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Follow-up and Review

Developing the Institutional Framework
for Implementing and Reviewing the
Sustainable Development Goals
and Partnerships

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Content

- The 2030 Agenda and SDGs: Negotiations and Results3**
- Agreeing on Follow-up and Review.....4
- What the 2030 Agenda says on Follow-up and Review.....6

- Further steps for operationalizing the HLPF reviews8**
- Inspiration wanted: The first round of Voluntary National Reviews at the HLPF9
- Reviewing contributions by NGOs and Partnerships..... 11
- Building capacities for effective and efficient reviews 13

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are not legally binding but their implementation will be reviewed on a voluntary basis. Within the United Nations, the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) will adopt a central role in overseeing a network of different review processes and conduct its first round of reviews in July 2016. Several preparatory processes are already under way. End of March 2016, for example, the ECOSOC Partnership Forum discussed how to promote the accountability of multi-stakeholder partnerships for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In April, UN member states started negotiating a General Assembly resolution on the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, to be finalized by the end of May 2016. These processes, however, turn out to be difficult – there is danger that the results are falling behind what is necessary to realize the aspirations of the 2030 Agenda. Lessons learned at the first round of HLPF reviews could and should inform the development of the review architecture. Best practices could inspire the voluntary guidelines, incentivise meaningful participation and discourage pure showcasing and window dressing.

This paper wants to contribute to the debate on how to best organize voluntary national reviews and other types of reviews at the HLPF. It builds on the findings and suggestions of the [SWP research paper 2015/RP 01](#) and the [working paper FG08/ No. 01, 2014](#) (see also the [SWP dossier „Sustainability, Climate and Energy“](#) on our website [forthcoming]).

The 2030 Agenda and SDGs: Negotiations and Results

On 25 September 2015, the heads of state and government of the 193 member states of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, entitled “Transforming our World”.¹ The 2030 Agenda has four sections: a Declaration, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a section on the Means of Implementation and the Global Partnership, and one on Follow-up and Review.

The 2030 Agenda and SDGs have developed from both the Rio+20 conference in 2012 (Colombia, Guatemala and Peru had proposed defining SDGs in the run-up to the conference) and the so-called Post-2015 process on the successors of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were to be implemented by 2015. Accordingly, the SDGs address many of the same issues as the MDGs and take these further, including combating poverty and hunger, improving education, health, water and sanitation, and gender equality. And there are also issues from the Rio agenda such as sustainable consumption and production patterns, combating climate change, conserving the oceans and terrestrial ecosystems, and sustainable urban development.

During the negotiations for the 2030 Agenda, efforts were made to avoid the structural errors made in the MDGs and achieve what they did not. The SDGs therefore have a more integrated approach and all 17 goals endeavour to take account of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. The SDGs are also more human rights based – for instance, by striving to end extreme poverty and provide all people (not just a part of the global population) with access to clean drinking water and food by 2030. The 2030 Agenda also revisits important issues that had created controversy in the past, such as equitable distribution and good governance, tackling the factors that earlier MDG reports had identified as obstacles and structural causes preventing the MDGs from being achieved. These include inequality, war, insecurity, bad governance and lack of decent work. As a result, the list of SDGs is twice as long as the MDGs, but this was necessary to secure consensus on such an ambitious large-scale agenda.

In contrast to the MDGs, which were drawn up by a handful of experts, the SDGs were negotiated by the member states during a transparent, three-year process aimed at reaching agreement, and they were adopted unanimously. Consultation rounds were held in parallel, both with NGOs based in New York and via online platforms, global campaigns and national discussion forums. There was the usual wrangling in the UN over the wording of the outcome document. On the whole, however, the inclusive procedure used this time round meant that the heads of state and many civil society groups developed more ownership of the goals than previously. In a multi-polar world of sovereign states, the implementation of global goals is voluntary. It is therefore of the utmost importance that individual states and societies accept these goals as something worth striving for.

