

Expert Group Meeting

The Way Forward – Strengthening ECOSOC and the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

*3-4 December 2019
UN Headquarters, New York*

Summary

I. Introduction

At its 74th session, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) will review the implementation of several resolutions (67/290 and 70/299) relevant to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in order to take stock of the work of the HLPF at the end of its first four-year cycle, to strengthen it and ensure that it delivers effectively as the central platform for follow-up and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Resolution 72/305 further decided that the resolution on strengthening of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) would be reviewed in conjunction with the review process of the HLPF, to improve the way ECOSOC delivers on its functions and supports the HLPF.

To inform the work of the UNGA in this review, an Expert Group Meeting (EGM) entitled “The Way Forward – Strengthening ECOSOC and the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development” was convened from 3 to 4 December 2019 at UN Headquarters in New York, organized by UN DESA’s Office of Intergovernmental Support and Coordination for Sustainable Development (OISC) in collaboration with the European Commission.

The EGM provided an opportunity for representatives of Member States, the UN system, academia and other stakeholders to reflect on possible ways to strengthen the HLPF, particularly with regard to thematic reviews, interlinkages, Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), the HLPF preparatory process, engagement of stakeholders, and political guidance. This meeting served to continue the discussions that had taken place during a previous EGM held in May 2019, as well as similar stocktaking exercises convened during the July 2019 HLPF under the auspices of ECOSOC.

The following is a brief summary of the discussions and recommendations produced by the EGM.

II. Thematic Reviews: Approach

The participants discussed how to organize the HLPF thematic review sessions, and whether the SDGs should be reviewed in clusters as with the first cycle. They considered ways of ensuring that the cross-cutting issues and themes were also included, whether the time allocated for the HLPF was sufficient and how to maximize the available time. There as consensus on the

importance of ensuring space for peer-learning and technical discussions at the HLPF, to avoid a “parade of reports” and to support more substantive discussions.

Participants recalled that the HLPF under the auspices of the General Assembly—the SDG Summit—had called for an acceleration of SDG implementation, and discussed the importance of preserving the HLPF as a platform for reviewing progress toward the SDGs. While many agreed that the 2019 edition of the Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) identified six cross-cutting entry points that could be used to structure the thematic reviews, some participants also stated that it was important not to lose the focus on reviewing specific SDGs, and highlighted that in order to have in depth discussions it would not be possible to review all the SDGs each year. Considering the “decade of action”, participants stated that there should also be a focus on the SDGs identified in the GSDR as lagging behind. Participants also highlighted that there were growing communities of practice and practitioners working on each of the SDGs, and it is important to reflect this in the structure of the HLPF thematic reviews, so discussions during thematic reviews could also help to spotlight and support other global processes.

While the first cycle of the HLPF was generally a success, many recognized that efforts to fine-tuning the process and substance of the HLPF would not be perfect; there would necessarily be trade-offs, in the choices about how to integrate the goals and targets at the core of the 2030 Agenda into the structure of the reporting and review process. One proposal envisioned reviewing the progress on the SDGs in the morning sessions, and then discussing how such progress relates to the other SDGs in the afternoon sessions.

It is important to think of the HLPF not as one week, but as a year-round process. The importance of incorporating the inputs of the Functional Commissions and the Regional Commissions was also highlighted. Participants noted that the half hour allocated for the regional outcomes was not enough, and highlighted the need to utilize the outcomes and recommendations of the regional meetings more fully in the review process. The link between other preparatory meetings and the HLPF should also be strengthened, and allowed to guide the process and the HLPF sessions. A proposal that was discussed in the Group of Friends of the VNRs was considered, with some participants proposing a meeting in the Spring as a part of the preparatory process for the HLPF that would inform the negotiations, and others noting that an additional meeting would have resource and cost implications.

Participants agreed that it is important to consider the desired outcome of the HLPF and structure it accordingly. They discussed the possibility of a “Sherpa system”, where a Sherpa would support the development of the thematic review panel in order to provide more coherence to the discussions. They also discussed how the background documents produced by DESA could better be utilized during the panel discussions, including a proposal for a “digestible” one-page note to be produced to support the discussions, to help missions inform and consult with their capitals to ensure better guidance in negotiating the political declaration and prepare “fit for purpose” input during the interactive debates, and to feed into the Ministerial segment. In this context, the Sherpas (one for each main panel plus side events) could organize the year-long process and assist with producing the one-pager, finding and briefing suitable panelists, serving as a well-prepared panel moderator, and ensuring an action-oriented follow-up after the HLPF.

