



# The Future of the High-level Political Forum: Fit for Purpose?

A summary of the ideas presented during the 13 July 2020 Stakeholder Forum 'Pop-up Side Event' webinar at the 2020 HLPF - 'Lessons from the Proposal for a Sustainable Development Council for the UN General Assembly (from Rio+20) for the Future of the High-level Political Forum'

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## ABOUT STAKEHOLDER FORUM

Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future (SF) is a not-for-profit international organisation working to advance sustainable development at all levels. Our work aims to enhance open, accountable, and participatory decision-making and governance on sustainable development through enhancing the involvement of all stakeholders. We provide a bridge between those who have a stake in sustainable development and the international forums where decisions are made in their name. To this end, we work with a diversity of stakeholders globally on international policy development and advocacy; stakeholder engagement and consultation; media and communications, and capacity building - all with the ultimate objective of promoting progressive outcomes on sustainable development through an open and participatory approach. In consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) since 1996, SF also works with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) under an MOU to expand the engagement and participation of the Major Groups and other Stakeholders in the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) and HLPF processes.

Our current projects include the Global Forum for National SDG Advisory Bodies, developed and co-founded in partnership with the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE), The Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development, and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA). The Global Forum aims to support national councils for sustainable development and similar multi-stakeholder bodies in their efforts to deliver the 2030 Agenda. Another current project is the Global Partnership for Ocean Wave Energy Technology, a sustainable development innovation multi-stakeholder partnership aimed at transforming the energy supply of small island developing states (SIDS) and other coastal communities with utility-level electrical power generation from ocean waves. Co-located with wind power, solar power, tidal power, and battery-storage technology to meet the electric power load demands of a modern power grid, should deployment of the SurfWEC system and others be realized, it offers a pathway to the meaningful reduction of carbon emissions into the atmosphere and to the electrification of land and marine transport.

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## INTRODUCTION: FELIX DODDS, MODERATOR OF THE ‘POP-UP’ WEBINAR HLPF 2020 SIDE EVENT

Stakeholder Forum held its first ‘pop-up’ side event at the virtual High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, HLPF 2020, on 13 July 2020. The side event was designed to look at a proposal that was suggested for Rio+20 as a replacement for the Commission on Sustainable Development. This proposal was for a Sustainable Development Council of the United Nations General Assembly. A link to the recording can be found on the [Stakeholder Forum Webinars](#) page, along with the accompanying presentation.

We chose to arrange the event at the 2020 HLPF due to the recent decision to postpone any reforms to the HLPF until the autumn of 2021. That decision to postpone reforms was made after the HLPF side event deadline had passed. We apologized to the ‘pop-up’ event participants who had wanted to attend the plenary of the Voluntary National Review HLPF.

The side event was conceived and delivered in less than a week, and we were very pleased that the speakers and respondents were able to find the time to participate. We chose experts who had been integral to the SDGs and the HLPF so that the discussion that was likely to follow would be informed by their first-hand experiences.

The objective of the ‘pop-up’ event was to raise the question of whether the HLPF was fit for purpose. Speakers and respondents considered whether there is anything that we can learn from the pre-Rio+20 suggestion to create a Sustainable Development Council of the UN General Assembly. They were asked: ‘Why didn’t that idea succeed, and what insights can this offer for creating something that is ‘fit for purpose?’

To address the issues, the side event was very fortunate to welcome:

- **Mohamed Khalil**, Sustainable Development and Climate Change Senior Expert, and Former G77 & China Lead Coordinator and Negotiator for Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development; and
- **Jan Gustav Strandenaes**, Senior Advisor on Governance for Stakeholder Forum.

For respondents we had:

- **Paula Caballero**, RARE Managing Director for Climate and Water, and previously Director for Economic, Social and Environmental Affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Colombia where she spearheaded and helped shape the Sustainable Development Goals;
- **Albert Butare**, former Rwandan Minister of Energy and Water, and former Co-chair of the 2011 Germany Nexus Conference; and
- **Marianne Beisheim**, Senior Associate, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP).

Some of the key questions asked in the ‘Pop-Up’ event were:

- How can the HLPF thematic review better analyze interlinkages, synergies, and trade-offs among the SDGs?
- Should HLPF review all SDGs, or combine a review of a small cluster of SDGs with more focus on interlinkages and a review of action areas with the greatest transformative power, such as the entry points outlined in the 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report?

- What would be a good substantive focus for the HLPF in 2021, 2022, and 2023?
- What can be improved in the VNR process?
- What can be achieved within existing mandates, such as through the annually revised Secretary-Generals' guidelines and handbooks for VNRs?
- Are countries ready and equipped to make their VNRs more evidence-based, focused on policy results and challenges?
- How far can we go to make the VNRs more comparable?
- How can impact and follow-up of VNRs and their discussions be improved, and build on innovations from recent years?
- How can HLPF declarations be made more evidence-based and more action-oriented?
- Should HLPF declarations be more concise and political, or increasingly detailed and operational?
- How can policy guidance and recommendations from HLPF be transformative, integrated and inclusive, and reflect the principle: "leave no one behind"?
- Is there a need to introduce changes to the structure or duration of the session at HLPF?
- Are any mandated changes necessary to improve the HLPF preparatory process - including better preparations at regional forums, preparatory expert meetings, inputs from intergovernmental processes, and analyses produced within and outside the UN system?
- How can the regional dimension be better addressed during HLPF?
- How can HLPF become more inclusive of all relevant stakeholders, so that no one is left behind?
- How can we improve HLPF at the General Assembly (SDG Summit)?
- How should the July HLPF contribute to the summit? How can we make the summit more inclusive?
- Is there a need to improve the outcome from the summit?
- How can ECOSOC and HLPF promote the integration of economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in a complementary manner within existing mandates?
- How can a Council help advance the Decade of Action and delivery for sustainable development?
- Should it work in tandem with the HLPF or replace it?
- Could ECOSOC deliver tasks that HLPF has no time to deliver, and which ones would this be?
- Is there a need to further clarify the respective roles of the GA, ECOSOC, and the HLPF and how can this be done?

Some of the key questions that came out of the 'Pop-Up' event that will need to be addressed over the coming year are:

- Is the HLPF 'fit for purpose'?
- What institutional form would enable it to better fulfil its mandates and functions?
- How can the UN system, with relevant conventions, report on and engage in implementing the 2030 Agenda?
- How can local and subnational governments, industry, and other stakeholders report on their implementation of the 2030 agenda?
- How could their contributions be quantified?

- How can new and emerging issues be addressed - such as antibiotic resistance and COVID-19?
- How can the international financial institutions be better linked into the delivery of the 2030 Agenda?
- How can multi-stakeholder partners be clustered, and their contributions quantified each year to identify gaps in the delivery of the 2030 Agenda and seek to establish new multi-stakeholder partnerships to help deliver it?
- What is and could be the role of the Resident Coordinators in delivering the UN support for the 2030 Agenda at the country level?
- How could - or should - a similar focal point be established in countries without such a coordinator?

In organizing the workshop and helping to put together this report we would like to thank Charles Nouhan, Chairman of Stakeholder Forum, and Stakeholder Forum Associate Tanner Glenn.

## Opening Remarks: Mohamed Khalil, Sustainable Development and Climate Change Senior Expert, and Former G77 & China Lead Coordinator and Negotiator for Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development

I thought that the idea for a Sustainable Development Council was no longer on the table while observing the efforts to review the HLPF and ECOSOC.

The present review seemed to be really more about the functions and the mandates and activities of the HLPF rather than its structure or its form.

So, it is very interesting to bring the idea for a Council back to the foreground once again and to put it on the table for discussion.

My comments are going to mainly address the historical aspect of the idea of the Council, what happened, and why we didn't achieve it. I emphasize the underlying political issues, which I think have played a major role in getting to where we are now and will continue to play a major role.