In contrast to the MDGs, the SDGs do not just apply to developing countries but to all member states, and they are designed to include all population groups and leave

¹ UN-Doc. [A/RES/70/1](#). Relevant paragraphs are given in brackets.

no one behind. It is no longer acceptable to measure goal attainment using misleading averages. The goals must also be attained for the poorest and most disadvantaged population groups. But this makes both the implementation and the monitoring process for the 2030 Agenda a very challenging task as this will require collecting and processing reliable data, broken down by income, gender, age, social status, etc.

Views on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs are mixed across governments, civil society and the general public. Many observers consider it an achievement simply that the heads of state and government were able to decide on 17 SDGs and 169 associated targets. The media and the broader public see the list of SDGs as difficult to understand and communicate. A response to this criticism is the Global Goals Campaign, which is designed to inform people about the SDGs in a clear and simple way. Nobel Peace Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai and other celebrities such as Bill Gates and Stephen Hawking, musicians, actors, and other artists support the project. Among experts, some criticism has been voiced that the goals are too numerous, or ill-chosen, or that their wording is not sufficiently binding or too imprecise, or that they do not sufficiently address systemic problems and offer too many loopholes.²

All sides agree that *implementation* is what counts now. For this, it is positive that the *means* of implementation were negotiated in parallel, which was not the case with the MDGs either. The means of implementation are addressed not only in the third section of the 2030 Agenda but also in 62 of the 169 associated targets and in the Action Agenda on Financing Development adopted in Addis Ababa in July 2015. Many people, however, have criticised these commitments for not going far enough.

Another factor that is also vital during implementation is the measurement and evaluation of achievement and non-achievement. So it is a positive step that the subject of *follow-up and review* has been successfully established in the fourth section of the 2030 Agenda.³ This paper further investigates the accomplishments and outstanding issues in that regard.

Agreeing on Follow-up and Review

An annual progress report on the MDGs was only published from 2005 onwards, and it presented aggregated global and regional data only. When negotiating the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, again some of the states were uncomfortable when the question came up of whether there should be a binding framework for monitoring implementation and national progress reports according to uniform global indicators. They preferred to decide themselves on the indicators used nationally. Proposals on the global-level follow-up and review that received the most scepticism were the critical evaluation of the national reports and the discussion of necessary changes based on additional information from parliaments and local authorities, civil society and other local stakeholders.

When negotiating the mandate for the *High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Develop-*

² See, for example, William Easterly, “The SDGs Should Stand for Senseless, Dreamy, Garbled, *Foreign Policy*, 28 September 2015.

³ Marianne Beisheim: Reviewing the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals and Partnerships. A Proposal for a Multi-level Review at the High-level Political Forum. [SWP Research Paper 2015/RP01](#), January 2015.

ment (HLPF) in 2013, member states agreed that the new review procedure should build on the Annual Ministerial Review (AMR) with its national voluntary presentations (NVPs). The AMR under the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) was an instrument set up in 2005 with which national implementation of the MDGs could be discussed directly with the responsible representatives of the UN member states. Only a small number of developing countries actually participated in this review. The AMR was an event that was largely limited to the New York public. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA) developed quite detailed guidelines for the NVPs.⁴ Participating states, nevertheless, mainly reported on development achievements they themselves had selected – mainly showcasing successes. And, as there was no systematic follow-up of the results of the AMR, reviews tended to have no consequences. In parallel, UN member states have been discussing effective means of development cooperation in the Development Cooperation Forum (DCF) of the ECOSOC and, since 2014, in the context of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation. However, sustainability aspects have received little attention during these deliberations.

Despite these weaknesses, the UN member states were unable to agree during the 2012 Rio+20 conference that the SDGs would require a stronger monitoring and review framework or what form it might take. The Rio+20 outcome document merely includes a note that the newly established HLPF “could” follow up and review progress. In August 2013 the General Assembly then adopted the resolution on the establishment and mandate of the HLPF. The resolution confirms that the HLPF shall conduct “regular reviews” from 2016.⁵ These are to be voluntary but are to encourage reporting, although this is not specified in any more detail.

During the past few years, the calls for a more robust review have been increasing. Still, it came as a surprise that the topic of “Follow-up and Review” was adopted as a distinct part of the 2030 Agenda. During the negotiations, a few countries (especially Russia) initially opposed having any kind of review process and most countries, simply out of a lack of capacity, refrained from expressing strong views on the matter. In spring 2014, a group of seven Permanent Representatives (Egypt, Liechtenstein, Norway, Pakistan, Peru, the Republic of Korea and Switzerland) set up several informal consultation rounds on a robust review mechanism for the HLPF. In autumn 2014, the German delegation presented a “non-paper” with suggestions for elements of an effective monitoring and review mechanism. The scientific community and civil society groups also presented several proposals.⁶

The subject was then finally taken up officially in the agenda in May 2014, when the President of the General Assembly invited participants to an interactive dialogue on the “Monitoring and Accountability Framework” of the 2030 Agenda. The HLPF also addressed the topic of monitoring several times in 2014 and even included it in the

⁴ UN-DESA 2015: Office for ECOSOC Support and Coordination: [Guidance Note](#) for the 2015 National Voluntary Presentations, New York.

⁵ UN-Doc. [A/RES/67/290](#), para. 8.

⁶ Steven Bernstein et al., “Coherent Governance, the UN and the SDGs”, Post-2015/UNU-IAS Policy Brief No. 4, 2014; Shannon Kindornay and Sarah Twigg, Establishing a workable follow-up and review process for the Sustainable Development Goals. [ODI Report](#), April 2015.

title of its theme in 2015.⁷ In January 2015, UN member states discussed the issue of follow-up and review for the first time during the intergovernmental negotiations for the new Post-2015 (now 2030) Agenda, followed by more extensive discussions on the topic in May 2015. In early June, the co-facilitators presented the Zero Draft of the outcome document. The follow-up and review wording in the Zero Draft was more ambitious, especially regarding the call for regular reporting and the participation of member states in the global-level procedure and in preparatory national and regional review processes involving civil society and other stakeholders. Moreover, as the text for the Agenda was being negotiated, the HLPF acquired a lesser role, dropping from “apex” to “central role” when overseeing a network of follow-up and review processes (para. 82).

What the 2030 Agenda says on Follow-up and Review

With the 2030 Agenda, the signatory member states “commit to engage in systematic follow-up and review” of the SDGs (para. 72). The Agenda also sets down which *principles* these procedures should be guided by (para. 74): The review is to be voluntary and country-led, while being participatory, transparent, effective and efficient. The review is to be integrated in all three dimensions of sustainable development and is to track the means of implementation, be based on solid evidence, and have a multi-level approach. This all sounds good, but it still leaves room for interpretation.

As many of the representatives were of the opinion that national implementation of the SDGs was a matter for the *sovereign* member states, the 2030 Agenda refers several times to a necessary “national policy space” and a need to “take account of the different national realities, capacities and levels of development”, “respecting national policies and priorities” (paras. 5, 21, 55, 56, 59, 63, 74.a). On the positive side, the processes at the national level are to be designed to support *accountability* towards citizens. The negotiating states were prepared to accept the use of the word *accountability* in this context only (paras. 47, 73). Accordingly, the 2030 Agenda “encourages” all member states to develop ambitious *national implementation plans* as soon as practicable and conduct regular reviews of progress at the national and subnational levels (paras. 78, 79). These processes are to be participatory and involve both national parliaments and national stakeholders.

These processes would be the basis for the *regular reviews of national implementation* including the *voluntary reporting* that the 2030 Agenda encourages of member states *in the HLPF* (para. 84). Complementary to the monitoring based on data and indicators, this kind of reporting could be more qualitative and analytical, evaluate the available data, report on promising measures and aim at mutual learning. All parties agree that successful approaches and measures that could serve to foster mutual learning across countries and to inspire other states should be made accessible to everyone. But obstacles and new challenges should also be addressed (see also next section).

Another starting point for analysing data and trends will be the *Global Sustainable Development Report* (GSDR) (para. 83), which is to provide a strong evidence-based

⁷ “Strengthening Integration, Implementation and Review – the HLPF after 2015”.

scientific assessment of developments. Two pilot reports have been published so far on an integrated assessment of the SDGs and their interlinkages. The President of the ECOSOC is now asked to conduct consultations on the scope, methodology and frequency of the global report and its relationship to the SDG progress report. It is expected that the outcome will be reflected in the ministerial declaration of the HLPF in July 2016. The 2016 GSDR will keep the ‘science-policy interface’ and ‘SDGs as integrated system’ as main threads and will have the theme chosen for the HLPF 2016 (“Ensuring that no one is left behind”) as a running theme throughout the report.

The 2030 Agenda leaves it up to the member states to select and structure the most suitable *regional forums* for review processes (paras. 80, 81). While the Latin American countries have already set up a forum for peer review in their UN Economic Commission (ECLAC), other countries have been more reserved as they do not necessarily view their neighbours as “peers”. In Europe, both the UN Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have had good experiences with review procedures. Many African countries support the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) of the African Union. The African and Asian UN Regional Commissions, on the other hand, lack the necessary capacities.

At the global level, the HLPF will have the *central role* in overseeing a network of different processes that will build on existing review procedures and work together with the General Assembly, the ECOSOC and other relevant organs and forums (para. 82). The details still need to be clarified. There will be *thematic* reviews of progress (para. 85). The Secretary-General’s report presented proposals on annual themes, on a sequence of thematic reviews and on institutional responsibilities. In the ongoing negotiations, however, member states did not yet decide what selection of (thematically related) SDGs or rather general, cross-cutting issues the thematic reviews should address.⁸

As with the MDGs, the Secretary-General is to prepare an *annual SDG progress report* based on a *global indicator framework* (para. 83). The Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs), which is staffed with representatives of statistical authorities, has presented a proposal for these indicators. In March 2016, the UN Statistical Commission welcomed it as a “practical starting point”. The proposed global indicator framework must still be approved by both the ECOSOC and the General Assembly. While it is recognised that the annual *SDG progress report* will be used to discuss general trends and global progress on individual SDGs, it remains unclear whether this data will also be broken down to the national level and critically evaluated. Some states are afraid that this would result in negative finger-pointing. However, if difficulties are not identified then states will not be able to work to overcome them and the UN system cannot provide targeted support. Moreover, it is still not clear how the UN will work with the laboriously collected data and how it will identify the causes of (inadequate) progress and the best possible means of implementation.

⁸ On thematic reviews see Mark Halle and Robert Wolfe 2016: Follow-up and Review for the 2030-Agenda. Bringing coherence to the work of the HLPF. [IISD Policy Brief](#), page 7f.

Similarly, while all parties agree that available *UN system review results* should be put to good use, it has not yet been decided how this data and information will be collected and processed in the HLPF. DESA has submitted a compilation of the existing follow-up and review procedures.⁹ But there are concerns that there is a lack of ideas how to “pave the way for discipline and integration of the information flow.”¹⁰ One option would be to permanently establish a kind of inter-agency body like the UN System Task Team (UNTT) or the Technical Support Team (TST) that have been supporting the negotiations since 2012. In advance of the HLPF, this body could prepare a report on the outcome of the relevant review processes in the UN system. Afterwards, it could help communicate the suggestions of the HLPF to the UN institutions. Moreover, this body could also coordinate the review of the progress of implementation by the relevant UN institutions. Doing so, they should also draw on the outcome of the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR), a review procedure, introduced in 2008, designed to measure and improve the effectiveness and coherence of the work of the UN Development System.

The structure of the follow-up and review procedures for *financing and means of implementation* was a matter of long and heated debate. The resolution on the HLPF already stipulates that the means of implementation should be included in the HLPF review. During their negotiations for Financing for Development (FFD), the G77 called for an independent follow-up mechanism, which they viewed as their part of the agreement on review processes. However, the donor states were of the opinion that this mechanism must be integrated in a coherent process within the HLPF. The 2030 Agenda thus sets down that the recommendations of a new annual Economic and Social Council forum on financing for development will feed into the overall follow-up and review in the HLPF (para. 86).

Further steps for operationalizing the HLPF reviews

Decisions on some details and controversial points relating to the HLPF reviews have been postponed. The Secretary-General was asked to prepare a report with recommendations on “voluntary common reporting guidelines” and a proposal on the “organizational arrangements” for reviews at the HLPF (para. 90). In the last round of negotiations, the phrase was added that this should take place “in consultation with Member States”. UN-DESA conducted a survey of member states and stakeholders for this purpose which lasted until mid-November 2015. The Secretary-General’s report was published in January 2016, containing proposals for “critical milestones towards coherent, efficient and inclusive follow-up and review at the global level”.¹¹ In the annex, it features a “proposal for voluntary common reporting guidelines for Voluntary National Reviews at the HLPF”.

During a first General Assembly informal exchange of views on the report in Febru-

⁹ UN System Technical Support Team (TST) 2015: Selected Follow-up and Review Processes and Platforms. An illustrative non-exhaustive compilation, [Matrix](#), 29.05.2015, New York.

¹⁰ Mark Halle and Robert Wolfe: Channeling the Flow. Rising to the Reporting Challenge for the 2030 Agenda. Guest Article #53, IISD.

¹¹ UN-Doc. [A/70/684](#).

ary 2016, it became clear, however, that several member states have serious reservations. The Group of 77 and China proposed to start intergovernmental negotiations on a resolution on the operationalization of follow-up and review. Accordingly, the President of the General Assembly initiated a new round of consultations and negotiations. In April 2016, the co-facilitators of this process issued a zero draft of the resolution, to be finalized by the end of May. The consultations on the draft are not going well, however, and exhibit a lack of consensus and ambition – in parts even falling behind what has already been agreed upon.

Inspiration wanted: The first round of Voluntary National Reviews at the HLPF

Many questions are still unresolved. How often should member states participate in the HLPF Voluntary National Reviews? On which points exactly should they report? And according to which specifications? It is important that the first rounds of the HLPF reviews inspire confidence in this instrument. Innovative formats and champions will be important here. In July 2016, twenty-two member-states, including Germany, intend to report implementation measures to the HLPF. Work is under way in New York and the national capitals to prepare the reports, presentations and meetings – while much remains unclear or is still under negotiation. That opens up a window of opportunity to convince and inspire others.

In the first round of national-level reporting in the HLPF, member states are expected to focus on their preparatory implementation efforts: How are member states implementing the global SDGs as national goals and targets? How are national development plans and sustainability strategies being adapted, and what resources have been made available? What processes have governments initiated for this purpose, and how are relevant national institutions and societal groups involved? This is designed to encourage other countries to adopt similar measures.

Germany, for example, will present its implementation efforts at the first round of the HLPF review in July 2016. The German government is using the already scheduled update of its National Sustainability Strategy to turn the SDGs into national targets. The State Secretaries' Committee for Sustainable Development chaired by the Federal Chancellery, the Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development in the German Bundestag, the Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) and the Federal Statistical Office are all working on this. The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) is designing a national platform to support multi-stakeholder partnerships in implementing the 2030 Agenda. This infrastructure of institutions alone could well be interesting to other countries. And yet Germany should not be content with its current system as the capacity of these institutions to effect transformational change can definitely be improved upon. The State Secretaries' Committee, for example, urgently needs to be given more weight in the Federal Chancellery. It is critically important that this central interface is able to make the new national sustainability strategy politically relevant to the *entire* German government and improve political coherence both internally and externally. Germany must also further develop the meaningful participation of societal and business stakeholders and succeed better in initiating, accompanying and evaluating innovative partnerships for implementing the SDGs.

It is vital that the “early reviewers” convey their ideas for substantive implementation and also for future follow-up and review processes at national or HLPF level.¹² Reports and presentations should address problems that are also relevant for other countries and focus on those areas, where countries can offer innovative and transformative solutions. The Voluntary National Reviews should focus on actions taken at the national and subnational level, i.e. go beyond presenting data on indicators measuring outcomes.¹³ Actions and measures that successfully integrate economic, ecological and social dimensions are of particular interest. Many countries are also interested in how synergies between goals can be generated and how conflicts of goals can be dealt with. There should also be space for self-critical reflection and difficult issues should not be ignored. Only when reports openly address mistakes, obstacles and difficulties, can the needs for future learning and support be identified. The voluntary guidelines for reports and presentations must be worded in a sufficiently flexible way on the one hand but also robustly enough so as to prevent cherry-picking and window dressing. One possibility would be to keep the annual data reports extensive (on all global indicators plus self-selected national indicators) and flexible with the obligation to comply or explain. Even if data on many indicators may still be missing, data that is already available (for example on the MDG indicators) could be analysed and discussed.¹⁴ Beyond that, the Voluntary National Reviews – reports and presentations – should focus more on qualitative reporting. Each country could, for example, present (1) a positive and inspiring example of a successful measure for each SDG and (2) areas in which it is facing difficulties or would like suggestions and/or support.

Furthermore, countries could also report on successful multi-stakeholder processes and partnerships (see also next section). Donor and partner countries could jointly present best practices in designing and implementing successful projects and partnerships – this would increase credibility.

In general, national processes for identifying national targets and policies should be organized in a participatory and inclusive fashion, appropriately involving parliament, local government, civil society, business and the general public. Participatory processes will help achieve broad ownership and reinforce the visibility and thus relevance of the national strategies and institutions for sustainable development. And only with meaningful participation will it be possible to identify concrete needs and challenges, as well as best practices and innovative policy ideas.¹⁵ As the 2030 Agenda places particular weight on improving the situation of disadvantaged and marginalized groups, these groups need to be identified and integrated from the outset in the processes.¹⁶ Countries should increase their contributions to the

¹² Marianne Beisheim: Reviewing the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. »Early Movers« Can Help Maintain Momentum. [SWP Comments 2016/C 30](#), May 2016.

¹³ Åsa Persson, Nina Weitz and Måns Nilsson: Follow-up and Review of the Sustainable Development Goals. Alignment vs. Internationalization. *RECIEL* 25 (1) 2016, 59-68.

¹⁴ Marianne Beisheim, Hedda Løkken, Nils aus dem Moore, László Pintér, Wilfried Rickels: Measuring Sustainable Development. How can Science Contribute to Realizing the SDGs? [Working Paper](#) FG8 / No. 02, April 2015, Berlin: SWP.

¹⁵ See also Transparency, Accountability & Participation (TAP) Network: Towards a Transparent, Accountable and Participatory HLPF Review System, [Position Paper](#), April 2016.

¹⁶ For this see also Save the Children's [Recommendations](#) on Follow-up and Review, May 2016. See also Together 2030: Perception Survey on Agenda 2030 National Reviews for HLPF 2016, [Report](#), April

(existing) voluntary trust fund of the HLPF for enabling the participation of these stakeholders in the HLPF reviews – this would be another step towards “leaving no one behind”.

Incentives are also needed to better ensure that the results of the reviews and the recommendations are actually taken on board. Data and national reports and the outcome of the reviews could be put online. Besides relatively extensive participation options already adopted for representatives of the nine Major Groups in the HLPF, civil society groups, experts and other stakeholders should be given the possibility of using an online system to comment on the national reports in advance. DESA could prepare a summary of those comments before the annual HLPF meeting. This approach could not only include information from the local level (citizen monitoring), it could also generate a certain degree of public pressure through the transparency it achieves.

Reviewing contributions by NGOs and Partnerships

The 2030 Agenda also calls upon non-governmental actors and multi-stakeholder partnerships that receive public funding for development and implement relevant projects to engage in reporting (paras. 84, 89). To ensure a coherent way to approach this reporting, several coalitions of non-governmental actors try to self-organize and to develop tools based on existing models. UN-DESA is supporting some of these work streams.

Following an Expert Group Meeting (EGM) in April 2016 on the issue,¹⁷ a Task Group of *civil society* representatives is drafting voluntary common guidelines for Major Groups and other Stakeholders (MGoS) to report to the HLPF on their implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Current plans foresee a common template for reporting by all stakeholders that will contain general guidelines and minimum reporting standards, so as to allow flexibility of reporting by different stakeholders. Moreover, UN-DESA might organize a preparatory meeting with MGoS ahead of the HLPF.

On the side of *business*, the Global Compact Office has launched the “SDG Compass” that shall help companies align their strategies with the relevant SDGs, and measure their impacts supported by a constantly updated inventory of business indicators and tools.¹⁸ Moreover, in the context of their Local Networks SDG Action Plan, they launched a programme to identify “Local SDG Pioneers”. Recently, the International Chamber of Commerce’s (ICC) Permanent Representative to the United Nations and coordinator of the Global Business Alliance for 2030 has proposed the establishment of a “High Level Political Forum Business Coordinating Mechanism (HLPF/BCM)” that “would operate as an autonomously governed, distinct business representative entity that will serve as a focal point for Member States”.¹⁹ This, however, would constitute

2016, and Together 2030: [Essential Elements](#) for an ambitious, inclusive and participatory follow up and review of the 2030 Agenda, April 2016.

¹⁷ UN-DESA: “HLPF 2016: Shaping the reporting by Major Groups and Other Stakeholders on their contribution to the implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda”, Summary EGM 19. April 2016, New York.

¹⁸ <http://sdgcompass.org/>

¹⁹ <http://www.businessfor2030.org/bizfor2030blog/2016/5/11/getting-the-architecture-right-attracting-business-expertise-and-action-for-sustainable-development-on-the-road-to-2030>

an extra alley exclusively for business (next to the existing mechanisms for the Major Group Business and Industry, via the Global Compact Office and the UN System Private Sector Focal Points).

In its latest resolution “*Towards Global Partnerships*”, the UN General Assembly “encourages the United Nations system to continue to develop, for those partnerships in which it participates, a common and systemic approach which places greater emphasis on transparency, coherence, impact, accountability and due diligence, without imposing undue rigidity in partnership agreements”.²⁰ It is not yet clear, however, how reports and other evaluations will feed into the HLPF reviews. On March 31, participants of the 2016 ECOSOC Partnership Forum discussed how to promote the accountability and transparency of partnerships for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.²¹ While member states agree that a better UN meta-governance is desirable, they shy away from budgetary consequences.²²

