



Towards a Transparent, Accountable and Participatory HLPF Review System

A position paper from the Transparency, Accountability & Participation (TAP) Network

In order to meet the ambition of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) to be truly transformative, Member States must craft a robust follow-up and review framework that fosters accountability at all levels – globally, regionally nationally and sub-nationally. An integrated, transparent and participatory framework for follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda is essential for ensuring there is accountability for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and means of implementation commitments. It is also integral to the overall credibility of the 2030 Agenda - by showing clear results and timely updates on progress, and helping to accelerate implementation and support partnerships, including with governments, civil society, the private sector and all stakeholders, coming together to achieve the SDGs.

Follow-up and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda should be seen as a continuum of accountability from local to national to regional to global levels and back again. While the framework must ensure coordination and flow of information across all levels, particular focus must be placed on strengthening national accountability between governments and citizens, fully reflecting the “people-centred” nature of the 2030 Agenda and its commitment to “leave no one behind.”

This position paper provides recommendations for the global follow-up and review framework at the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), and complements the TAP Network’s paper: “People-Centred Post-2015 Review & Accountability with Transparency and Citizen Participation at its core,” which outlines key principles for accountability of the 2030 Agenda.

Overarching principles for the 2030 Agenda Follow-up and Review Framework

Broad, inclusive, meaningful and people-centred participation at all levels

The 2030 Agenda's commitments to "leave no one behind" and "to reach those furthest behind first", along with paragraphs 74(d) and 74(e) of the 2030 Agenda, should be guiding principles for follow-up and review processes at all levels. While national review processes will be "state-led", they should also be "people-driven" with the active engagement and meaningful participation all stakeholders, including civil society and all stakeholders – particularly vulnerable and marginalized communities. Therefore, it is critical for each government undertaking HLPF national voluntary reviews in a given year to actively and meaningfully engage with stakeholders at the sub-national and national level in the preparation of its report and subsequent presentation at the HLPF. Their views and input should also be adequately reflected in the report itself. Additionally, as outlined in the *Secretary-General's Report on critical milestones towards coherent, efficient and inclusive follow-up and review at the global level*, each government should outline in detail how it has engaged and consulted with stakeholders in drafting its report.

Leaving no one behind in accountability processes means addressing barriers that prevent specific groups from engaging: the financial, linguistic, logistical, technological, age or legal barriers – such as laws against registration of NGOs or requiring that they obtain permission from public bodies before they engage in certain activities. It means engaging all people, especially excluded and marginalized groups, in regular and continuous interactive dialogue to assess progress. Excluded groups must not be viewed as mere beneficiaries of the new agenda, but as active participants who can contribute to implementation and accountability by freely providing their views as to whether government policies and actions are achieving their intended aims. In designing or revising processes for accountability at all levels, governments should seek the views of a diverse range of people, including children, through inclusive and open consultations. The principle of "leaving no one behind" also means concerted efforts to ensure that there is adequate and timely public access to information and data on national progress towards achieving the SDGs, as well as strengthening of capacity for stakeholders – including marginalized groups – to engage meaningfully in follow-up and review processes.

Providing space for participation of stakeholders at HLPF

Citizen participation must be rooted in the HLPF's review mechanism and preparatory processes at the national, regional and international levels, or the international community risks repeating a key shortcoming of the experience of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – namely squandering a critical opportunity to enhance ownership of and support for the 2030 Agenda at all levels.

To do this, ambitious and explicit modalities must provide for stakeholder perspectives throughout the review process, building upon the existing modalities in paragraph 8 of General Assembly Resolution 67/290. In addition to consulting with all stakeholders during the preparatory national reporting process, the HLPF follow-up and review framework must provide explicit entry points for stakeholders to engage meaningfully in both HLPF national voluntary reviews as well as thematic reviews. In addition to these entry points, Member States undertaking reviews in a given year could also invite, encourage and provide logistical and financial support to national-level stakeholders, including excluded and marginalized groups, to participate meaningfully in review processes at the HLPF. Inputs and assessments from all stakeholders within countries will be necessary to provide a more accurate snapshot of progress within countries.