To start, I think it is important for us to point out the whole environment and the circumstances that surrounded the idea for a SDC. Here we are speaking about the preparation for the Rio+20 conference. I'd like to just remind people that this conference was revolutionary, in the sense that it was not following the usual UN approach to conferences. It wasn't just another review conference following up on the progress from previous conferences to see where we are now. The Rio+20 conference was more about taking a pause and acknowledging that things were not going right. It allowed us to say that we needed to change course, and I think this was the revolutionary part of Rio+20.

### Landmark decisions

The results of the Rio+20 conference included truly landmark outcomes. The key outcome was, of course, the new generation of development goals: the post-2015 development agenda, which is now Agenda 2030. The outcome document from Rio+20 'The Future We Want' identified the roadmap forward for the development of the **Sustainable Development Goals**:

*"We resolve to establish an inclusive and transparent intergovernmental process on sustainable development goals that is open to all stakeholders, with a view to developing global sustainable development goals to be agreed by the General Assembly. An open working group shall be constituted no later than at the opening of the sixty-seventh session of the Assembly and shall comprise 30 representatives, nominated by Member States from the five United Nations regional groups, with the aim of achieving fair, equitable, and balanced geographic representation. At the outset, this open working group will decide on its methods of work, including developing modalities to ensure the full involvement of relevant stakeholders and expertise from civil society, the scientific community, and the United Nations system in its work, in order to provide a diversity of perspectives and experience. It will submit a report, to the sixty-eighth session of the Assembly, containing a proposal for sustainable development goals for consideration and appropriate action."* (UN, 2012)

The Future We Want also called for the creation of the **High-level Political Forum**:

*"We decide to establish a universal intergovernmental high-level political forum, building on the strengths, experiences, resources and inclusive participation modalities of the Commission on Sustainable Development, and subsequently replacing the Commission. The high-level political forum shall follow up on the implementation of sustainable*

development and should avoid overlap with existing structures, bodies, and entities in a cost-effective manner.

85. The high-level forum could:

- a) Provide political leadership, guidance, and recommendations for sustainable development;
- b) Enhance integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development in a holistic and cross-sectoral manner at all levels;
- c) Provide a dynamic platform for regular dialogue, and for stocktaking and agenda-setting to advance sustainable development;
- d) Have a focused, dynamic and action-oriented agenda, ensuring the appropriate consideration of new and emerging sustainable development challenges;
- e) Follow up and review progress in the implementation of sustainable development commitments contained in Agenda 21, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, the Barbados Programme of Action, the Mauritius Strategy and the outcome of the present Conference and, as appropriate, relevant outcomes of other United Nations summits and conferences, including the outcome of the Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, as well as their respective means of implementation;
- f) Encourage high-level system-wide participation of United Nations agencies, funds, and programmes and invite to participate, as appropriate, other relevant multilateral financial and trade institutions and treaty bodies, within their respective mandates and in accordance with United Nations rules and provisions;
- g) Improve cooperation and coordination within the United Nations system on sustainable development programmes and policies;
- h) Promote transparency and implementation through further enhancing the consultative role and participation of major groups and other relevant stakeholders at the international level in order to better make use of their expertise, while retaining the intergovernmental nature of discussions;
- i) Promote the sharing of best practices and experiences relating to the implementation of sustainable development and, on a voluntary basis, facilitate sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned;
- j) Promote system-wide coherence and coordination of sustainable development policies;
- k) Strengthen the science-policy interface through review of documentation bringing together dispersed information and assessments, including in the form of a global sustainable development report, building on existing assessments;
- l) Enhance evidence-based decision-making at all levels and contribute to strengthening ongoing efforts of capacity-building for data collection and analysis in developing countries.” (UN, 2012)

### How did we get there?

It was important to acknowledge that we needed an institutional framework that would deliver and would cater for this vision. And this is where we started to debate how this institutional framework should take shape.

Before the conference, there were many views and ideas. We started to focus more on the idea of ‘form follows function.’ Having said that, the functions that were identified back then cantered around the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development. This had been a major shortcoming of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (1993-2012).



It was perhaps logical that the issue of the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development would appear at the top of the list of what we needed to see as a functional mandate of the new institutional structure. The second priority concerned the implementation of sustainable development commitments and agreements. The third concerned the coherence and coordination to avoid duplication and overlap. The fourth was the need to attract the high-level decision-makers to facilitate influential discussions with the international financial institutions and multilateral development banks. The fifth concerned agenda setting and the final priority concerned the science-policy interface.

During the negotiations we were struggling to settle on a forum and organizational structure everyone could agree on. We at least had an agreement, more or less, on the functions that should be delivered.

### Solo Message

I believe an important milestone was the Solo Meeting that took place in Indonesia in July 2011 before the Rio+20 conference. This meeting was critical because this is where the idea of the SDC was really put on the table. It was also where Paula Caballero from the government of Colombia put the idea of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) forward in a meeting in a meaningful and effective way so that it would be part of the discussion and debate.

### Sustainable Development Council

The rationale behind the SDC was to base it upon what had been undertaken to convert the Commission on Human Rights, a functional commission of ECOSOC, into a Council of the United Nations Assembly.

ECOSOC had been dealing with human rights, but this responsibility had moved to the UN General Assembly; so, the rationale was to follow suit with the Human Rights Council.

The advocates for the SDC of the UNGA believed that there were many parallels between the case for human rights and the case for sustainable development. The opponents feared that the idea of the Council would threaten, weaken, and marginalize ECOSOC.

Let's remember ECOSOC is an elected 54-country body, while the UN General Assembly is a universal body. Decisions regarding any functioning commission of ECOSOC must be approved by ECOSOC and then go to the UNGA.

This approach would move sustainable development from a subsidiary body of ECOSOC - where it was prior to Rio+20 (as the Commission for Sustainable Development) - to the universal body of the UN General Assembly, thereby strengthening sustainable development as a major conceptual framework for the work of the UN.

The counter idea, or let's say the other option, was strengthening ECOSOC so that it can it could do the job.

Advocates for the SDC believed that ECOSOC was overburdened with work; they contended this plan would not only elevate sustainable development but also enable ECOSOC to function better with a smaller, more targeted agenda.

The concerns raised around the application with ECOSOC are real and valid, and I think these are still major issues we need to consider as we debate the idea of a SDC. The elevation of the Commission on Human Rights to a functioning commission would not have the same impact as moving sustainable development to the UNGA.



In the case of sustainable development, lots of the economic and social aspects of sustainable development are being dealt with by ECOSOC. During the extensive meetings and negotiations at that time, we couldn't come up with how to address that concern which was and remains real and valid.

We couldn't agree on a compromise around the division that we had before gathering for the conference. We only managed to establish the HLPF at the Rio+20 conference. We didn't have the time to agree on the details of its form and its structure. This was delegated to the process afterward.

In contemplating the history of the idea of the SDC, we have to differentiate between the period preceding the Rio+20 conference and the period that came after. After Rio+20 there was no longer an option for a Council on the table.

What we did agree to, however, was the establishment of the HLPF. The fight afterward became not whether we establish a council or not, but whether the HLPF was going to be an institution or not.

The G77 and China position back then was more lenient toward having an institution because they stressed that it should have decision-making power. After Rio+20 this became controversial. In fact, the major controversial point in the negotiation was whether the HLPF could adopt decisions or not. And this was to remain true to the last minute.

The G77 at the time questioned how the HLPF could exist under ECOSOC, as the HLPF is a universal membership body reporting to ECOSOC whose membership is limited and not universal.

The G77 and China contended that the HLPF should be an institution and should be able to adopt decisions. The question or contradiction was how the HLPF, with its universal membership, was going to adopt a decision that needs to be re-examined and re-verified again at ECOSOC; with ECOSOC's limited membership, this made no sense. The compromise was to have what we have now, which is a hybrid that can convene under ECOSOC and under the UNGA.

Unfortunately, we couldn't manage to reach consensus on the idea that the HLPF should be a decision-making body because, as I said, this was really the fundamental issue.

The compromise was to have the ministerial declaration and the double adoption (adopted first in the HLPF while also adopting the report of the year before) including some simple declaration. Its re-adoption in ECOSOC was to address this issue.

We didn't know how this would work, as it was the first time, to create such a hybrid arrangement. We built in a review for 2020, now postponed to 2021 due to the pandemic.

As I said, the political undertones were very strong, and I do believe that it is the main reason why we didn't really achieve or establish a SDC or make the HLPF a real institution.

At that time, one of the arguments put forward by one delegation from a major country promoted the vision of the current HLPF as a 'Davos on the Hudson.' This is how you described the HLPF as it is now; not really an institution, but sort of a meeting - a forum to attract high-level people.

As a former negotiator of these key decisions, I thought it would be useful to explain the historical evolution from the negotiation perspective.

Regarding the UN today after going through the Development System Reform:

"There is one last point that I would like to conclude with. I spoke about the history, about what happened. I think it is important to take into consideration what is happening now in

the present. This is not where we were in 2015 or 2012. Today the UN is fully mobilized behind the agenda for sustainable development at the highest level. The Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohamed is supervising the progress and implementation of the 2030 Agenda herself. The UN family at the country level through the new resident coordinator system is active in helping governments develop their SDG plans and strategies and track their progress and implementation of the agenda. The philosophy behind these major changes and reforms is that the UN will not wait for Member States to come forward, but will go to countries, support and equip them to better achieve the SDGs. SDGs will be implemented and will be happening at the Country level. What will be the role then at the International level?

And with the new development system reform within the UN, the whole UN system at every level is totally mobilized behind achieving the Agenda 2030. This evolution and change definitely need to be taken into consideration when examining and debating the idea of the SDC.

Thanks, and all the best.

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**The following is an edited version of the narrative which accompanied the PowerPoint Presentation given by Jan Gustav Strandenaes, Senior Advisor on Governance for Stakeholder Forum.** Each of the slides is also included.

“How strong an institution is needed to implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) portfolio by 2030? What suffices? A forum? A subsidiary body? A council?”

75 years ago, almost to the day, 50 nations agreed to the Charter of the UN

The focus at the time was urgent implementation and strong governance in a strong institution to safeguard the well-being of the peoples of the planet

Today 75 years and 193 countries later, we are clamouring for exactly the same things: urgent implementation, strong institutions and strong governance

Last September in 2019 at the UN Headquarters, member states of the UN agreed to call for urgent action now naming this third decade of the 21st century a decade of implementation.

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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



The first slide offers an overview of the historical development which was referred to by Mohammed. The text illustrates that the needs are identical then and now, the language used is slightly different, but the urgency to act is the same now as seventy-five years ago, almost to the day of this presentation, when the

United Nations was founded in San Francisco. It is with a solid foundation in knowledge and history that we actually can say that the idea of a sustainability council is founded.

Looking back and reading the comments and the discussions that took place in San Francisco in 1945 reflect serious concerns that resemble ones. In 1945, delegates spoke about the urgency of implementation and the need to safeguard the well-being of the people, including the planet, although the planet was definitely in a different shape back then. The urgency to implement was again expressed last year in September 2019 at the Summit on Sustainable Development which took place at the UN headquarters. The political declaration from that summit speaks about the urgency to implement. The state leaders that were present at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) at that time, including

all the other representatives from the one hundred and ninety-three Member States, agreed to call this decade a “Decade of Action” to deliver the Global Goals.

With this historical background and knowledge, and with our experiences and with what we know, we can approach the future with some interesting ideas.

Back in 1987, former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland introduced sustainable development into the political agenda. It was at the time not a new concept, but it was the first time it was clearly positioned on the political agenda. As a historian, it is of interest to me to remember the discussions and the papers and the books written on sustainable


development at the time. Scientists stated then that there was too much politics in the concept of sustainable development, and politicians claimed it contained too much science. But they all agreed on one thing: sustainable development was too complex and would soon disappear as a concept. Well, it is still here and it has been further developed. And the concept has been given strength and has been politically confirmed through three global and major summits (as the slide above shows). And each of the summits gave us an institution with which to work. We got the Commission on Sustainable Development from UNCED in 1992. The 2012 Rio+20 summit established the High-Level Political Forum - the HLPF. However, HLPF only got its mandate and marching orders a year later in the UNGA resolution, 67/290.

Since the presentation of Sustainable Development in the UN Report Our Common Future, by Norway's Prime Minister, Ms. Brundtland in 1987, sustainable development issues have taken on a life of their own, through FOUR Summits, and ...

- 1992 UNCED and Agenda 21
- 1993 CSD
- 2002 WSSD and the JPOI
- 2003 A revamped CSD
- 2012 Conference on SD and The Future We Want
- 2013 – HLPF mandated
- 2015 – Adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs

**OUR COMMON FUTURE**  
THE WORLD COMMISSION  
ON ENVIRONMENT  
AND DEVELOPMENT



The SDGs presented as an idea at Solo, Indonesia, in 2011, by Paula Caballero of Colombia:

"At the international level, we need an organization to enhance the integration of sustainable development. Various options were discussed, ranging from an enhanced mandate for ECOSOC and reviewing the role of CSD, to the establishment of a Sustainable Development Council. There was a significant interest on the discussion on the sustainable development goals."

— (Solo Message, 2011)



In the run-up to Rio+20 in 2012, at the Solo conference in Indonesia, Paula Caballero of Colombia introduced the sustainable development goals for the first time. The Solo Message was very clear on this issue but also pointed to the need to have a council for sustainable development to monitor the implementation of the SDGs.

Two important issues were presented in 2011. One, the SDGs have come into fruition. And in ways we could not have anticipated back then. The other, a Council, is still waiting for inspiration and perhaps also implementation.



One aim of this presentation is to ask whether the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development needs an improved and strengthened institution. The 2030 Agenda today has become too large, too complex, and too important for a forum or a platform to handle. The 2030 Agenda demands an institution with vast resources, not like the present forum. It should also

have a solid home within the United Nations. In a sense, sustainable development has been struggling for many, many years to be recognized as a political issue in its own right. According to reports from UNDESA, sustainable development has finally reached political legitimacy. This also speaks to the need for establishing an institution with a strong organizational framework and foundation. That would probably be needed so the intentions from the Rio Outcome Document can be fulfilled. Only with a stronger institution can we accomplish a process which at the same time will be inspiring reform and creating transformative change, both explicit outcomes of the 2030 agenda.

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This presentation aims to show that The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development needs a strong institution because:

- The 2030 Agenda is becoming too large for a Forum to handle. The workload is fast expanding in volume and complexity
- It is becoming too demanding for a small forum with scant resources
- The 2030 Agenda must have a home at the UN with authority to make decisions and coordinate institutions working on Sustainable Development within the system to avoid duplication and create coherence
- Sustainable Development has reached political legitimacy, and needs a corresponding heavyweight institution which commands political respect among countries
- Transformative change as advocated by the 2030 Agenda in the world needs an authoritative institution with administrative leadership on par with Heads of Government




But now there is a growing need for the UN to do more on the

7 **SDGs – an expanding and complex agenda – has the UN an adequate institution to do this?**



There is a growing need for the UN to do more. And as we polemically might state: Building Back Better but not regress.

From my point of view, the following question is interesting to ask: Has the HLPF been successful in implementing its mandate? Which begs more questions: What is the mandate and is the mandate the same today as it is was in 2012 or 2015? As the knowledge-base and understanding pertaining to the 2030 Agenda increases, mandates are either rewritten or added, and the entire task portfolio of the HLPF is becoming increasingly more serious, complex, and challenging. So, the next question to be asked is of absolute relevance to the success of the 2030 Agenda: Are our institutions fit for purpose? And do they

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Has the HLPF been successful in implementing its mandate?

**Then - what is the mandate?**



**Is the mandate the same today as back in 2012 – or in 2015?**

**Are the mandates and tasks increasing and becoming more serious and challenging?**

**And of so – are our institutions fit for purpose?**

**Do forms really follow functions?**

**How can we Build Back Better and not regress?**

vance to the success of the 2030 Agenda: Are our institutions fit for purpose? And do they

fit the mantra of “form follows function?” And as I said earlier, are we now in a process of building back better but not regress?

The original mandate for the entire 2030 Agenda works are primarily defined in three resolutions:

UNGA A/Res/67/290, which gives the mandate and original format for HLPF; Resolution 70/1, which is the key 2030 Agenda document: “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” - we could label this ‘the constitutional document for the 2030 agenda.’ And in 2016, we got 70/99 which is designing the follow-up and a review of the 2030 Agenda. That document actually outlined the agendas for the next four or five years.

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The original mandates for the entire **2030 Agenda works** are primarily defined in three documents:

- A/Res/67/290: “Format and organizational aspects of the high-level political forum on sustainable development”, July 2013**
- Further expanded with assignments from **A/Res 70/1 “Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” –September 2015**
- Further strengthened by a third: **A/Res/70/299 – “Follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the global level”, August 2016**

Mandates fulfilled? 19 identified only in 67/290...	
Provide political leadership, guidance and recommendations	Perhaps
A concise negotiated political declaration for the GA	Not really
Follow up and review	YES
A focused, dynamic, action-oriented agenda - new and emerging sustainable development challenges	Perhaps to negligible
Enhance the integration of the three dimensions	Improving
A thematic focus with that of ECOSOC and the 2030 agenda	YES
Follow up, review progress in the implementation of all major UN conferences	Improving
Involve relevant UN bodies, in particular WTO, the Bretton Woods institutions, their respective means of implementation	Not really
Improve cooperation/coordination within the UN system on sustainable development programmes and policies	Has begun, needs strength

I have read through 67/290 and identified the tasks and mandates listed there. I found 19 easily identified mandates which the HLPF should carry out. Having done a cursory performance review of the HLPF as presented through most of the official reports made available after each HLPF, beginning in 2016, I then evaluated the performance of the HLPF.

The performance review was: Are the mandates fulfilled, completely, partially, or not at all? My understanding of the performance is readily seen in the slides above and below.

The appraisal may not be of a scientific kind, but it indicates a tendency - at least if you hold the results against the expectations voiced in the political declaration agreed to in September 2019 at the UN Summit on Sustainable Development. The urgency of implementing the 2030 Agenda has not been met.

Mandates fulfilled – continued - 19 identified from 67/290	
Promote sharing of best practices and experiences relating to the implementation	YES
Facilitate sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned	YES, but mostly on successes
Promote system-wide coherence and coordination of SD policies;	Improving
Take into account work of Development Cooperation Forum, other activities of ECOSOC relating to integration and implementation of sustainable development;	Begun, and improving, (Yes?)
Shall benefit from regional preparatory processes	Not really
Devote adequate time to the discussion of the sustainable development challenges facing developing countries	Begun – improving (hopefully)
Identify and address new and emerging issues	Not really
Strengthen the science-policy interface	Begun, improving
Develop an independent Global Sustainable Development Report	Improving
Deal with SCP	Improving, but far to go





And as you see in the right columns above, the ranking of the performance is from ‘not really’ to ‘perhaps’ or ‘negligible’ to ‘improving’ and it also includes a few ‘yes.’ I will not comment on each of the mandate areas because there are readily available in the slides. A key mandate stated in 67/290 is the follow-up and reviews. This has been accomplished, not the least thanks to a hard-working HLPF secretariat. Another key mandate is the political declaration meant to guide the UN and its Member States on sustainable development policies. The way this has been handled may be one of the biggest failures in the HLPF process. There has not been a negotiated political declaration reflecting what the HLPF was all about, simply because the declaration has been negotiated before the HLPF takes place.

**Mandates pertaining to HLPF:**

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- **From 67/290:** Found in paras: 1, 6, 7, 11, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 29
- **From the 2030 Agenda document:** found in paragraphs: 74, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90
- **Further strengthened in 70/299:** paragraphs: 4, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20

This slide to the left points to the paragraphs of the three resolutions enumerating the mandates and tasks given to the HLPF. There are more than thirty paragraphs containing mandates and tasks, and some of these paragraphs also contain more than one mandate area.

I asked a question earlier: Is the present HLPF is strong enough? I also made the assumption that the present structure may be too weak to deal with an agenda that grows in size, complexity, knowledge, and challenges. All areas, in fact, reflected in the political declaration from the September 2019 SDGs Summit.

The 2030 Agenda knowledge is expanding if not almost daily, at least on an annual basis. I have chosen to call this “The Global 2030 Sustainable Development Portfolio,” as shown in the slide to the right. The column in the left points to what has been agreed to and also operationalized since 2012. Within the framework of the 2030 Agenda, we find the SDGs, the targets, and the indicators. You see the tasks listed in 67/290. There is the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the Paris Climate Agreement, the Sendai Outcome Documents, the Samoa Pathway, lots of relevant work done by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and by other UN institutions and Specialized Agencies. This sustainable development, as explicitly stated in the 2030 Agenda has, as Muhammad said, penetrated the entire UN system and even gone further. But there's so much more being added in this present decade, all which has to be followed, included, understood, and implemented. Some of these new elements are listed in the right-hand column.

**The Global 2030 SD Portfolio – expanding the knowledge**

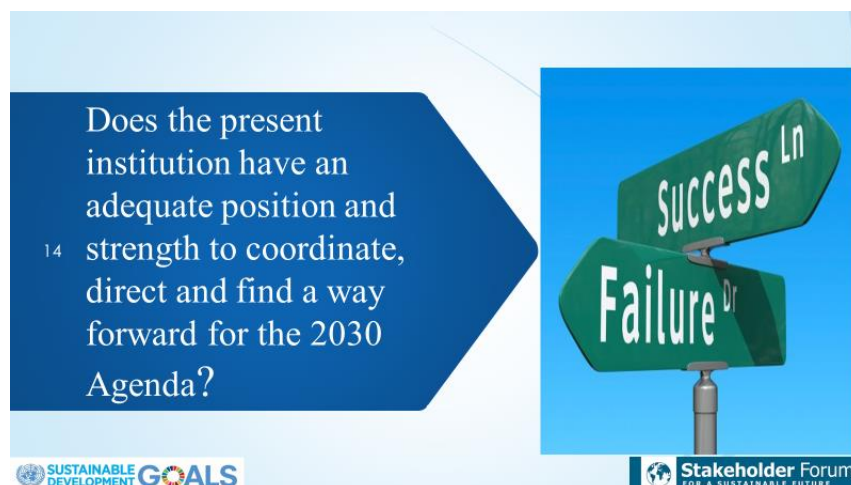
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Agreed and operationalised	To be followed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ The 17 SDGs with their 169 targets/2030 agenda</li> <li>■ The 232 review indicators (2016)</li> <li>■ Resolution 67/290 - HLPF</li> <li>■ The Addis Ababa Action Agenda</li> <li>■ The Paris Climate Agreement (December 2015)</li> <li>■ The Sendai Outcome document, Disaster reduction</li> <li>■ The Samoa Pathway (SIDS agreement)</li> <li>■ Relevant work by UNDP, ECOSOC Commissions, CBD, other UN institutions, UN Specialised Agencies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ World Data Forum, 2021/23/25/27</li> <li>■ Annual HLPF reviews</li> <li>■ The Reviews, national, regional, global</li> <li>■ SDG High Level meeting, 2023/27</li> <li>■ Indicator reviews 2020/24/28</li> <li>■ Annual Finance for Develop Forums</li> <li>■ UNEP Geo-reports</li> <li>■ The UN Environment Assembly, every 2 years, UNEA 2021/23/25</li> <li>■ The Global Sustainable Development Report 2019 – and additional ones</li> <li>■ UNGA resolutions on Sustainable Investment</li> <li>■ ECOSOC deliberations</li> </ul>



I also believe this list not to be exhaustive, having highlighted only a few of them that I found to be institutionally important: The World Data Forum, which is focusing on the 2030 Agenda with meetings in 2021, 2023, 2025, and 2027 and the annual HLPF with the national and regional reviews. There will also be SDG high-level meetings in 2023 and 2027. The indicators will be reviewed in 2024 and 2028, there are annual financing for development forums, biennial United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) meetings, there will be scientific reports on the state of the environment, with the next global environment assembly, UNEA 5 to take place in February 2021 as scheduled. There is the Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR), which has developed an interesting set of challenges and there will be a number of UN General Assembly resolutions on sustainable development. In short, the Global 2030 Sustainable Development Portfolio is growing.



So, the key questions again: Does the present institution have an adequate political position in the system? Does it have the institutional strength and the necessary resources to find a way forward for the 2030 agenda? And can it fulfil the political declaration from the SDG Summit that was agreed to in September 2019? Well, that is the key question, and it

boils down to simply - Will we work towards success or failure?

Before we continue, I want to draw your attention to a very interesting statement. Those of us who have been privileged to work with the UN for a number of years have become familiar with how resolutions are constructed. We should recognize a historical fact: when delegates are pushed to face a challenge, they often respond with wisdom and

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### A forgotten directive?

Pointing back to paragraphs 84 and 85 of the Rio+20 Outcome Document, and allowing for future strengthening of what we have, the second preambular paragraph of 67/290 gives us the framework for an improved institution:

- “Emphasizing the need for an improved and more effective institutional framework for sustainable development, which should be guided by the specific functions required and mandates involved; address the *shortcomings of the current system*; take into account all relevant implications; promote synergies and coherence; seek to avoid duplication and eliminate unnecessary overlaps within the United Nations system and reduce administrative burdens and build on existing arrangements.”

Sustainable Development Goals Stakeholder Forum FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

political savviness. Evidence of this is readily available in many UN resolutions. But when we read and refer to these resolutions, we often forget to look at the introductory sentences, the preambular text. There is a very interesting sentence in the preambular text in 67/290. It refers back to paragraphs 84 and 85 of the Rio+20 Outcome Document and paragraph 85 established the HLPF idea. The sentence also encompasses the entire raison d’être of HLPF. It states very clearly, and I will read the entire text: “...emphasizing the need for improved and more effective institutional framework for sustainable development should be guided by specific functions required and mandates involved and address shortcomings of the current system. Take into account all relevant implications,

*promotes energies and coherence, seek to avoid duplication, eliminate unnecessary overlaps, reduce administrative burdens, and build on existing arrangements.”*

In this preambular text, we almost find the answer to the question: What kind of institution do we need? This is a most pertinent and interesting reminder that we need to keep alive.



**The difference between a Council and a Forum**

**16 HLPF is**

- Directed by the President of ECOSOC/UNGA
- Universal membership
- Has no Bureau or decision-making powers,
- Works with a general reference to UNDESA to support HLPF (§ 23) in a secretarial manner
- 5 days for reviews, 3 days for the High-Level Segment
- A preparatory process through internet, no easy access to all documents
- Monitor delivery of SDGs and receive VNRs from countries, on certain goals
- A drafted report and a Ministerial Declaration negotiated outside of HLPF in advance of HLPF
- Selected inputs by stakeholders from the floor

**A Council could have**

- An Assistant SG at secretariat level giving political weight to the 2030 Agenda
- Universal membership
- A Bureau with decision-making powers, and an elected President of the Bureau as leading
- A negotiated agenda
- A well-resourced and large secretariat
- Work on an annual basis with a prep conference and an annual conference with a negotiated outcome where the best parts of HLPF experiences are integrated (VNRs etc)
- Mandated to coordinate Sustainable Development for the entire UN system and with an outreach to all member states through the UN Regional Commissions

Is there a difference between a council and forum at the UN? Well, I have tried to list some of the main differences in the slide below. To the left, I have listed in broad strokes what HLPF is. And to the right, I indicate what the council might do and be like.

The workings of HLPF should be well known, so this is a summary: It is directed by the

presidents of ECOSOC or UNGA. It has universal membership. It has no bureau, no real decision-making powers, works with general references to the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) in terms of the secretariat. It works through a very short, limited time, eight days only. The preparatory process is mostly through Internet deliveries, countries deliver their SDG reviews at the HLPF in a very short period of time, there is selected input from stakeholders, there is a drafted report from the HLPF and - as said before - a political declaration negotiated before the HLPF takes place.

The council, reflecting the growing complexity and workload of the 2030 agenda, could have a position at the UN, supported by or led by, perhaps an assistant secretary-general in charge of a well-resourced secretariat supporting this council. Of course, it would have a universal membership; a bureau with decision making power powers. And the president of the bureau would be leading the policies and negotiate an agenda that could quickly respond to current and emerging issues. Given the urgency we always refer to, do we not need a well-resourced secretariat to work continually on an annual basis and be mandated to coordinate sustainable development for the entire UN system?



So, the question is, do we need a council? To reiterate: this should be viewed as a serious question. Nations all over the world are upgrading their work and input on sustainable development. Many countries have admin- units dealing with the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda at a very high political level. Several countries have positioned the coordination of the 2030 Agenda at the state leader's level, and an assistant secretary-general at a council

**Do we need a Council?**

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- Nations are upgrading SDG work at a high political level, must be met at the same level by the UN
- An ASG at Council secretariat would carry more authority within and outside of the UN system than a commissioner appointed by the SG
- The 2030 SD portfolio is growing fast, and the volume of work demands a better resourced institution with a well-resourced and dedicated secretariat
- Nations are introducing new regulations and standards at all levels on SD, the UN may fall regrettably behind without a strong political institution to follow-up and be unable to inspire and lead SD development (ref investment regulations)

- A Council could be mandated and have the authority to work on SD coherence and coordinate decisions on SD policy at UN, avoid administrative duplication
- A Council could be in a position to direct implementation of decisions made through the UN system
- With the new Green Deals and Financial directives on investment regulations, a Council could have more political weight to work with ECOSOC, the World Bank, IMF and other finance institutions to promote better global economy
- A Council could be in a better position to work with important stakeholders and attract their attention

secretariat could carry political authority at a corresponding level to respond to this. The 2030 Sustainable Development Portfolio, which I have referred to a few times, is growing fast and needs a strong global secretariat to coordinate the policies required to achieve coherence.

Responding to political demands regarding sustainable development, demands that are growing in strength in nations, have inspired a set of regulations. The most promising initiatives in this area are found within the financial world. I would like to ask another pertinent question in this context: Are the nations and regions outrunning the UN in their efforts to deal with the 2030 Agenda? And what would happen to the UN if the political system of Member States completely outranks the political level at the UN? Would the Member States then be inclined to take the UN and the HLPF seriously? Would they also heed the advice coming from an institution that they might consider politically inferior? The Green New Deal's financial directives and investments are points in case. We see that top CEOs engage in working on and with the 2030 Agenda. This is promising. They would also need to be met by the authority at the UN to make sure these regulations are respected. When it comes to finance and sustainable development, I think that this is where actually we see a possibility for the council and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to work together and at the same time protecting the integrity of the two councils. Bringing the Green New Deal into the work of ECOSOC and collaborating with a council would also provide important stakeholders from finance an opportunity to meet the UN at a high political level.

**What could a relationship between an SD Council and UN look like?**

- A Council for Sustainable Development – could be an institution at the highest level, to deal with all matters relating to Sustainable Development
- It could absorb work of ECOSOC on sustainable development and the second committee of the UNGA while keeping the integrity and mandates of ECOSOC.
- The two Councils could meet on the issues of Green, Equitable and Inclusive Economy, the Green New Deal in Finance and what contribution they could have to deliver the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
- The Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review of UN system operational activities could be dealt with by ECOSOC with recommendations to the SD Council to address on challenges and opportunities in helping to inform the impact of UN activities delivering on the 2030 Agenda for SD at the country level.
- The UN Specialized Agencies and Programmes would to ECOSOC with actions on sustainability that the Council could address and bring forward
- The Council could have space to address the implementation of special focus areas, such as the Sendai Disaster Reduction and the Samoa Pathway
- It could be an interface with the MEAs

What would the relationship between the council and the UN look like? Mohammed spoke about this issue. This is in fact an extremely important issue because back in 2012, we did not address this point substantively and constructively. If a council would be established, a set of clear modalities would have to be developed and the relationship between a

council and the UN system would have to be well defined. The council and ECOSOC would have to clear their paths of work in relation to the Second Committee as well as to that of the General Assembly. A council could work together with ECOSOC on the issues of economy and finance. The economic and finance issues were originally an important mandate given ECOSOC. Coordinating with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was one area and turned out to be a very difficult one. Many have regarded this issue as a competition between the political regulatory will of the UN, as represented by ECOSOC, and the might and power of finance represented by the IMF. A struggle where ECOSOC always have played second fiddle. Actually, the issue of finance and the IFCs and ECOSOC is still contentious. Several Secretaries-General have tried to find ways out of this problematic area, and the last time a real analysis was done on this issue was in the late eighties carried out by Erskine Childers. Once we have the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of the UN system, operational



activities could be dealt with and recommendations on issues of sustainable development pertaining to the possible establishment of a council could be discussed in this context.

Another issue would of course be the Specialized Agencies and their report processes to ECOSOC. Should they have one report on the 2030 Agenda given the council and one on other matters given ECOSOC? The council could actually function as an interface with the multilateral environmental agreements. If these and similar issues are not dealt with, we will never see any new possibilities for strengthening the organizational framework, the new organizational architecture on sustainable development which we were asked to create by the Rio+20 Outcome Document. There could also be other benefits from creating a heavyweight council, as illustrated in the slide below.

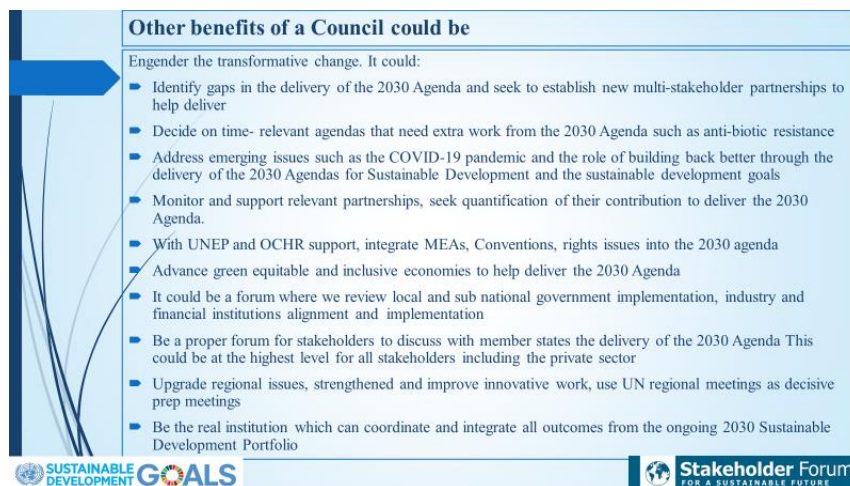
It could be better positioned within the intergovernmental system to actually be an agent to engender the transformative change. Its tasks would be plentiful: identify gaps; decide on time-relevant agendas as an integrated element of the SDGs.

For a Council could absorb the antibiotic resistance

issues. Or as we say in the third bullet point, respond immediately to the COVID 19 pandemic. If you had an agenda decided on and agreed to by a bureau, relevant and expedient decisions could be made, better, and more focused than is now the case with the HLPF and ECOSOC. The council would be in a position to support relevant partnerships exclusively on sustainable development and work to quantify their contribution. It would be able to take into its continual discussion conventions and rights issues. It could also be a forum where we review contributions from local and sub-national governments and be a proper forum for stakeholders to discuss with Member States on the delivery of the 2030 Agenda. It could upgrade regional issues.

These issues are dealt with by HLPF, but as many have pointed to, these issues are not well focused in the present structure. A council could also be an institution to coordinate and integrate all outcomes from the ongoing 2030 Sustainable Development Portfolio. The last one is extremely important because, as I've said and as Mohammed has pointed to, this portfolio is now inside every element of the UN and it's growing fast. However, coherence is not always given priority, and this could be another task of a council. Complexity is also growing, and a strong and well-resourced institution is needed to deal with this and make sure implementation is capable of dealing with this complexity. The issues are plentiful, the questions we have asked are many - answers are needed, and soon.



And that is it for me, with a smile and an optimistic attitude towards the future. We can actually work on this and make the implementation of the 2030 Agenda be completed by 2030. Thank you for your attention.



**Other benefits of a Council could be**

Engender the transformative change. It could:

- Identify gaps in the delivery of the 2030 Agenda and seek to establish new multi-stakeholder partnerships to help deliver
- Decide on time-relevant agendas that need extra work from the 2030 Agenda such as anti-biotic resistance
- Address emerging issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the role of building back better through the delivery of the 2030 Agendas for Sustainable Development and the sustainable development goals
- Monitor and support relevant partnerships, seek quantification of their contribution to deliver the 2030 Agenda.
- With UNEP and OCHR support, integrate MEAs, Conventions, rights issues into the 2030 agenda
- Advance green equitable and inclusive economies to help deliver the 2030 Agenda
- It could be a forum where we review local and sub national government implementation, industry and financial institutions alignment and implementation
- Be a proper forum for stakeholders to discuss with member states the delivery of the 2030 Agenda This could be at the highest level for all stakeholders including the private sector
- Upgrade regional issues, strengthened and improve innovative work, use UN regional meetings as decisive prep meetings
- Be the real institution which can coordinate and integrate all outcomes from the ongoing 2030 Sustainable Development Portfolio

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*Thank you for participating  
A recording of this webinar  
and the presentation slides  
will soon be available on the  
Stakeholder Forum website.  
<https://stakeholderforum.org/>*

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 **Stakeholder Forum**  
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 **GOALS**



## Comments by Paula Caballero, RARE Managing Director for Climate and Water - previously Director for Economic, Social and Environmental Affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Colombia where she spearheaded and helped shape the UN's Sustainable Development Goals

I'm going to be a little bit provocative in my response to the two presentations. So bear with me because I think these are important issues, but we have to really push the boundaries to achieve the transformation we all want.

There are two words that matter to me these days. One is “relevance” and the other is “actionable”. When we contemplate an initiative or action, we need to ask ourselves, “How is this going to be relevant to the world beyond the UN and how is it going to be actionable?” This has to be our north star.

We often talk about fit for purpose, but we need to always ask “for what purpose”? Some of the benefits of a council were just outlined, but we need to question whether a council could in fact deliver on all these fronts. Is a council going to be able to manage and truly advance the whole sustainable development portfolio? One needs to question whether this is the same as advancing the green and inclusive economy, where there are overlaps and where not. I would in any case submit that history has shown us that a council cannot truly deliver on all these fronts. We have tried that already. There are good but also bracing lessons from the CSD. We have to be ambitious, but we also have to be grounded in reality. Let's ask ourselves constantly: What is it that we're after? What is the impact that we're after? How are we moving the needle? And are we moving it fast enough?

For us, now, the question is how the UN can contribute to the marathon that we are running? Let me share a couple of points.

One is local. Local is where decisions happen, where synergies and trade-offs manifest. Local refers to all stakeholders, whether a local authority or a local company. What support can the UN bring to bear at the local level? There are many important initiatives underway at the national level: over six thousand multi-stakeholder partnerships to help deliver the SDGs; UNDP national investment forums help investors fund the SDGs and the Paris Climate Agreement; sovereign wealth funds shift focus to issues of sustainability. What are the equivalents for the local level? Can we assume that if we provide support at the national level this will automatically cascade down to the local level? In many cases, unfortunately, the answer is not straightforward. Thus, we need to look support the UN to look at country-

based initiatives in the aggregate and drive for alignment and coherent implementation at both levels.

The second is related to climate change. So far, no one has mentioned climate change. To me, the SDGs and climate change are one and the same. Granted, the genesis of these two agendas followed different tracks within the UN, but they are the same. We should be thus be working to fully align the two agendas within the UN, for example by having summits that combine climate and the SDGs. The fact is that in the “real” world the two are one and the same. Advancing implementation on one means advancing implementation on the other, whether from a mitigation or adaptation angle or most likely, both. Fortunately, there is important movement towards this. Take, for example, the private sector where there is an increasing focus on climate risk and SDGs. Initiatives like the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures are aiming to change the financial landscape and the Business and Sustainable Development Commission's report, Better Business, Better World, which calls for “setting business strategy and transforming markets in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals”. These two agendas must come together. They should not be managed differently within the UN just because they - so to speak - were adopted by different parents. They are siblings, Siamese twins.

In response to some of the issues raised by the panel, let me share a few thoughts:

I would not recommend a Bureau. Bureaus' can get locked into their own dynamic and lack the vision and foresight to be transformative. For example, the UNCSD Bureau for Rio+20 did not even have the SDGs on its radar until Member States made the SDGs a part of the negotiations. There was even opposition to the SDGs because this proposal was going against the prescribed norms that had been agreed to in UN resolutions. Again, ask what impact you are truly after. Can you get transformation through negotiated agendas or elected bodies? What would be the expectation in resourcing a secretariat? We must be careful not to create bureaucracy as a go-to solution but understand what specific functions would be fulfilled.

Regarding the relevance of the Voluntary National Reports, there is a lot of good material in this work. But if you go to countries or into the field and ask people about VNRs, or SDGs for that matter, nobody has a clue what you are talking about. So, we all need to redouble our efforts to make these building blocks of development more broadly relevant to many, many more stakeholders.

Equally important is how this is relevant to the UN reform itself? This is a huge effort underway. For example, the resident coordinators' system has been transformed. There have been huge changes in the UN already. Going back to what I was noting earlier, we need to ask whether or how a council can help advance greater coherence across the UN as part of the reform process. As we all know, there are many conflicts and tensions within the UN. In this context, perhaps the advancement of partnerships would be equally important, with a focus on regional agendas and linkages within the SDGs. Indeed, currently, COVID-19 has shown linkages galore. And please, let's not forget that this is a universal agenda. Look at what is happening with COVID-19 in places like the US or Sweden. This is not about helping developing countries do development. COVID-19 has evidenced that it is about development writ large. And everybody is a part of it.

And finally, I think that the SDGs were relevant because they were clear and they were sticky. This is the last bit I will leave you with: whatever governance structure is advanced, make it “sticky” so that it is relevant to the rest of the world. Otherwise, we are going to remain within a sound chamber. All of us on this panel are familiar with what we can call the multilateral bubble or the climate bubble, and we keep trying to talk about how to get out of these bubbles. Perhaps this is really an opportunity for building something from



outside. That is the challenge. We need to start by aligning the finance sector. That would be a decisive step to be able to deliver on this agenda.

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### Comments by Albert Butare, former Minister of Energy, Communication, and Water in the Rwanda government, and former Co-chair of the 2011 Germany Nexus Conference

This is a very important discussion we are having at this side event during the High-level Political Forum.

Making reference to my past and present experience, I was Minister for Energy, Communication, and Water in the Rwanda government prior to Rio+20.

I also had the pleasure of co-chairing the Germany government 2011 Nexus Conference with Uschi Eid who was the minister responsible for development cooperation and a long-time parliamentarian.

Perhaps even I had not realized how important the agenda of that conference was going to turn out to be. In many ways, the Nexus conference was the first place where the issue of interlinkage between issues, in this case, water-food, and energy, had a real profile leading into a critical UN Summit...Rio+20.

It is eight years since Rio+20 and nearly five years since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was agreed to.

I have two key reflections which are relevant to the discussion today and the excellent presentations.

The first point is unsurprisingly on the issue of Nexus or interlinkages between the goals and targets.

Last year's Sustainable Development Report produced by an Independent group of 15 scientists explained that and I quote: "...we stand at a crossroads of continuing to tick boxes - the SDG targets, or choosing a more systemic approach that multiplies effects."

This is something that has become so much clearer to a larger group of policymakers with the present pandemic. Building back better is a theme you hear and that has to be through the SDGs and the implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement

It is also evident that sustainable development will not come about by an accidental compromise among sectors.

We need a deliberate and specific focus on making the best use of co-benefits to accelerate broad progress, where we can to deliberately avoid negative trade-offs.

What this means is we can't just carry on looking at sectors by themselves.

We need time and space to look at the interlinkages.

It's clear from the presentations; so far, we don't have that timetabled in at the UN and neither in most countries at the national or local level.

It takes a huge refocusing of policymakers and other stakeholders to move to a systems approach. It cannot be achieved by just adding on a day here or there.

We need space in the UN agenda - perhaps a Council might give it the right political status for this to happen.

Ultimately it needs to help deliver better action at the local and national level through this missing bridging, and this brings me to my second point. That is implementation and accountability.

Are the commitments made by Heads of State being delivered at the local and national level?

In too many places they are not! The pandemic may make this even less likely.

In too many places people have not heard of the Sustainable Development Goals. Or have not implemented them rightly.

The agreement that Member States would produce Voluntary National Reports on their implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs has been more successful than we expected at the time.

But there is no real accountability and not enough peer review by other countries.

That there have been over 200 reports since 2016 is to be commended but we need them to be more robust and more transparent about our progress but also more honest about the challenges they are facing.

To end I'd just like to remind us.

We have around ten years according to the IPCC report before it's too late on climate change.

It has always been that the link between the 2030 Agenda and the critical conventions on climate change and biodiversity are intrinsically linked. If we want to hit the climate target and address the loss of biodiversity the roadmap is through delivering the SDGs at the local and national levels.

Post my ministerial engagement, I have been spending much of my time moving from country to a country especially in Africa to address issues around the Nexus - assisting governments in developing their sustainable energy strategies, climate change policies, and mainstreaming strategies, etc, all in response not only to Paris agreement commitments but also ensuring the alignment to the requirements of Sustainable Development Goals.

I can tell you that on the ground we still have a long way to go and a refocus on the response strategy is key.

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### Comments by Dr. Marianne Beisheim, Senior Associate, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP)

Thanks for inviting me - even though I said I would take a rather sceptical position. I have three points:

First, let me start by saying that I agree with many of the things I heard so far. I am a political scientist and I do believe in the power of international institutions. They are relevant, or at least they can be relevant for achieving more effective international cooperation among their members.

In March 2011, in the context of the run-up to the Rio+20 conference, my colleague Nils Simon and I drafted a paper on the pros and cons of a Sustainable Development Council.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This internal paper exists in German only. For a version that has been published in English in June 2012 see Marianne Beisheim, Birgit Lode, and Nils Simon 2012: A Sustainable Development Council: Relaunching Global Sustainability Policy and Politics, in: Marianne Beisheim and Susanne Dröge (Eds.): UNCSD Rio 2012. Twenty Years of Sustainability

Back then, we said the best option would be to reorganize ECOSOC, to give it universal membership, and to broaden its mandate so that the Council would work on sustainable development, i.e. all three dimensions, but in a more integrated way. Another option we discussed was to revitalize and reorient the Trusteeship Council.<sup>2</sup> But altering the nature of one of these Charter bodies would mean opening the UN Charter. The third option was to upgrade the Commission on Sustainable Development. That's what we got out of Rio+20: the high-level political forum (HLPF).

