a view to proposing ways to enhance its effectiveness

going forward. This year's SDTF is designed to foster an open dialogue on what we have learned in the first four years of implementing the SDGs, both at the country level and at the international level, particularly with regard to the role of the HLPF. The SDTF will foster an exchange of ideas among participants on how to accelerate implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the coming years and how, specifically, to enhance the role of the HLPF in the follow-up and review of progress and in advancing national level implementation.

3. 2019 HLPF under ECOSOC: Rounding off the first review cycle

The HLPF under ECOSOC takes place each year in New York in July over one-and-a-half weeks. Each year there is an overarching theme of the HLPF: in 2018 it was "Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies", in 2019 it will be "Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality". The SDGs reviewed in a given year are broadly related to the theme.

At next year's HLPF under the auspices of ECOSOC, the SDGs under review include SDGs 4 (Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all), 8 (Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all), 10 (Reduce inequality within and among countries), 13 (Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts), 16 (Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels), and SDG 17 (Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development) which undergoes in-depth review every year.

The first week of the HLPF is devoted to review of progress on those specific SDGs, cross-cutting issues like leaving no one behind and gender equality, as well as resource mobilization and partnership building to advance the SDGs. The second week, which is the high-level week attended by Ministers, is largely devoted to presentations by Member States of their voluntary national reviews (VNRs) of progress towards achieving the SDGs. A ministerial declaration, largely negotiated in advance of the HLPF, is tabled for adoption in the concluding plenary. In addition, the President of ECOSOC, who presides over the HLPF, issues a non-negotiated Chair's Summary of the proceedings.

It is important to bear in mind that the HLPF is the annual culmination of a host of national and regional processes and meetings relating to the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. Each national government preparing a VNR must engage multiple stakeholders in consultations and have extensive cross-ministerial consultations and coordination in producing its report. Also, the regional commissions of the United Nations all organize regional sustainable development fora where regional progress is reported and assessed prior to the HLPF. Communities of practice, very often involving specialized UN agencies, also convene meetings and produce analyses of progress on specific SDGs which come up for review in a given year – whether SDG 6 (water), SDG 7 (energy), SDG 4 (education), SDG 15 (terrestrial ecosystems and biodiversity) or others.

Knowledge and lessons are digested and distilled at each level, ideally with the result that the HLPF can collate the most robust findings on what works and what does not work in SDG implementation, and why. That knowledge can then be shared across regions and brought back to the national and local level in order to enhance the effectiveness of actions on the ground.

4. 2019 HLPF under the General Assembly: What are expectations?

When the HLPF meets at Heads of State/Government level in September 2019, it is expected to provide policy direction for sustaining and accelerating progress towards the SDGs in the years ahead and, in particular, to highlight priorities for enhancing follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda at the international level through the HLPF as well as other fora, platforms.

When the format and organizational aspects of the high-level political forum on sustainable development were agreed by the UN General Assembly (resolution 67/290 of 9 July 2013), paragraph 29 stated that the General Assembly:

“Further decides to review at its seventy-third session the format and the organizational aspects of the forum, unless otherwise decided; ...”

One question which arises in this regard is what should be the content of that review. What are the key issues and challenges facing the HLPF as currently constituted and what can be done to address them going forward in the interest of supporting achievement of the SDGs?

5. Forum Objectives and Format

The overarching objective of the SDTF is to achieve a better understanding of successes, lessons and specific mechanisms for initiating and fostering the profound transformations that are urgently needed to make our societies sustainable, resilient, prosperous, peaceful and inclusive in accordance with the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The SDTF has been conceived as a forum where the themes of the HLPF, the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda’s implementation can be discussed in an informal setting. It is designed for knowledge and experience sharing as well as capacity building for policy makers charged with SDG implementation at national level. At the same time, it is a place to consider how the international institutional arrangements for SDG implementation can best support accelerated progress at national and regional levels.

At previous sessions of the SDTF the focus has been on the themes of the HLPF and the SDGs reviewed in the sessions immediately preceding and immediately following the SDTF, which aimed to bridge the two and examine the interlinkages between them, given the integrated nature of the agenda. In light of the opportunity afforded by next year’s two-pronged HLPF – once under ECOSOC and once under the GA – the 2018 SDTF takes a broader approach. It will devote consideration to the themes of the 2018 and 2019 HLPF under ECOSOC and the SDGs under review, but it will also look at progress on the 2030 Agenda as an integrated whole and the SDGs as a set of interrelated goals and targets aimed at securing a sustainable development transition. Moreover, it will take the opportunity to reflect on the institutional architecture overseeing this global agenda and the global goals, with a view to providing guidance to UN Member States and other stakeholders as they ponder the question of how to make the HLPF and the broader institutional architecture more effective in supporting attainment of the SDGs.

Some of the concerns which have arisen during the first few years of SDG and 2030 Agenda review in the HLPF, which may be considered in the 2018 SDTF, are the following:

- What benefits do Member States and other stakeholders derive from their participation in the HLPF?
- Does the HLPF provide useful policy guidance for implementing the 2030 Agenda at national and subnational levels? What evidence is there that national governments and other stakeholders have applied those lessons?
- Does the HLPF serve as a valuable forum for forging partnerships to advance SDG implementation? Does it facilitate resource mobilization to that end?
- What is the experience with the thematic reviews of the SDGs and of overall SDG progress? Do these provide valuable policy insights? Could they be made more effective?

- Do the voluntary national reviews help the presenting country to improve its policies and other measures to advance the SDGs? What happens in-country after the VNR to follow-up?
- Are there specific ways to make the whole process of the VNRs (preparation, presentation, follow-up) more useful both for presenting countries and other countries?
- Does the HLPF provide adequate space and adequate incentives to non-state actors to share their experiences in working towards the SDGs and to commit to intensify their efforts?
- Should HLPF participants – both states and non-state actors – be encouraged to make voluntary commitments to advancing the SDGs, including resource commitments and partnerships?
- What is the utility of the Ministerial Declaration negotiated prior to the HLPF? Is there a way that it could be made more robust, richer in policy guidance and more specific on actions needed to accelerate progress?

The event will accommodate approximately 100 participants from governments, UN Agencies, Think Tanks, Development Banks, Academic Institutions, Civil Society Organisations, and private sector from around the world.

6. Forum Agenda

Please visit the [Forum website](#) for the latest agenda and list of speakers.

7. Outputs

The Forum will produce three primary outputs, one that will prepare and guide discussions during the event, and others resulting from its deliberations. They include:

- Concept note (this document) to guide the preparation for and structure the discussions;
- Forum report documenting the presentations and discussions on progress with implementation, including on the SDGs under review in 2019 but also on the entire integrated agenda, and enumerating suggestions for accelerating progress and enhancing institutional effectiveness in the coming years; and
- 2018 Incheon Communiqué summarizing the key messages which participants would like to convey to the international community in preparation for next year's HLPFs.

8. Schedule and Venue

The SDTF will be held in Songdo, Republic of Korea, at the Holiday Inn Incheon Songdo. The event will last 3 days, scheduled from 29-31 October; the Agenda is under development. English will be the language of the Forum.

9. Participants and Organisers

The 2018 SDTF will bring together an international audience of between 70-100 national government officials and experts responsible for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, as well as representatives of regional and international organizations, including the United Nations, and of civil society and private sector. A particular effort will be made to invite officials who have participated in the High Level Political Forum and, in particular, the preparation and/or presentation of countries' Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) to the HLPF.

The Forum is organized by the United Nations Office for Sustainable Development (UNOSD) of UN DESA, Division for Sustainable Development Goals (DSDG) in partnership with the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF).