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**HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT (HLPF)**

**REVIEWING AND TRANSFORMING THE 2030 AGENDA:
DISMANTLING THE BARRIERS TO PROGRESS ON THE
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

Authors: Lily Robic, Ashley Fernandez, Alicia Bolton

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COMMITTEE BRIEF

Introduction:

The first half of the 2020s has concluded and with the start of 2025, the deadline of one of the most important UN initiatives comes into view. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a hopeful vision for the world, the eradication of poverty everywhere and sustainable development across the board in every continent. Critically, no one can be left behind for it to be considered successful. While a new year is an exciting chance to make ambitious resolutions, much reflection is needed to ensure that these goals are actually met.

Sustainable Development does not only refer to environmental sustainability, but rather a shift in how we must live every single day to have a better tomorrow.¹ In 1987, the UN's World Commission on Environment and Development defined sustainable development as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."² It does not contend that we need to compromise present needs for an unforeseeable future, rather that every year, every decade, every conference should make things better for every single person on this planet. Globally people on average live longer than they ever have, but in many individual places the conflict, unequal distribution of resources, and the prioritization of short-term gains have lowered the average life span.

In 2012 at the Rio United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, a resolution was passed: *The Future We Want*³. Inside this resolution the Commission on Sustainable Development—a body under the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) that oversaw the initial integration of Sustainable Development into the UN's missions—was replaced with the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). The HLPF's would, in contrast, be under both the General Assembly (GA) and ECOSOC, would focus more on intergovernmental cooperation, and demand greater transparency from the world towards sustainable development.⁴⁵ *The Future We Want* was also the point of conception of the Sustainable Development Goals which would later be implemented in 2015-6⁶. With the creation of these goals, the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) began to play a pivotal role in fostering dialogue, reviewing the progress made, and figuring out the best next steps.

¹United Nations. (2023, August 8). *Fast facts - what is sustainable development? - United Nations sustainable development*. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2023/08/what-is-sustainable-development/>

² World Commission on Environment and Development. (n.d.). *UN Documents: Gathering a body of global agreements*. Our common future, Chapter 2: Towards Sustainable Development - A/42/427 Annex, Chapter 2 - UN documents: Gathering a body of global agreements. <http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-02.htm>

³ "High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development." 2024. Un.org. 2024. <https://hlpf.un.org/home>

⁴ Institutional arrangements to follow up the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development : resolution / adopted by the General Assembly. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/159123?v=pdf>

⁵ Agenda 21, the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21 and the outcomes of the World Summit on Sustainable Development and of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development <https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=A%2FRES%2F67%2F203&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False>

⁶ United Nations. 2014. "United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, Rio+20 .. Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform." Un.org. 2014. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/rio20>

Over the years, the HLPF has brought together high-level representatives of governments, as well as private experts; including the heads of several UN entities and representatives from other groups. By fostering cross-sectoral collaboration, the HLPF is able to address complex, interconnected issues such as climate change, inequality, and sustainable economic growth. The HLPF meets every four years under the General Assembly and annually under ECOSOC. They hope to work with others to create a future that is fitting for the people across the globe and establish peace.

Despite affirmed pledges, there is concern about the timeliness of progress made towards the 2030 Agenda. Multiple factors have been at play that have slowed potential progress: lingering COVID-19 impacts, conflicts, and climate change, among others. Past reports have echoed the same sentiment—these concerns made it clear that actions must be taken to ensure the HLPF meets the deadline. So, how does the United Nations review the progress that has been made, and along with it, improve upon previous efforts?

Reviewing the 2024 HLPF Report

There is some good news regarding the 2024 HLPF report, a sign that there is progress actively being made. Both infant mortality rates and HIV infections have continued to decrease, and there is an increased investment into improving sanitation and access to water as an energy source. Additionally, individual states have been working towards pursuing SDG transformation with determination and are making progress. Goals One and Seven—Eliminating Poverty and Affordable Clean Energy—have shown to be the most consistent regarding the moderate progress that has been made. What’s more is that governments are determined to remain united behind the 2030 Agenda and work with UN agencies to make it happen.

Despite this good news, the 2024 SDG report revealed that progress has “ground to a halt” or been reversed across several fronts. In the area of climate and biodiversity—despite some reductions in greenhouse gas emissions—greenhouse gas concentrations hit record highs in 2022, with real-time data indicating a continued rise. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict is in its third year (as of previous report), and there is contention regarding the conflicts in Gaza. The consequences of both of these conflicts set back progress on all 17 SDGs. Between 2022 and 2023, civilian casualties in armed conflict increased by 72%. Labor markets have shown resilience, but due to uneven pandemic recovery and declining protections of labor rights, the report foresees a worsening labor market, with higher unemployment ⁷.

The HLPF has not only made significant strides in fostering dialogue and reviewing progress, it also illuminated the critical need for intensified efforts and innovative solutions to meet the 2030 targets. The HLPF provides an essential platform for addressing the critical challenges of advancing the 2030 Agenda amidst global crises, and it has shown that through collaborative efforts that there is a possibility that the SDGs can be attainable.

⁷ General Assembly Economic and Social Council. 2024. “Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.” United Nations.

Barriers to Progress

The UN Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are two of the most significant voluntary initiatives the UN has made within the last two decades. They were adopted by all 193 countries of the UN General Assembly meaning they should be the goals of all nations. Initially, the HLPF was created to increase transparency between countries by reviewing each other's progress made towards the goals. It does this through the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), which encourage member states to "conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels, which are country-led and country-driven"⁸. Additionally, these reports would be updated regularly to reflect the lessons learned from the HLPF⁹. The VNRs are a soft accountability and progress monitoring mechanism. This allows member states to conduct their own research and review their standing without infringing on national sovereignty. Through these VNRs, the HLPF is able to view the progress made, determine global standing, and better understand the impediments to Sustainable Development.

Voluntary Action

The nature of VNRs is that they are voluntary, and without the data input the HLPF cannot accurately review progress and where more help is needed, but that does not mean they should not review low information cases at all. The UN Secretary-General recommended that member states should have at least two submissions of VNRs within the fifteen-year timeframe and most countries have met or are on their way to that goal. Only 5 states, Haiti, Myanmar, South Sudan, and Yemen, have not yet presented a VNR to the UN since the foundation of the HLPF in 2016¹⁰. Despite the fact that there is still time, it is important to consider how the HLPF can support those most behind. What can be learned from their situations and seeing if there are countries who were in similar situations in the past that can offer advice.

Conflict and Funding

Sustainable development is a complex matter and often seems secondary to addressing regional instability and geopolitical conflicts; however, these two issues actually go hand in hand. One of the key benefits of the SDGs is increased human stability and security, thus reducing likelihood of internal conflicts over scarce resources. It is also cheaper in the long term to develop sustainable long lasting infrastructure than it is to have ongoing fights for other's resources. Unfortunately, long term thinking and willingness to cooperate globally through the UN has been a challenge, specifically in the sector of finance¹¹. Conflicts also create debt and short-term liquidity problems that make international financing hesitant to invest. Motivating

⁸ ("Voluntary National Reviews | High-Level Political Forum," n.d.)

⁹ "Secretary General's Voluntary Common Reporting Guidelines for VRNs" | n.d. United Nations.

¹⁰ Hub, IISD's SDG Knowledge. 2022. "Five Countries yet to Conduct Voluntary National Review | News | SDG Knowledge Hub | IISD." SDG KNOWLEDGE HUB. March 24, 2022. <https://sdg.iisd.org/news/five-countries-yet-to-conduct-voluntary-national-review/>

¹¹ Reuters Staff. 2024. "World Falling behind on Environment, Health and Hunger Goals, UN Report Says." *Reuters*, June 17, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/world-falling-behind-environment-health-hunger-goals-un-report-says-2024-06-17/>

global financing to be more resilient to short term shocks and consider long term returns will be challenging, but is necessary for accelerating progress on the SDGs.

Covid

Many improvements were observed in the early years of the HLPF, poverty started a historic decline between 2015-2018, falling globally from 10.1% at the beginning of 2015 to 8.6% in 2018.¹² However, COVID-19 significantly set back progress in almost every sector and the wake of the pandemic still has many countries today. In Ethiopia, COVID-19 affected all sectors directly or indirectly, but healthcare was especially impacted. The early spread of the virus posed a challenge to Ethiopian human health management, facility utilization, and medical supply management¹³. The COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to the direct disease burden, posed a significant risk of indirect mortality from other preventable diseases as a result of essential health services disruptions¹⁴. Due to the strain COVID-19 placed on healthcare workers, other healthcare services failed.

In other areas COVID-19 affected job stability, the quarantines resulted in mass layoffs that left millions unemployed. Unfortunately, some of the hardest hit were those working low-income jobs and the informal economy—referring to workers and economic units that are not covered by formal arrangements—pushing thousands into poverty¹⁵. The global poverty rate increased from a rate of 7.8% to 9.1% in 2020. While this number is lower than it was when the 2030 Agenda was created, this increase has exacerbated debt-burdens across the world. Many low and middle income countries (LMICs) faced mounting debt after they borrowed to finance pandemic relief. With the pandemic sequestering people into quarantine, global education faltered. School closures disproportionately impacted marginalized communities, deepening disparities in education attainment and literacy rates. Some schools shifted to online learning, but families who lived in rural areas or those who did not have access to technology were left behind.

In addition to health, economic, and educational divides, social inequalities affecting women rose. In LMICs, one of the biggest sectors of their GDP is the informal economy, which is a mainly female-dominated field. Women make up 80% of domestic workers globally, and 72% of them lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic.¹⁶ Women-owned businesses and female

¹² Swarna, N. R., Anjum, I., Hamid, N. N., Rabbi, G. A., Islam, T., Evana, E. T., Islam, N., Rayhan, M. I., Morshed, K., & Md. Juel Miah, A. S. (2021). Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on the informal sector workers in Bangladesh. *PLoS ONE*, 17(3). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0266014>

¹³ Haileamlak, Abraham. 2021. "The Impact of COVID-19 on Health and Health Systems." *Ethiopian Journal of Health Sciences* 31 (6): 1073–74. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8968362/>

¹⁴ Department of Health and Social Care, Office for National Statistics, Government Actuary's Department and Home Office. n.d. "Direct and Indirect Impacts of COVID-19 on Excess Deaths and Morbidity: Executive Summary." Accessed January 21, 2025. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/907616/s0650-direct-indirect-impacts-covid-19-excess-deaths-morbidity-sage-48.pdf.

¹⁵ International Labour Organization. 2024. "Informal Economy | International Labour Organization." www.ilo.org. January 28, 2024. <https://www.ilo.org/projects-and-partnerships/projects/partnership-improving-prospects-forcibly-displaced-persons-and-host-themes/informal-economy>

¹⁶ "COVID-19 BRIEF: Impact on Women and Girls," U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, <https://www.usglc.org/coronavirus/women-and-girls/#:~:text=In%20fact%2C%20women%20make%20up,the%20pandemic%20in%20March%202020.>

entrepreneurs faced greater challenges in accessing capital and sustaining operations during the crisis, and as the world shut down, everyone was forced to remain home. Many young girls who were in school were forced to drop out due to caregiving responsibilities, enabling vulnerable girls to be pressured into marriage. It has been estimated that due to the pandemic an additional 13 million child marriages occurred in 2020¹⁷. Violence against women is a prevalent issue across the globe: unfortunately the lockdown has made it more challenging for victims to report their abuse because they were confined with their abusers at home. China saw three times the amount of domestic abuse cases during lockdown, and several states in the United States recorded a 21%–35% surge in domestic violence incidents. Spain witnessed a 700% increase in women calling essential support services, and in Iran almost 35.2% of pregnant women experienced domestic abuse at the hands of their spouse.¹⁸

The pandemic impacted nearly every aspect of daily life and has thus set back every one of the SDGs. Sustainable Development is resilient development and must be how we build back from COVID-19 and the pandemic. We must act quickly to prevent these effects from exacerbating inequalities and leaving all countries with little resilience to future crises.