We always say that “form should follow function” and that UN institutions need to be “fit for purpose”. No doubt, by now, the HLPF outgrew its form which was set up in 2013, that is before we agreed upon the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Nowadays, almost the whole UN system works on the SDGs. But at the same time, while the HLPF should have “a central role in overseeing a network of follow-up and review processes at the global level”, “promoting system-wide coherence and coordination of sustainable development policies” (as stated in para 82 of the 2030 Agenda), the HLPF is not in a position to orchestrate these processes.<sup>3</sup> The main purpose of the HLPF should be to provide “political leadership, guidance, and recommendations”, as promised in UNGA resolution 67/290 and again in the 2030 Agenda. In view of that, the HLPF should help answer the question of *how* do we get there, how do we achieve the SDGs by 2030? What policies and measures do we need to implement for achieving the transformation towards sustainable development? Like for example last year, the 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) suggested focusing on tackling the interlinkages between goals and targets, both co-benefits and trade-offs. How could the HLPF support Member States to work on this in the future?

So, yes, it would be a good time to reflect upon the format of the HLPF and maybe even go beyond this by thinking about the division of labour within the UN system at large, looking also at the General Assembly, the ECOSOC, and maybe even the Security Council.

My second point reflects my scepticism. We are in a situation of multiple crises. We do not only currently suffer due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since a few years now, we are also observing and discussing a crisis of multilateralism. If we take just one minute to reflect what happened during the last few days and weeks: We have a global pandemic and the US decides to leave the WHO. We have a major humanitarian crisis in Syria and there is no consensus in the Security Council to extend a resolution on cross-border access for humanitarian support. We have a looming climate crisis and there is no consensus on even mentioning decarbonization or green recovery in any UN document.

Most relevant for our discussion, of course, are the ongoing intergovernmental negotiations on the review of the format and organizational aspects of the HLPF. In resolution 70/299 in 2016, Member States agreed to review the HLPF's work after its first full four-year cycle. Last year in the 2019 Political Declaration, one of the ten action points was a commitment to strengthen the HLPF through this review.

Yet the negotiations, so far, have been quite disappointing and there are many conflicts:

- As for the level of ambition, G77 and China say they do “not envision a total overhaul” - just a “few adjustments”. And the US expressed that they do not see the reviews provided by the HLPF as an “accountability mechanism”. Many other Member States

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Policies - Now Put into Practice? Research Paper 8/June 2012, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research\\_papers/2012\\_RP08\\_bsh\\_dge.pdf#page=55](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2012_RP08_bsh_dge.pdf#page=55).

<sup>2</sup> For this see Jan-Gustav Strandenaes 2012: A Council for Sustainable Development - a possible outcome of the Rio + 20 Process. Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future.

<sup>3</sup> Marianne Beisheim 2020: UN Reforms for the 2030 Agenda: An interim assessment of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) and its current Review. Conference paper, Utrecht Global Goals Conference, June 2020.

join in by saying that the reviews should stay completely voluntary, no standardization is wanted, for example regarding the voluntary national reviews (VNRs).

- Member States also criticize the many duplications with the work of the UN's Second Committee. Many do not find the institutional interplay with the integration segment and the high-level segment of ECOSOC convincing, but there is no agreement on how to better organize these sessions.
- Most Member States seem to support that the HLPF's annual Ministerial Declaration remains a consensus document that is pre-negotiated (some even want to skip it altogether). As we see this year, a consensus document has its problems: To find agreement, the declaration will have to be very weak, representing the lowest common denominator.
- Beyond that, we have conflicts around stakeholder participation. The HLPF is known to be very strong on stakeholder participation and a few Member States want to weaken this.
- In terms of financing and budgets, the old conflicts are all back on the agenda, whether it is the link to Financing for Development and the means of implementation or the discussion around any programme budget implications (PBI). Member States are not willing to invest in strengthening the HLPF with more days, better preparatory or follow-up processes, or greater investment in the support structure that comes from UNDESA and others.

There are many more conflicts around how to organize the HLPF's themes, the SDG Reviews, and how to best deal with the interlinkages. And, indeed, the relationship to ECOSOC is still one of the main unsolved problems. This is why Member States actually said that the two reviews of ECOSOC and the HLPF should be "in close conjunction." But then again G77 and China insist on two separate resolutions, referring to the different mandates and objectives of the two institutions. And that is, in my view, another sign that there is another big hidden conflict, maybe the "elephant in the room" - the old conflict between development and sustainable development. Maybe we still have not overcome this obstacle.

I would like to conclude with my third, more constructive point: As I said, I think international institutions have an important enabling function. If we want to go forward with strengthening the HLPF, I think we need to take all these concerns, these positions, and the politics behind it seriously. We need to analyse them, come up with good arguments, and convince Member States why and how it would be in their best interest to upgrade and invest in better governance for the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs at the United Nations.

Still, as for now, I remain sceptical. In the current situation, there is not only no majority among UN Member States for a SDC. Rather some powerful Member States even question the HLPF as it is. So, this might not be the "best of all times" and we might not yet be in "the age of wisdom". So, we should be prepared if the time comes, but, at this point in time, we should be cautious and avoid opening the Pandora's Box (here the UN Charter).

## Afterword: Felix Dodds

The objective of the 13 July 2020 ‘Pop-up’ side event was to raise the question: Is the present High-level Political Forum fit for purpose? And if not, then is there anything we can learn from the pre-Rio+20 suggestion of a Council of the UN General Assembly? Why didn’t that idea succeed, and what suggestions it might offer for creating something that is ‘fit for purpose’?

The presentations in this report we hope opens up a serious discussion for Member States and stakeholders on is the High-level Political Forum fit for purpose. To help we had brought some of those engaged in the discussion on what institution should be created to replace the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). To look at what the main option other than a Forum was. That being a SDC of the UN General Assembly.

During the first five years of the Commission on Sustainable Development, the Rio conventions on climate change and biodiversity reported to it. Two of the agreed mandates of the Commission on Sustainable Development at the UN General Assembly in 1992 were:

1. “Recommends: To consider, where appropriate, information regarding the progress made in the implementation of environmental conventions, which could be made available by the relevant conference of the parties.” (3h UNGA A/RES/47/191); and
2. “Review of the implementation of Agenda 21, at the international level, as well as at the regional and national levels, including the means of implementation, in accordance with paragraph 12 above and the functions of the Commission, taking into account, where appropriate, information regarding progress in the implementation of relevant environmental conventions.” (14b UNGA A/RES/47/191)

The reporting from 1992-1997 at the Commission on Sustainable Development was an integrated agenda and then it started diverging.

Could a more integrated policy discussion at the CSD with the conventions have started to see how the different chapters of Agenda 21 could help deliver the climate and biodiversity conventions? If they had, Would that have meant that in the 1990s we might have had commitments to reduce climate change gases and reverse biodiversity loss? Could we have had SDGs in the 1990s? An interesting academic proposition.

I raise these questions because we didn’t in the 1990s, but these are part of what we need to do in the review of is the HLPF fit for purpose. In the 1990s we thought we had more time. We let down a generation. This time we can’t let down this generation. This must be why we all look seriously at the institutions we have at the international, regional, national, and sub-national levels. Those institutions have to be about, as Paula suggests, making our decisions relevant and actionable.

If you haven’t watched the video from which this report is a summary, you can find it on Stakeholder Forum’s YouTube page. Feel free to use it to prime your discussions on what institution do we need to take forward the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.



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