Additionally, space must be provided for all stakeholders, including civil society to provide independent written reports to inform review processes at the HLPF. These reports should be compiled and synthesized by the UN Secretariat and presented as an official input to the HLPF, with these synthesized recommendations included in the outcome documents of the HLPF.

Recommendations for the HLPF

HLPF under the auspices of ECOSOC

Under the auspices of ECOSOC each year, the HLPF should:¹

- **Leave no one behind in its focus** – It should review national and global thematic progress, explicitly focusing on the progress of those furthest behind in line with para. 74(e) of the 2030 Agenda. It should provide clear political guidance and specific recommendations for follow-up action by Member States and other stakeholders to ensure that no one is left behind. Reviews should encourage Member States to seek to achieve all goals and targets for all segments of society
- **Leave no one behind in its meetings** – It should ensure that all reviews and meetings are open and inclusive with multi-stakeholder participation and interactive dialogue between Member States and civil society, the private sector and other stakeholders. Participation should not merely be limited to NGOs with ECOSOC accreditation, and must be inclusive of stakeholders that are traditionally marginalized from such structures.
- **Leave no one behind in its inputs** – It should take into account written and oral inputs for all national and thematic reviews from a wide range of processes and stakeholders, including Member States, the UN System, sector-specific partnerships, civil society and the private sector among others. All inputs should be made available in an online portal in a timely, open and user-friendly manner and in all official UN languages. Additionally, a template for these inputs should be provided to help standardize reporting and to reduce the burden of work for the Secretariat.
- **Leave no one behind in its outcomes** – It should produce a summary document following each national and thematic review that includes or synthesizes recommendations provided by stakeholders in advance of the HLPF, recommendations arising from reviews at the HLPF, as well as a short summary of the review itself. These documents should be publicly available in all official UN languages to enable follow-up on these recommendations by governments being reviewed.

National Reviews

National voluntary reviews should be a core part of the HLPF, as recognized in General Assembly Resolution 67/290 and the 2030 Agenda. First and foremost, national reviews should be a solutions-based tool that aims to support implementation by evaluating progress in achieving the SDGs and generating evidence about successful strategies and policies, and emerging issues. The meaningful participation of all stakeholders in the national review, including the private sector and civil society, should be ensured. Processes for consultation need to be inclusive, transparent and participatory to increase ownership and accountability for 2030 Agenda accountability.

National-level implementation and accountability processes are key for the success of the 2030 Agenda and will be instrumental for meaningful national voluntary reviews at the HLPF. For these accountability processes to be effective, civil society and other stakeholders, especially at the local level, have to play an active role. In view of this, governments must provide an enabling environment and concrete opportunities for all people - men, women and children alike - to participate in these processes. Additionally, there should be minimum criteria and standards for Member States to aspire to and meet when engaging with all stakeholders in the national reporting process.

National voluntary reviews must be more than just an opportunity for the Member State under review to present a report or showcase its good practices, and instead provide an opportunity for real engagement, dialogue and learning.

¹ Excerpts from: "Towards a New Accountability Paradigm: An Accountability Framework for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," Save the Children

HLPF National Voluntary Reviews should be based on:

- A written government report with information provided by the state under review;
- A report from the UN summarizing information submitted by non-state actors including civil society; and
- A report from the UN summarizing information and data from across the UN system, including UN treaty bodies and the Human Rights Council.

All reports should outline progress, challenges, emerging issues, recommendations to further implementation and, where applicable, any steps taken to follow up on previous recommendations. The HLPF National Voluntary reviews are also mandated to provide a platform for partnerships. This should be a dynamic platform where Member States, UN agencies, the private sector, civil society and other stakeholders come together to showcase good practices, share lessons learned, and address challenges and shortcomings. Such meetings need to be well prepared, drawing on the Partnerships for SDGs online platform, the ECOSOC Partnership Forum and the work of other entities that deal with partnerships in the UN system.

Outcomes from HLPF National Reviews

There should be a written summary of recommendations from each voluntary national review that is made publicly available and accessible in a timely manner. These recommendations should be considered by the national government and all other stakeholders in the period between reviews, in order to make further progress in implementing the SDGs and to address any challenges, gaps or emerging issues. Member States should consider taking recommendations to the regional level to discuss shared regional challenges in implementation and possible solutions. During subsequent national voluntary reviews at the HLPF, Member States should outline the steps they have taken to address recommendations arising from previous reviews.

Additionally, recommendations and outcomes from the HLPF under the auspices of ECOSOC on issues related to the UN Development System each year could be taken up by the General Committees of the UN to be actioned and operationalized. Regardless of where these HLPF outcomes are eventually taken up, the ongoing engagement and consultation of stakeholders will be critical to this work. Thus, for credibility and legitimacy of the follow-up and review process, whichever bodies or mechanisms that take up the HLPF's outcomes must make an extra effort to ensure transparency, inclusion and participation by considering inputs from civil society in its work. Paragraph 15 of Resolution 67/290 which outlines the participation and access rights of all stakeholders in the HLPF is a good starting point to build a participatory process around for these general committees' work.

Voluntary Reporting Guidelines for National Reviews

The TAP Network generally supports the voluntary reporting guidelines for national reviews, as proposed in the Secretary-General's report on follow-up and review. Countries should report on progress towards all SDGs in their national reports and presentations. For flexibility, if universal reporting coverage is not possible for a given country, they should be asked to explain why they were unable to report on progress towards certain goals or targets.

Reporting guidelines should encourage countries to report on progress, challenges, emerging issues and measures for further implementation of all SDGs, and where applicable, the steps taken to follow-up previous HLPF recommendations as well as to report on:

- Actions taken to prioritize marginalized and vulnerable groups in order to leave no one behind and to meet all goals and targets for all segments of society;
- Actions taken to raise awareness of the 2030 Agenda and promote the participation of civil society and all stakeholders in accountability processes including the production of national reports;
- Actions taken to produce high-quality, accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated data – in line with the disaggregation called for in paragraph 74(g) of the 2030 Agenda – that is publicly available and to consider citizen-led or third party data; and
- Actions taken to independently monitor progress on the SDGs at national levels by, for example, independent human rights institutions or parliaments.

Thematic Reviews

The HLPF should review thematic global progress towards the SDGs annually. Thematic reviews should be informed by the annual SDG Progress Report, the Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR), and written and/or oral inputs from a wide range of processes and stakeholders, which are synthesized in a summary brief for discussion at the thematic review. The summary brief should highlight the interlinkages between goals and targets and support the pledge to “leave no one behind” by focusing on the groups that are the furthest behind in achieving goals and targets.

Annual thematic reviews of progress at the HLPF could focus on progress towards all SDGs around the agreed overarching transversal theme for the HLPF each year. This would safeguard the integrated nature of the SDGs, and prevent fragmentation of many issues. It would also help to avoid a key criticism of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) that the CSD’s limited focus on different themes each year effectively siloed work around particular issues, and hindered the ability of governments and stakeholders to address implementation in a cross-cutting and integrated fashion.

Alternatively, the HLPF could undertake thematic reviews by reviewing eight goals plus Goal 17 each year, which would allow for a more in-depth analysis of goals. This approach would allow each goal to be reviewed in-depth five times (e.g. in 2017/2018, 2020/2021, 2023/2024, 2026/2027 and 2029/2030) with all of the SDGs together also reviewed five times over the course of the 2030 Agenda (e.g. in 2016, 2019, 2022, 2025 and 2028). The selection of the eight goals to be reviewed in 2017 and 2018 could be done randomly with an effort made in subsequent years to ensure that different combinations of goals are selected. Regardless which goals are reviewed in-depth, the interlinkages between all goals and targets should still be highlighted every year. ²

Regardless of the approach taken, building on paragraph 74(f) of the 2030 Agenda, HLPF thematic reviews should build upon existing mechanisms, thematic fora such as the functional commissions of ECOSOC, the Rio Conventions (UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), UN Convention on Biological Diversity (UN CBD), etc.) and other key thematic processes such as UN Forum on Forests (UNFF), UN Environment Assembly (UNEA), and others. These existing conventions and forums can undertake regular reviews of progress towards the thematic issues they cover through their own meetings and programmes, and submit a report to the HLPF yearly on progress towards implementation of a particular goal or target. Additionally, a UN Task Team approach should be employed to help the UN System synthesize these outputs from various forums.

Outcomes of thematic reports through these forums could cover, inter alia:

- Progress, achievements and critical success factors to attain the SDGs – including data sources and progress against global-level SDG indicators;
- Challenges and gaps;
- New and emerging issues;
- Examination of trends around a particular thematic issue;
- Recommendations to mobilize further actions to accelerate implementation;
- Highlighting innovative tools and partnerships around a particular issue

This process must be inclusive of civil society and all stakeholders, and inputs should be fully transparent and accessible to all. The outcomes of the thematic reviews should be considered through the Summary from the President of ECOSOC to the HLPF, and recommendations provided in advance of thematic reviews should be taken into consideration for inclusion in the Ministerial Declaration.

² Excerpt from: “Towards a New Accountability Paradigm: An Accountability Framework for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” Save the Children

Selection of themes for HLPF

The themes for the HLPF should be strategically selected to highlight topics where progress is slow or where there are concerns about results or where an issue is already flagged as being critical. A multi-year work programme should be adopted in advance.

The President of ECOSOC could make suggestions for themes of the HLPF meetings under the auspices of ECOSOC every two years. Providing the programme of work four years in advance would not allow the HLPF to be sufficiently flexible or responsive to new and emerging issues; consequently, to provide this flexibility, the selection of HLPF themes every two years should be adopted by ECOSOC.

The HLPF should have a crosscutting theme to ensure the integrated follow-up of all SDGs, and leaving no issue behind. This theme should be aligned to the overall theme of ECOSOC – in line with paragraph 7c of General Assembly Resolution 67/290 – in order to allow all functional commissions and other bodies of ECOSOC to input into the HLPF. In selecting the themes for the HLPF, an inclusive, transparent and participatory process – jointly held by the President of ECOSOC – and should be conducted to take into consideration inputs from Member States, other intergovernmental platforms, civil society and all stakeholders.

Broader Institutional Enablers

Capacity Building, Enabling Environment and UN Institutional Support

The HLPF needs a solid, transparent and participatory preparatory process to sufficiently support its work, and to consider inputs from a wide variety of processes and stakeholders throughout the year. Past experiences with international review mechanisms, such as the Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights Council, suggest that a robust mandate, sufficient time and strong secretariat support – as well as the meaningful participation of local civil society – are crucial for an effective review. Member States should contribute to the already established HLPF voluntary trust fund, to help support the engagement of civil society and all stakeholders in the HLPF and review processes – which includes logistical and financial support for national-level stakeholders to attend and participate in the HLPF reviews, as well as for the formation of online platforms and innovative technology to enable people at the national and local levels to participate virtually.

The capacity of Member States to collect better-quality and user-friendly data, and to make such data and information publicly available in a timely manner, must also be strengthened. This would enable and support Member States in setting up transparent and participatory review processes at the national level, with governments as duty bearers and citizens as rights holders. This means not only strengthening coherence and capacity for national agencies responsible for implementation of the 2030 Agenda, but also dedicating the resources needed for National Statistical Offices to collect the data needed for robust measurement and monitoring of the SDGs. In addition, the inclusion of citizen-generated or “third-party” data should be supported and promoted in HLPF reviews, as this data can complement and fills data capacity gaps, help ensure greater accountability by providing a more robust picture of progress, and drive innovation in data collection more broadly. Additionally, Member States must provide for capacity-building and resources to strengthen the UN Secretariat and other UN agencies responsible for assisting governments in implementation and follow up and review of the 2030 Agenda.

Endorsing Organizations: Access Info Europe, Alliance For Development, Article 19, Asia Development Alliance, Association for the Promotion of Sustainable Development India, ATD Fourth World, ATD Fourth World, CAFSO-WRAG For Development, Campaign2015+ International, Centre for Social and Economic Development (CSED), CIVICUS, Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Echoes of Women in Africa (ECOWA), ENDA Tiers Monde, Equity BD, Global Network for Community Development, International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), JasHim Foundation, NGO Federation of Nepal, Nonviolence International, Plan International, Saferworld, Save the Children, Soroptimist International, Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future, Transparency International, UNA South Sudan, WaterAid UK, World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA), World Vision.