Accordingly, it would be wise to build on what is already there in terms of UN governance for and of partnerships, striving for a more coherent learning process, the outcome of which can then be discussed in the HLPF.²³ Open for all multi-stakeholder partnerships and initiatives, UN-DESA is currently developing the new “Partnerships for SDGs” Platform and will organize the first “Partnership Exchange” as a space for dialogue during the 2016 HLPF.²⁴ In parallel, the ECOSOC Partnership Forum could focus on those partnerships that are UN-led and relevant to the annual ECOSOC/HLPF thematic review in that year. UN-DESA could commission a report which would be based on the self-reporting of the partnerships on the online platform and on other input from the thematically relevant UN organisations, national platforms, major groups and other stakeholders. The report could be presented and discussed during the annual ECOSOC Partnership Forum in spring, where the representatives of partnerships could respond to the report and engage in discussion with member states and stakeholders. A summary with recommendations could then be submitted to the HLPF for discussion at a plenary session. Lastly, drawing on the results of this debate and of the HLPF Partnership Exchange, member states could formulate their recommendations in the annual ministerial declaration of the HLPF – in keeping with the mandate of the HLPF to provide “political guidance”. The ministerial declaration would then be forwarded by the ECOSOC to the General Assembly and to the specialised UN agencies, programmes and funds to implement the recommendations.

²⁰ UN-doc. [A/RES/70/224](#).

²¹ UN-DESA: [Issues Note](#) for 2016 Partnership Forum, New York.

²² Marianne Beisheim and Nils Simon 2015: Meta-Governance of Partnerships for Sustainable Development, SFB Governance [Working Paper](#) Series, No. 68, Berlin: DFG Collaborative Research Center (SFB) 700 Governance in Areas of Limited Statehood.

²³ For details see Marianne Beisheim and Nils Simon 2016: Multi-stakeholder partnerships for implementing the 2030 Agenda: Improving accountability and transparency. [Independent Analytical Paper](#) for the 2016 ECOSOC Partnership Forum, New York.

²⁴ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/partnerships/>

Building capacities for effective and efficient reviews

Both the UN Secretariat and member states must expand their capacities to create a solid foundation for such reporting and review processes. These include capacities for data collection and processing – for which a high-level group and several partnerships have already been set up.²⁵ Improved capacities are also needed for voluntary national reporting and reviews: As reviews should go beyond monitoring and data collection, member states need to strengthen their analytical capacities to determine the reasons for their successes and failures, to evaluate measures and to identify the tools needed to further improve goal attainment in the future. Interested donor countries should align and set-up an initiative to support interested states in their preparatory efforts to participate in the HLPF review. Moreover, the UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) is already preparing training packages and tools to support countries, especially Least Developed Countries and Small Island Developing States²⁶ – such a complementary multilateral effort with an outreach beyond individual partner countries deserves funding support.

Unfortunately, as regards the capacities of the secretariat, the disputed status of the HLPF is complicating the negotiations on follow-up and review. Those keen to give the HLPF and the global-level reviews a stronger role are calling for more days of negotiation and better resources for the HLPF – in the form of an intergovernmental steering committee and a better-equipped secretariat, for example. Others see the HLPF as a platform for discussing the broad lines of action at a high level; they oppose expanding the mandate and resources of the HLPF and point out that the mandate of ECOSOC is, in accordance with the UN Charter, to be responsible for reviews. It is also a matter of dispute whether the HLPF – despite its universal membership – is even able to make decisions. There is consensus, however, that the HLPF is a kind of dash board where the overall picture can be discussed of what has been measured, analysed and assessed on a subsidiary basis by the thematically relevant institutions inside and outside of the UN system. Past experiences with similar processes show that the secretariats' work in preparing and supporting such complex review processes is indispensable for effective and efficient reviews. This implies that the secretariat should have a robust mandate, be well equipped and staffed with capable personnel.

All in all, the use of resources for follow-up and review processes should not be placed in false opposition to resources for implementation. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that these processes are *means to an end*: In order to achieve sustainable development, we need political will, public support and effective instruments. The voluntary follow-up and review procedures will gain traction if the first rounds of reviews deliver results to this effect and subsequently lead to improved implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. If such successes can be realized in the first rounds, UN member states might be willing to invest more time and resources into future HLPF reviews.

²⁵ The High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for Post-2015 Monitoring, which is part of the Statistical Commission, and the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data.

²⁶ UNITAR „[Capacity for Agenda 2030](#)“, Geneva.