Participants highlighted that the HLPF and the VNRs are indeed helping countries to accelerate implementation; each year more countries are volunteering to present their reviews and more countries should be encouraged to do so. The HLPF should take the new Regional Coordinator system and the QCPR review into consideration in its reviews. The need to delineate the different roles of ECOSOC and the GA in relation to the HLPF was discussed, along with various levels of best practices, including South-South and triangular cooperation, which are all important to capture in the review process.

Participants considered measures needed to make better use of data and monitoring in order to gain an accurate review of the challenges of implementing the SDGs. They also discussed how to maintain a high level of political commitment, how to make the ministerial declaration more meaningful, and how to support a bottom-up approach to enhance capacity on the ground. There was a proposal to include a session on the special challenges and responsibilities of high-income countries, where achieving the SDGs could require the deconstruction of some systems with policies that push other countries further behind. The meeting also discussed ways to engage the private sector in the HLPF, highlighting that in order to bring the private sector to the table there was need to communicate differently, including through more concentrated meetings with clear takeaway actions, so the private sector would be considered as a partner bringing not only financing but also expertise and innovation to the table.

III. Thematic reviews: Addressing interlinkages and cross-cutting issues

SDG and thematic reviews could be improved to better document interactions among SDGs. Standard scientific reviews and regression analyses are not ideal. Transformative, “clever” policies ideally involve multiple sources of insight that can work together to produce a more coherent and complete analysis than individual sources; these policies are said to be effective, efficient, practical, locally relevant, inclusive, synergistic, and contextual.

There was discussion around the benefits of “decomposition analysis”, which combines analysis of certain outcomes (e.g. decarbonization, reduced emissions and other factors such as population growth). Examining the relative contribution of countries, contextualizing individual VNRs, assessing synergies, weighing “transformation” vs. “business as usual”, and assessing global convergence were all addressed in this context. It was also highlighted that global data can sometimes reveal a country’s performance in a relative and more adjusted way, where real results have been achieved despite unfavorable conditions. One participant reported that a global index on SDG 8 is in development, and proxy indicators have been useful in some instances where lack of data is a challenge.

The debate on how to design the next HLPF cycle to be specific enough to measure progress and still link to the entire agenda considered a number of options. The proposal to organize the thematic reviews around the six GDSR entry points could prove useful for addressing interlinkages across the SDGs, as effective thematic reviews should not only present data on the agreed indicators under one goal, but must also analyze cross-sectoral data and information in multiple ways.

One proposal focused on two of the six GSDR entry points each year. Some participants cautioned against exchanging one set of silos for another, and noted that terms such as “levers” can mean different things to different people; for example SDG 16 and SDG 10 address institutions, and can apply to any lever or function. In the context of leaving no one behind (LNOB), the discussion recalled that eradication of poverty is an overarching issue, with SDGs 2, 3 and 4 as crucial for progress, and SDG 17 as a cross-cutting goal, and one participant wondered how to reconcile different layers, levels, and priorities. The idea of “creative destruction” was invoked as a positive principle in re-envisioning the HLPF parameters and methodologies.

An additional strategy examined the idea of adding up three main outcomes or findings of the GSDR: the record so far, plus GSDR entry points, plus interrelations among goals and targets. These different sources of information combined could support each other, while also optimizing each source of policy insight. The intensity of interlinkages could be analyzed through various relationships—multifunctional outcomes (e.g. education, public sector spending per person, reflecting policy will) or demographic relationships (e.g. change over time in different sub-populations of a country, progress in gender equality in educated versus non-educated populations). Data are more available in some sub-sectors than in others; the bigger challenge is disaggregation within countries, and the need for better in-country data collection systems. While the conceptual potential exists with this approach, there are still some gaps to be closed.

Some participants stressed the advantages of continuing to review clusters of SDGs in specific years, noting that a continuation of the previous cycle could more easily engage communities or groups that work on specific SDGs at the same time, and expressing preference for preserving and maintaining the agreed clusters from the first cycle. While some noted that interlinkages were often effectively addressed in side events, others agreed that side events are extremely useful, allowing more participation and sharing by more people, but should not be seen as a replacement for the thematic reviews. Most agreed that there should always be a place for discussion on individual SDGs.

One participant added that other UN official processes did not address interlinkages, but that some bodies are now making an effort to do this and to feed their outcomes into the HLPF. Linking to other UN conferences and events is critical, and coordination and timing with other events and conferences must be considered in the designing of the next HLPF cycle.

While there is need for ensuring policy coherence through interlinkages and integration, some wondered how technical experts at country level would be able to grasp the substantive complexity of how interlinkages are addressed, and how to make these suggested narratives and approaches user friendly, noting that national and sub-national policy practitioners do not always talk to each other. Engagement of communities must happen across the HLPF cycle—but some questioned who is involved in setting national level priorities, and whether the principle of LNOB makes these processes inclusive.

Many agreed that the HLPF must go beyond measuring progress toward the goals and look at more granular data to determine how progress is interlinked, to focus on leveraging synergies and understand relationships toward progress. The HLPF must evolve beyond the way it has addressed interlinkages in past sessions, avoid repeating the same things, and to go deeper into

implementation. Cross-fertilization of work at the national level requires some type of cross- or inter-sectoral discussions, for cooperation and collaboration across sectors. A proposal was made for a type of “Sherpa” mechanism that could bring a more useful structure to the design of the HLPF, to analyze pieces of progress and where to place them. Interrelationships could be discussed within the scope of each goal, in other dedicated meetings and platforms. To avoid narrative “fatigue” the HLPF could reinterpret development priorities and plans, noting the constant flux in buzzwords and changing ideas; in some ways this keeps the attention of the public and can also respond to new and emerging challenges.

IV. VNRs: Strengthening evidence-based reviews, peer learning and partnerships

Lessons learned from four years of VNRs based on questionnaires

Participants agreed that the VNRs showed ownership of the SDGs, and the process of preparing VNRs helped countries to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs, and to mobilize partnerships and multi-stakeholder approaches. In the past four years, the development of VNRs is considered a successful endeavor. The countries presenting VNRs are increasing, and the quality of reviews and related data are improving. VNRs are getting more attention.

The main challenges countries face in the preparation of the VNRs include: the timeframe in preparing the VNRs can be challenging, especially for meaningful stakeholder engagement; SDG mainstreaming and established institutional frameworks are lacking in some countries; the contributions of stakeholders need to be strengthened; there is a lack of baseline data and standardized and disaggregated data sources; coordinating inputs and collecting data from multiple sources is time consuming and complicated; there is increasing strain on institutional capacity to gather and analyze information; it is vital to have strong internal structures in place, especially in the refinement phase of the report; and mobilizing resources and financing for the VNR process is continually difficult.

The lessons learned from 2019 VNR countries include: start the process early; make a work plan that includes consultations with stakeholders; include country’s mission to the UN at every stage; make institutional arrangements that include a policy guidance tier and a technical advisory tier; determine drafting arrangements early; establish early arrangements for the means of inclusion of stakeholders; know the presenting team well ahead of time; and develop unique presentations that are both informative and interesting.

Recommendations to improve VNRs at the national level include: strengthening national ownership including capacity building and whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach and through preparing the VNRs by national team using international assistance when needed; linking the VNRs to reporting to other mechanisms and conventions; strengthening monitoring and oversight including through parliaments and supreme audit institutions, strengthening cooperation among all branches of government; and explaining the impacts of strategies and policies on national level implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Recommendations to improve VNRs at the global level are: using SG voluntary common reporting guidelines to increase comparability, but also to improve the overall quality of reports over time by learning from good practices, and reflecting these by periodically updating the guidelines; focusing VNR presentations at HLPF on the explanation of impacts of policies and strategies, lessons learned and peer learning that can be of benefit to all countries; strengthening of interactive discussions, including through providing more time for questions and discussing recommendations; strengthening the role of the HLPF as a platform for peer learning and exchange of experiences; strengthening the HLPF to serve as a broker and matchmaker for partnerships in the follow-up after the VNRs by looking at areas where countries need support; and the guidelines for the second time presentations of the VNR should be different from first time VNR countries.

Strengthening evidence-based reviews and making VNRs more analytical and comparable

Participants emphasized the challenges and gaps on baseline data and disaggregated data sources at the national level for VNRs, which is particularly important for understanding the situation of inequality within each country and for leaving no one behind.

There are positive developments toward strengthening national statistical capacity for improving evidence-based VNRs. Participants exchanged successful experiences in ECLAC on establishing a knowledge platform for the region to take stock on the implementation of SDGs. Other regions also have region-specific indicators, which have been incorporated into regional reporting. UNEP is working on data and indicators on monitoring the environmental dimension of the SDGs.

At the national level, more countries have taken steps to incorporate more data and statistics in the VNRs, with over half of VNRs in 2019 including a statistical annex. Countries also have taken steps to modify and adapt the global indicator framework to fit national contexts, conditions and priorities and have developed and launched SDG data reporting platforms.

For future actions, participants recommended to make data more useful for policy makers; to target data for VNR reporting; to update data and make them more specific and analytical, and to reflect this in the guidelines for VNR countries; to link data and VNRs to the means of implementation and financing; and to share best practices on data collection and using technologies, capacity building, and identification of non-traditional data sources such as citizen generated data to fill in data gaps.

Participants referred to the review of indicators for SDGs to be conducted by the Statistics Commission in 2020 and looked forward to receiving more information. They also stressed the need to streamline the three dimensions of sustainable development in VNRs, and suggested including this in the guidelines. Many also proposed linking VNRs with the thematic and SDG reviews and with the “decade of action and delivery”, to consolidate national experience. Linking VNRs to other national reporting and review processes could help improve sharing of information and data as well as support coherent policy making at the national level, to reduce reporting burdens and enhance quality.

Strengthening peer learning and partnerships

Participants stressed that the VNR is not only a report, but also a national process, with different levels and branches of government, parliament, local governments and all stakeholders to be involved for it to be beneficial. Countries should think about how to organize VNRs institutionally at home beyond the year of HLPF. It is important to involve stakeholders and non-state actors in preparing VNRs, both on presentations in the HLPF and on follow up, and leaving no one behind. Participants suggested communication tool kits with key messages to get everyone involved in the VNR process, to strengthen partnerships and advance multi-stakeholder approach. Connecting reviews at the community, sub-national and national levels with the regional and global trends would make the follow up to the implementation of SDGs more concrete.

The lessons learned and good practices on the ground on providing resources, using technologies, incentives to employment, strengthening governance and institutions could help in finding solutions to tackle challenges. Participants agreed that the peer-learning element of VNRs should be strengthened. The objective of the VNR is to share experiences of countries in the implementation of SDGs, to identify challenges, to get advice from other countries, and to mobilize partnerships.

Some suggested that UN DESA prepare and share the best practices from the past four-year cycle on case studies in terms of peer learning, as a good way for people to know the advantages or disadvantages that countries face. Participants also stressed the important work at the regional level on peer learning and partnerships. Regions have ownership and would help countries in the same region to understand each other more easily. The regional preparatory forums could play a more important role in this regard. Some stated that countries should also think on how to bring the peer-learning experience at the regional level to the global level, and to the official meetings of HLPF. Others stressed that countries are diversified and there is no “one-size fits all”.

Organization of VNRs at the HLPF

To maximize the effectiveness of VNR presentations, participants suggested that information and questions could be shared in advance with VNR countries for better preparation for the interactive discussions. Countries could be grouped in panels earlier in the preparatory process, to facilitate the conversations between countries. There was a proposal to consider selecting one country from each region with interesting good practices to make a presentation during the thematic review of SDGs, in addition to presenting a VNR.

Many agreed that more time needs be allocated to VNR countries for their presentations and discussions during the HLPF, and more specific guidelines need to be provided to countries on how they can make their VNR presentations in the HLPF more effective. It is important that Ministers continue to present in the VNRs, to reinforce the commitment to implementation of the SDGs at the highest level.

The VNR Labs add great value to the HLPF; some suggested that VNR Labs could be more analytical, with an emphasis on sharing experiences among countries.

