



UN Monitor #17

25 June 2020

2020 HLPF, one decade to go: tinkering or transformation?

By Barbara Adams, Karen Judd and Elena Marmo

Preparations are underway for the 2020 High-level Political Forum (HLPF) and review of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Member States are engaged in negotiations to adopt by consensus a Political Declaration and 47 have undertaken Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) for presentation at the HLPF. The UN system has issued a number of reports containing analyses and assessments of progress towards the SDGs. In addition to contributing to these processes and reports, major groups have issued a range of analyses and demands.

Leadership across the UN has continued to position the 2030 Agenda and the [Decade of Action](#) to deliver the SDGs as the major priority for and objective of the UN Development System. However, many questions remain concerning the depth and quality of implementation of the 2030 Agenda and whether the policy response is on track to deliver the transformation needed to achieve the 17 SDGs.

The COVID-19 crisis has heightened, not diminished the urgency for action on the SDGs. As stated by the [President of ECOSOC](#): “Our development gains are at risk of being reversed in the very year when we launched a Decade of Action and Delivery to accelerate the implementation the Sustainable Development Goals.” In his [2020 SDG Progress Report](#), the Secretary-General noted:

“While this crisis is imperiling progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, it also makes their achievement all the more urgent and necessary. Moving forward, it is essential that recent gains are protected as much as possible and **a truly transformative recovery from COVID19 is pursued**, one that reduces risk to future crises and bring much closer the inclusive and sustainable development required to meet the goals of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.”

Findings from UN reports – transformation sought, not found

A number of UN reports have been issued in the lead-up to the HLPF, many of which aim to identify action to bridge the gap from SDG implementation to transformation. The [2020 Report by the Committee for Development Policy](#) (CDP) calls for the HLPF to “identify the rules that stand in the way of the Goals and the global response to inequality and climate change and establish road maps to address them”. It further acknowledges:

“While action by all stakeholders is needed at all levels, States have the responsibility to strategically deploy the full range of policy instruments to catalyse and redirect innovation and investments towards equitable and green development....However, isolated interventions will not work. A transformation commensurate with the scale of the challenge presented by inequality and climate change requires public policies and investment to be realigned and streamlined.”

The CDP has analysed the [2018 and 2019 VNR](#) contributions at the HLPF and will issue a 2020 analysis in early July. The 2020 Report addresses the imbalance in reporting on the SDGs, making note that:

“More attention should be paid to reporting on implementing Sustainable Development Goal 10 on reducing inequalities, a goal that is paid least attention in the voluntary national reviews analysed. To strengthen the high-level political forum process as a forum for exchange of experience in implementing the 2030 Agenda, the Committee calls for all voluntary national reviews to cover the contributions of non-State actors, and for broadening the space for civil society and regional dialogues.”

The Secretary-General released a report titled, “[Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of the action and delivery for sustainable development](#)”. This report “identifies accelerators for building synergies across economic, social and environmental dimensions and offers recommendations to inform the discussions of the high-level segment of the Economic and Social Council”. It reiterates the call to focus on inequality and CO2 emissions, emphasizing

“the critical role that reduced income inequality can play in amplifying the effects of economic growth in eradicating extreme poverty by 2030 and the high economic, social and environmental benefits of rapid and sustained reductions in CO2 emissions aligned with the 1.5C goal to limit the global temperature rise which would entail reaching carbon neutrality by 2050”.

The Secretary-General’s [2020 SDG Progress Report](#) also discusses progress made in 2019 as well as the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the 2030 Agenda. It points to areas where “progress had either stalled or been reversed: the number of people suffering from hunger was on the rise; climate change was occurring much faster than anticipated; and inequality continued to increase within and among countries”.

The 2020 Progress Report stresses the need for a “transformative recovery to reduce the risk of future crises and bring much closer the inclusive and sustainable development required to meet the goals of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. This is the first task of the Decade of Action. It will require leadership, foresight, innovation, finance and collaboration among all governments and all stakeholders. And, as the United Nations marks its 75th anniversary, it will require a surge in international cooperation and multilateralism.”

The report details the status of progress on each SDG as well as trends across the board related to financing, information and communications technology, trade, capacity-building, and data, monitoring and accountability. On the topic of trade, it notes:

“The share of LDC exports in global merchandise trade remained marginal at just above 1% in 2018. Growth in global exports of LDCs stagnated over the last decade, missing the target of doubling the share of global LDC exports by 2020 from 2011. In 2018, LDCs recorded significant year-on-year growth in services exports reaching a global share of 0.8%. Developing regions’ share of global services exports has flattened over the last years, with a share of 30% at the end of 2018.”

Further, on the topic of inequality, it notes:

“In 73 of the 90 countries with comparable data during the period 2012–2017, the bottom 40 per cent of the population saw its incomes grow....Still, in all countries with data, the bottom 40 per cent of the population received less than 25 per cent of the overall income or consumption, while the top 10 per cent received at least 20 per cent of the income.”

Other UN reports demonstrate the centrality of the 2030 Agenda for the UN system. These include a [Compilation of Main Messages from the 2020 VNRs](#), a [Synthesis of voluntary submissions](#) by ECOSOC functional commissions, and a [report of the Secretary-General on long-term scenarios](#).

Measuring progress on SDGs

It is essential to explore how progress on achieving the SDGs is monitored and reported as the global community navigates what it means for action on SDGs to be “transformative”. Central to this activity has been a global indicator framework that has been adopted to measure progress against the specific targets. What is and is not measured, the way the data is collected, as well as whether by official or nonofficial sources all hold profound implications for policy solutions and priorities.

The Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities (CCSA) published a [special report on Covid-19](#) titled, “How Covid-19 is changing the world: a statistical perspective”. The report is compiled jointly by 36 international organizations including UN agencies, regional commissions, IFIs and Member State groups. It details the impact of COVID-19 on different sectors including labour markets, global banking, manufacturing and trade, as well poverty, migration and human rights. It also examines the challenges faced by the statistical community in measuring the implementation of the ambitious 2030 Agenda and of working with big data and open data. It notes:

“At a time when statistics are most needed, many statistical systems are struggling to compile basic statistics, highlighting once again the need to invest in data and statistics, and the importance of having modern national statistical systems and data infrastructure.”

“In recent years, statisticians, researchers, academics, and businesses have been exploring ways to make better use of big data and open data to compile official statistics. Much of this work has been experimental and it has been challenging to operationalize this work in such a way that it can be incorporated into the regular statistical system.”

“The COVID-19 crisis is serving to sharpen our thinking and alter our risk profile (which is generally very low for statisticians) when it comes to using big data, open data and citizen generated data to compile current economic indicators and official statistics. Several countries have launched open platforms for citizens to provide their governments and themselves an assessment of the health, social and economic impact of COVID-19.”

The [Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDGs \(IAEG-SDGs\)](#), tasked with updating and refining the global indicator framework held an [open virtual meeting](#) on COVID-19 impacts and responses on 2 June. This included updates on the work of the geospatial working group and the SDMX working group along with the National Multi-dimensional Poverty Index and an initiative on CSO involvement in SDG monitoring and preparation for the 2025 comprehensive review.

A [report on a global NSO survey](#) prepared by the World Bank, UN regional commissions and the UN Statistics Division indicated that as a result of Covid-19 and subsequent lockdowns, 65 percent of national statistical offices (NSOs) have closed either fully or partly and 90 percent of staff work from home. Importantly, 96 percent have stopped face to face data collection. As a result, 9 in 10 NSOs in low and lower middle income countries are unable to meet national reporting requirements.

If NSOs are not able to conduct in-person household and time-use surveys, what methods can they use to measure progress against many different indicators, notably those that rely on data from households and institutions?

Member State declaration for 2020 HLPF

The Ministerial Declaration to be adopted at the 2020 HLPF is being negotiated in a series of virtual meetings, led by the co-facilitators, the Permanent Representatives of Bulgaria and of Lebanon.

A zero-draft and later [revised draft](#) have been the basis for discussion at virtual informal negotiations on 8 June and 24 June under Chatham House Rules with one representative for each of the Major Groups and other Stakeholders (MGoS) invited to participate. MGoS have also submitted position papers to the HLPF, all of which have been compiled and summarized by the HLPF Secretariat, and issued as an official UN document (E/HLPF/2020/2): "[Discussion papers on the theme of the high-level political forum on sustainable development, submitted by major groups and other stakeholders.](#)"

The draft Ministerial Declaration covers an "assessment of the situation regarding the 2030 Agenda" and "actions to be taken for the way forward". In its opening, the draft notes: "We acknowledge the COVID-19 pandemic reinforces pre-existing obstacles, gaps and systemic challenges."

The commitments made in the zero draft include references to human rights, gender equality, climate change, financing and debt, and national statistical capacities and build on the Secretary-General's 2020 SDG Progress Report, specifically in the sections on debt and national statistics.

The commitments include:

"We also commit to respecting, protecting and fulfilling human rights for all, ending all forms of racism, discrimination, xenophobia, ensuring equal access to justice and achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls."

"We will ensure that emergency social and economic schemes integrate a gender equality and child rights perspective....We recommit to targeted and accelerated action to remove all legal, social and economic barriers to achieve gender equality, full, effective and meaningful participation in decision-making and the empowerment of all women and girls and their full and equal enjoyment of all human rights."

"We will strengthen our global response to climate change by accelerating the reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, inter alia, by updating our Nationally Determined Contributions under the Paris Agreement, accelerating the clean energy transition and ensuring access to affordable and clean energy for all. We reaffirm our commitments under the Paris Agreement and stress the importance of mobilizing means of implementation, including, adequate financial

support, for climate change mitigation, adaptation and loss and damage, as well as strengthening resilience.”

“We are deeply concerned about the impact of high debt levels on countries’ ability to withstand the impact of the COVID-19 shock, and to invest in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. We commit to addressing the high debt levels of developing countries, and invite the international community and relevant stakeholders to urgently and properly address these challenges, and engage efforts towards a coordinated international debt relief effort for countries experiencing solvency problems, in close cooperation with International Financial Institutions.”

The draft does not address what “transformation” looks like in the context of the SDGs, despite the focus of the 2020 HLPF programme and recent system-wide emphasis on the need for “transformative” solutions including those on inequality and climate change. Rather, it offers rededications to existing commitments including the Paris Agreement, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, Human Rights conventions and the UN Charter.

2020 HLPF Programme

The [official programme](#) of the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) is being convened under the theme of “Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development”. The nine-day programme includes a ministerial segment, [VNRS](#) and a number of thematic sessions. The thematic sessions explore the challenges for SDG progress as well as effects of the COVID-19 crisis with focus on the Decade of Action and the S-G’s calls to “build back better”.

The programme draws upon and builds on the [2019 Global Sustainable Development Report](#) (GSDR) that states: “The true transformative potential of the 2030 Agenda can be realized through a systemic approach that helps identify and manage trade-offs while maximizing co-benefits.” The report identifies six entry points and four levers to achieve needed transformation. A more detailed examination of the report can be found in [GPW Briefing #31](#).

Building on calls for “transformation” across the UN System, the 2020 HLPF’s agenda presents an opportunity for Member States and civil society to explore policy solutions to pressing challenges and impediments to SDG progress. While various reports present areas for attention/focus, the onus of concrete policy solutions must fall on Member States and at present, the Ministerial Declaration and HLPF set-up appear to be limited in their analysis and scope.

Social Watch

Avda. 18 de Julio 2095/301
Montevideo 11200, Uruguay
socwatch@socialwatch.org
www.socialwatch.org

Global Policy Watch

205 E 42nd St | 20th Fl
New York, NY 10017, USA
globalpolicywatch.org

Global Policy Forum

Koenigstrasse 37a
53115 Bonn, Germany
gpf@globalpolicy.org
www.globalpolicy.org