Opportunities for Progress

Despite these barriers, the 2030 Agenda is still possible by looking beyond small incremental changes. The world requires deep, sustained, and nonlinear changes to its current social and economic structures, called transformations. Transformations are quite common in the modern era due to the rapid emergence of new technologies causing new human behavior patterns; however, they are not just caused by market forces. The Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) 2023, commissioned by the SDG Knowledge Hub, provides a framework for transformation for policymakers, emphasizing an optimistic view that if a SDG can make it past initial impediments and levers of change are used to multiply their force, that goal can reach a tipping point where it becomes a transformation.¹⁹

Impediments are the barriers to progress discussed in the previous section. Levers of change are key interventions that can be used to effectively implement, even in the face of barriers. The GSDR categorizes five policy levers: Governance levers, Economy and Financial Levers, Science and Technology Levers, Individual and Collective Action Levers, and Capacity-Building Levers.²⁰ These levers are then implemented in three different stages:

¹⁷ UNFPA, with contributions from Avenir Health, Johns Hopkins University (USA) and Victoria University (Australia). 2020. “Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Planning and Ending Gender-Based Violence, Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage.” *United Nations Population Fund*. UNFPA.

<https://www.unfpa.org/resources/impact-covid-19-pandemic-family-planning-and-ending-gender-based-violence-female-genital>.

¹⁸ Priya Dharishini Kunasagan, Khalid Mokti, Mohd Yusof Ibrahim, Abdul Rahim, Freddie Robinson, Adora J Muyou, Sheila Miriam Mujin, et al. 2023. “The Global Landscape of Domestic Violence against Women during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Narrative Review.” *Korean Journal of Family Medicine* 45 (1). <https://doi.org/10.4082/kjfm.23.0084>

¹⁹Jungcurt, S. (2024, November 20). *Yes, you can manage transformations for sustainable development!*. SDG Knowledge Hub. <https://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/policy-briefs/yes-you-can-manage-transformations-for-sustainable-development/>

²⁰ UN General Assembly. (1993, January 29). *Institutional arrangements to follow up the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development* .: United Nations. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/159123?v=pdf>

Emergence, Acceleration, and Stabilization. Determining which stage an issue is at and what kind of lever is needed is critical towards creating actionable change.

Leverage of changes are not limited to the highest levels of government, it is actually key that interventions are introduced to local level policymakers as well. A whole-of-society approach that aims to lift everyone up is not only effective for consensus building, but necessary for the success of the SDGs.

Addressing Global Insecurities at a Local Level

Addressing global insecurities at a local level requires a delicate balance between global initiatives and grassroots action.²¹ People are often overwhelmed by the scale of issues like climate change, economic instability, and social inequality, which can lead to feelings of fear and stress. To bridge this gap, it is essential to translate the UN HLPF goals into actionable, relatable steps that resonate with local communities. Clear, empathetic, and inclusive communication is key. Using straightforward language that highlights the immediate benefits and tangible impacts of these goals can help convey their urgency without causing fatigue.²² By showcasing local success stories and emphasizing the shared responsibility and potential for positive change, we can inspire community involvement and foster a sense of collective purpose. This approach not only aligns with the HLPF objectives but also empowers individuals to contribute to global security from their own neighborhoods, creating a ripple effect of resilience and progress.

Case Study: Approaching SDG Goal 16

First let us observe the key aspects of Goal 16.

1. **Peaceful Societies:** Aiming to reduce all forms of violence and related death rates. This includes measures to prevent conflicts, protect vulnerable populations, and foster social cohesion.
2. **Access to Justice:** Ensuring that everyone has equal access to justice. This involves eliminating discrimination, providing legal aid, and ensuring fair treatment under the law.
3. **Strong Institutions:** Building transparent, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels of governance. This includes efforts to combat corruption, promote transparency, and ensure public access to information.

These statements are entry points to the issues, high level areas that will interact and intersect with other SDGs. They can each be broken down into smaller issues to be addressed more specifically. For example, some parts of Strengthening Institutions for Peace and Sustainable Development would be:

²¹Bullock, D., & Sanchez, R. (2021, October 11). *What's the best way to communicate on a global team?* Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2021/03/whats-the-best-way-to-communicate-on-a-global-team>

²²*Integrated Sustainability Action Plan (ISAP): Technical report.* Integrated Sustainability Action Plan. (2019, April). https://cms5.revize.com/revize/stpete/Residents/Sustainability/Plans%20and%20Policies/ISAP%20Technical%20Report_FINAL_PART1-Main_Report-April_2019_webview.pdf