V. Pathways to expand multi-stakeholder participation

Participants shared information on two reports that analyze the effectiveness of VNRs. The Division for Sustainable Development Goals, UN DESA, has commissioned a report to analyze how Member States report on stakeholder engagement in the implementation and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda in their VNR. The report's purpose is to identify what types and levels of engagement are being showcased; what examples of best practices exist; and where there are gaps that could benefit from additional support. The first draft is under review and due to be released by early 2020. The Committee for Development Policy has also presented findings on its analysis of the VNRs from the perspective of LNOB. It found that almost all VNRs acknowledge the LNOB principle but do not always report on their actions in detail. Far fewer acknowledge and report on reaching the furthest behind first.

The discussion focused on the need for all participants to question the culture that they are trying to advance at the HLPF. At present, there is an adversarial culture in this space, whereby Member States and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are in opposition to each other. A fundamental shift is needed in how all stakeholders contribute, posture and frame their contributions. While there has been significant advancement in how participants engage constructively with each other, further work is required.

Participants recognized that at the global level there is a growing awareness among stakeholders of how to engage with the HLPF, thanks to the work of UN DESA and the Major Groups and other Stakeholders' Coordination Mechanism. At national levels, however, there is a need for more toolkits, workshops and guidance to map the opportunities that exist for stakeholders. Additional workshops that focus on the civil society perspective could take place in parallel with workshops that currently exist. This would enhance capacity for effective engagement, provide opportunities for peer learning, and bridge the gap between the national and global levels.

Some participants noted that the VNR is seen as the last chapter in the process for many countries and that further discussion needs to take place to identify a clearer road map from the local, national and regional platforms to the global platform. Other participants stated that further emphasis on the follow-up and review of each VNR was necessary after the HLPF and that a VNR feedback loop to national or local stakeholders would be beneficial to those who could not attend the HLPF. In the general context of the VNRs, Member States must use the indicators in the VNRs to provide a clearer picture of progress. Furthermore, adequate frameworks are required. Domestic sustainable development architecture cannot be done *ad hoc*; it needs support from institutions, councils and umbrella organizations.

The theme of meaningful engagement was also raised with regard to how VNR processes are conducted. Participants noted that the increase in number of CSO reports at the national level (shadow reports) was indicative of their views not being considered as part of the VNR. Several participants stressed that Member States must communicate how they intend to engage stakeholders as early as possible in the consultation process and thereafter to hold meaningful consultations. Consultations are beneficial to all parties, as they help to identify the issues of concern prior to global level discussions. In addition to absence at national level, many participants

also acknowledged the absence of Member State representatives during the official session of the HLPF that focuses on multi-stakeholder engagement.

The need for funding to support the participation of stakeholders is an ongoing issue. In order to strengthen multi-stakeholder engagement, several additional suggestions were made, namely: stakeholders should formulate reports containing case studies and experiences at the local level, to provide to Member States with best practices focusing on multi-stakeholder engagement; additional avenues of funding need to be explored to secure multi-stakeholder participation, particularly from developing countries; in addition to the plenary sessions of the HLPF, further time should be allocated to discussion about the technical aspects of the VNRs; and stakeholders should be further incorporated into the negotiation process of the HLPF political declaration.

VI. Preparatory process of the HLPF thematic review

Participants emphasized the need to review and follow-up on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in a holistic manner through high quality and analytical thematic reviews, while noting that the SDGs are highly integrated, and the world is very interconnected. The thematic reviews need to be strengthened to add value and offer more strategic political guidance on sustainable development, including in the Ministerial Declaration; ensure follow-up and action-based outcomes; focus on interlinkages among SDGs; and strengthen the science-policy interface. The form of the thematic reviews and their preparations would need to follow and support these functions.

Improving the thematic reviews and their preparatory process

The HLPF thematic reviews were seen as a means to analyze progress and engage ministries and stakeholders in the HLPF. Yet the thematic reviews also need to lead to transformative outcomes. They need to be based on evidence, facts and timely data, and better employ existing analytical reports, such as the UN Secretary-General's reports and the GSDR.

The current context of the thematic reviews was viewed as being different from the first review cycle starting in 2016. There is new knowledge and data, as well as new global challenges. Participants emphasized timely information and data as being of the essence. Particular attention is needed on data and data disaggregation, and identification of areas where countries need support in SDG implementation. Preparations and reviews should also involve a 10-year timeline, as opposed to a four-year cycle.

The broad scope of the thematic reviews allows them to draw on a range of inputs. There was a call for a better use of these inputs, such as reports produced by UN agencies and stakeholders, and outcomes from regional and expert meetings, and a more systematic analysis of inputs.

The preparatory process was seen as important for the success of the thematic reviews. It needs to be a year-round process, which is also used to promote ownership and mobilize stakeholders. One participant noted that for the preparatory process there are four priorities:

focusing on synergies, tradeoffs and leaving no one behind; partnerships; balancing entry points across sectors; and keeping abreast of new data.

The different elements of the preparatory process preceding the thematic reviews, including expert group meetings to prepare thematic recommendations, remain central. These include consultations with governments and other networks, applying the concept of universality and looking beyond the UN system for knowledge. The preparatory process also includes the preparation of the panels convened during the HLPF. It often takes significant time to identify the panelists who have the expertise that is sought, and who also speak well and will facilitate communication across sectors. There is a need to work with existing networks and be inclusive as well as to manage the expertise of the inputs to ensure a strong outcome.

Participants also discussed how to better leverage the regional forums for the thematic reviews. The regional forums represent a first stop for analysis of gaps and issues, building on regional assessments of progress, and can be building blocks for, and filters of, best practices that can be replicated. The Resident Coordinators are also part of the regional discussions, adding their perspectives. The regional forums could also provide approaches and regional perspectives for using the GSDR entry points.

Clustering versus not clustering the SDGs in the thematic reviews

Participants again discussed the options for the focus of the thematic reviews. Some stated that focusing on a few selected SDGs every year has led to a siloed and fragmented approach, not only of the SDGs but also of the stakeholders and participants. Moving to a more holistic approach would enhance the HLPF as a platform to facilitate addressing cross-cutting issues as well as communication among all stakeholder groups. Such an alternative would be to improve the thematic reviews by organizing them using the GSDR levers and entry points, which focus on interlinkages. The entry points and levers from the GSDR could be used to review the 2030 Agenda and all 17 SDGs at the HLPF each year. One participant noted that from year to year, some entry points might need to take priority over others. Another noted that the entry points would be for examining the SDGs and not replacing them, as it is important not to lose the fundamental link to the SDGs.

Others felt that the HLPF could continue to review a set of SDGs every year within the thematic reviews to provide in-depth analysis and review. Knowing which SDGs will be reviewed in advance has been central to leveraging the significant energy, commitment and engagement from stakeholders and networks within sectors that support particular SDGs. The HLPF thematic reviews have thus far been successful, to a certain extent, so clustering is thus a fallback option since it has worked, and a new approach would need to have a clear value added.

Participants agreed that the challenge is to reconcile reviewing a holistic 2030 Agenda without dividing it inappropriately. The SDGs are a system of goals, targets and indicators, and in-depth reviews are necessary to review progress, yet it is important to highlight and have a better understanding of their interlinkages, while continuing to mobilize stakeholders throughout the year.

Instituting Sherpas for the organization of the thematic reviews could be useful, particularly for shoring up weaknesses. Additional areas for strengthening include high-level political guidance for accelerated action, systematic and evidence-based analysis, and identification of emerging challenges.

Thematic reviews and the VNRs

National ownership remains fundamental. Each country needs to take national ownership in preparing the reviews, including the thematic reviews and VNRs. The thematic review theme could be more effectively used in the VNRs. It will also be important to bring VNRs to a level of comparability.

VII. Outcome: Ministerial Declaration and Political Declaration

It was agreed that the Political Declaration adopted at the SDG Summit has more weight than the Ministerial Declaration adopted at the HLPF due to its clear, concise and forward-looking political message. While some participants felt that a Ministerial Declaration may not be necessary each year, other participants felt that having a Ministerial Declaration is important as it encourages ministerial presence at the HLPF.

Many participants were of the view that negotiating the Ministerial or Political Declaration prior to the HLPF leads to a sense of disconnect between its discussions and the content of the Declaration. While some participants did not view a pre-negotiated outcome document as a major problem, others proposed ways to improve the negotiation process and the value of the Ministerial and Political Declarations. One such suggestion was to start negotiations in the spring of each year, and to finalize the Declaration at the HLPF itself. Other participants noted that this might cause delegations to forfeit participation in plenary sessions of the HLPF. A second proposal was to form a “Sherpa panel” that could draft a page of the Ministerial Declaration, as a broad framework from which the rest of the Declaration could be derived. One participant noted that the Ministerial Declaration did not necessarily need to be negotiated and adopted by the end of the HLPF, but could be produced after the HLPF had concluded.

Participants agreed that the content of the Declaration should include political guidance, trends and gaps in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and concrete, future-oriented action points. To make the Declaration more relevant, there was a suggestion to hold a preparatory meeting at the expert level in the spring. One participant reflected on the effectiveness of the ten action points of the Political Declaration from the SDG Summit, indicating that the ten action points could be tailored to the SDGs in the future. It was also proposed that “coalitions of the willing” could be formed to work around the action points at the national and local levels.

Some participants expressed concern about the lack of follow-up on previous Ministerial Declarations of the HLPF. One participant suggested that the Ministerial Declaration should be reviewed at the following year’s HLPF during one of the first sessions. There was agreement that co-facilitators be assigned early on in the process to allow for a longer consultation period on the Declaration. This would allow for Member States and stakeholders to submit written inputs and

suggestions for the text well before the negotiations start, enabling the co-facilitators to compile an informed outcome document in advance of the negotiations.

Some participants also expressed concern about an observed disconnect between what is negotiated in New York and what capitals actually set as policy towards SDG implementation. Generally, participants concurred that national policies were generally more ambitious than what governments would submit to the negotiations in New York. Other participants also mentioned a sense of disconnect between the regional and global levels, and one questioned how to best ensure that the summaries of the regional forums on sustainable development could feed into the Declaration every year. Some participants questioned the need to adopt the Ministerial Declaration twice—once at the end of the HLPF and once in ECOSOC.

Has the HLPF fulfilled its role?

Participants emphasized the need to underline the universality of the 2030 Agenda, to correct the misperception by some that it is an aid-driven agenda, which has caused some stakeholders—notably the private sector—to lose interest in the HLPF. Some participants expressed that the private sector is perceived as a donor, rather than a partner, in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Several participants acknowledged that the private sector is more likely to engage when they see a return on the investment of their engagement.

Finally, many participants underscored that political will is the most important determinant for systemic change. One participant suggested the creation of a regulatory framework to capture the political will of Governments for sustainable development.

VIII. Summary of recommendations

- ❖ The GSDR identifies entry points that could be used to structure the thematic reviews
- ❖ Thematic reviews should also maintain the coherence and momentum achieved through clustered reviews of SDGs for mobilizing respective communities of practice, and their participation in the HLPF
- ❖ The inputs from the ECOSOC Functional Commissions and Regional Commissions should be incorporated into the HLPF programme more fully, and in a timely manner
- ❖ A pre-HLPF meeting could be convened in the Spring as a part of the preparatory process
- ❖ The new Regional Coordinator system and the QCPR review should be taken into consideration during the HLPF review
- ❖ The preparatory process could inform the HLPF through a “Sherpa” type system, to help curate and support preparation processes for each panel
- ❖ Data to track progress and analyze implementation of the goals and targets should be drawn from multiple sources and perspectives
- ❖ The HLPF should be seen as a year-round process, not simply a few weeks
- ❖ The HLPF under the auspices of ECOSOC held in July should serve as a wrap-up and conclusion of the year’s work
- ❖ Peer learning should be strengthened across the board
- ❖ The focus of the second cycle should shift more toward interlinkages and transformative

pathways

- ❖ More time must be given for VNR presentations by high-ranking officials from capitals
- ❖ The inclusiveness of the VNR process could be improved, with better analysis of data
- ❖ The HLPF cycle could be extended from four years into five
- ❖ Outcomes from meetings on Financing for Development and the Multistakeholder Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation should be better incorporated into the HLPF
- ❖ Linkages between ECOSOC and the HLPF should be enhanced