1. **Enforcing Rule of Law:** Enhance the rule of law by improving the legal framework and ensuring fair and impartial justice systems. This includes providing training for law enforcement and judicial personnel and promoting human rights.
2. **Combating Corruption:** Implement anti-corruption measures, such as transparency initiatives, whistleblower protections, and independent oversight bodies. Encourage public participation in governance to ensure accountability.
3. **Inclusive Governance:** Promote inclusive governance by ensuring that all segments of society, including marginalized groups, have a voice in decision-making processes. This can be achieved through inclusive policies, participatory budgeting, and community engagement.
4. **Conflict Resolution:** Invest in conflict resolution and peacebuilding initiatives. This includes supporting dialogue and reconciliation processes, addressing root causes of conflict, and providing platforms for peaceful dispute resolution.
5. **Strengthening Civil Society:** Empower civil society organizations to play a role in monitoring and advocating for peace, justice, and strong institutions. Provide funding and resources to support their activities.
6. **Capacity Building:** Build the capacity of institutions to effectively implement and enforce laws, policies, and regulations. This includes training government officials, improving infrastructure, and leveraging technology for better governance.

Now that we have some specific issues we can observe how some countries have tried to tackle them in a transformative way, directly involving citizens in policies that work towards the SDG.

1. **France:** has been actively working towards SDG Goal 16 by promoting peace, justice, and strong institutions. One notable initiative is the "I Paid A Bribe" platform, which allows citizens to report instances of corruption and bribery. This initiative helps to combat corruption by increasing transparency and accountability.²³
2. **India:** The "I Paid A Bribe" platform is also used in India to tackle corruption by allowing citizens to report and share their experiences with bribery. This helps to identify patterns and push for better governance systems.
3. **Uganda:** Barefoot Law is an initiative that uses technology to provide legal information and services to marginalized communities. This helps to ensure equal access to justice and promotes the rule of law.
4. **Brazil:** Participatory budgeting in Brazil allows citizens to have a say in how public funds are allocated. This promotes inclusive decision-making and strengthens democratic institutions.
5. **Palestine:** The '100 Days Campaign of Government Accountability' was launched by the Palestinian Consultative Staff for Developing NGOs in cooperation with various civil

²³Haeri, K., Touanssa, M., & Briand, C. (2024). *Bribery and corruption laws and Regulations 2025: France*. GLI. <https://www.globallegalinsights.com/practice-areas/bribery-and-corruption-laws-and-regulations/france/>

society organizations. This campaign aimed to increase government transparency and accountability by encouraging active participation from the community.

Conclusion

The HLPF is a critical platform for advancing the SDGs and for fostering global cooperation. While notable successes have been achieved, the forum highlighted persistent gaps in financing, capacity-building, and systemic reform. Moving forward, fostering global solidarity and scaling proven solutions will be critical to achieving the 2030 Agenda. While in committee, delegates should be focusing on how to navigate post-pandemic resilience strategies, strengthen mechanisms of engagement for marginalized groups, and find innovative solutions towards financing and monitoring.

Guided Questions

1. What is your country's position on the HLPF?
2. Have you reviewed your country's VNR and what is its current standing?
3. What steps has your country taken within its own borders towards fostering better sustainable development? What are the potential challenges that get in the way of success?
4. In what ways have potential challenges hindered development? Has there been any improvement towards remedying the issues?
5. What lessons can be learned from the 2024 HLPF and SDG reports? How can your country implement some possible solutions?

Resource Review

- [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development \(2016\)](#): This document details the seventeen SDGs and their targets
- [The Future We Want \(2012\)](#): This document was the outcome of the 2012 Rio conference on sustainable development. There the UN reaffirmed global commitments and establishes a new set of goals as well as the HLPF
- [2024 Report on Sustainable Development \(2024\)](#): The annual report brought forth by the UN to discuss progress made towards sustainable development. Here it will show global standing as well as key statistics.
- [The SDG Transformation Center](#): The SDGA Transformation Center is a flagship program of the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN). It focuses on accelerating the achievement of the SDGs through innovative solutions, partnerships, and capacity-building initiatives.