## UN Reforms for the 2030 Agenda: An interim assessment of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) and its current Review

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*Marianne Beisheim (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin)*

The High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) is currently at the heart of the UN's sustainable development governance. While some presume the HLPF to be just another "empty institution" (Dimitrov 2019), other scholars focus on the HLPF's potential as an orchestrator (Bernstein 2013; Abbott & Bernstein 2015; see also Klingebiel & Paulo 2015; Boas, Biermann & Kanie 2016; Bernstein 2017) or its actual performance, also but not only as an *orchestrator* (Beisheim 2018; Fritzsche 2020; van Driel, ongoing research). Examining the HLPF as an orchestrator appears to be an appropriate approach as the HLPF's work indeed qualifies as non-hierarchical and indirect orchestration. It must however be recalled that the UN resolution on the HLPF's mandate, format and organizational aspects, calls for the HLPF to provide "*political leadership, guidance and recommendations*" (UNGA 2013, para. 2), for implementing the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNGA 2015). The envisioned recommendations are supposed to guide the UN system, the efforts of UN member states, and other actors involved in implementing the SDGs, such as for example companies, civil society groups, or municipalities. The HLPF, however, risks failing in this task (and others) as its mandate is not unambiguously stated (my main argument here), and concurrently the HLPF is also not adequately equipped to fulfil its tasks.

The nature of the HLPF and its role as a "governor" has been a controversial and highly politicized issue from the very beginning. This paper claims that this unresolved quarrel hampered the work of the HLPF during its first four-year cycle (2016-19) and it continues to do so, now again in the context of the Review of the HLPF's format and organizational aspects, i. e. the ongoing UN negotiations on a new modalities resolution. These negotiations have been slow and difficult from the beginning. Challenges ensuing from the crisis of multilateralism, in combination with the Covid-19 pandemic, have more or less stalled negotiations, which are, as of now, likely to be postponed to the 75th General Assembly. The paper aims to provide an interim assessment of the HLPF, with a focus on (1) the initial and persistent conflicts about the HLPF's mandate and format, (2) in how

far political leadership, guidance, and recommendations are generated in the current set up of the HLPF, and (3) how conflicts and challenges in this regard reappear again in the ongoing negotiations on the HLPF's future format and organizational aspects.

## *(1) The "hlpf"'s history*

The HLPF was born in 2012, when, during the Rio+20 conference, UN member states discussed the "institutional framework for sustainable development" (Beisheim, Lode & Simon 2012b). After long debates, it was decided to transform the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) into a "high-level political forum" (UNGA 2012). At the time, however, UN member states could not even agree on a name for the new entity, so "hlpf" (in small letters) was used as a *placeholder*. In contrast to this, before the Rio+20 conference, bolder ideas had been discussed, e.g. for a Sustainable Development Council (Strandenaes 2012; Beisheim, Lode & Simon 2012a), which could have been modelled after the Human Rights Council. However, no consensus on upgrading the CSD in such a way could be reached. The outcome document only states that the HLPF shall be provided with a universal membership structure and it mentions some of its possible functions, while its tasks are only described in vague terms. Just before the conclusion of negotiations, the wording of this paragraph (UNGA 2012, para 85), which had originally read that the forum "will" take on this role, was modified to the less stringent "could":

> "The high-level forum *could* [my own italics]:
> (a) Provide political leadership, guidance and recommendations for sustainable development; (…)
> (c) Provide a dynamic platform for regular dialogue, and for stocktaking and agenda setting to advance sustainable development; (…)
> (e) Follow up and review progress in the implementation of sustainable development commitments (…)
> (g) Improve cooperation and coordination within the United Nations system on sustainable development programmes and policies;
> (h) Promote transparency and implementation through further enhancing the consultative role and participation of major groups and other relevant stakeholders at the international level in order to better make use of their expertise, while retaining the intergovernmental nature of discussions;
> (i) Promote the sharing of best practices and experiences relating to the implementation of sustainable development and, on a voluntary basis, facilitate sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned;
> (j) Promote system-wide coherence and coordination of sustainable development policies;
> (…)".

Furthermore, the references to a peer review process had been withdrawn from the text altogether. Again, the aversion of many countries to opening themselves up to any kind of international oversight became apparent. Many countries reject "supervisory agencies" that monitor them and that could potentially impede their development or their "way of life". Other countries support multilateral action with their words but do not want to

contribute additional funds to the UN and, for this reason, reject upgrading institutions or introducing more elaborate procedures (with additional meeting days etc.). At Rio+20, this unholy coalition became a winning coalition – preventing bold reform steps.

Hence, at the end of the Rio+20 conference, there was no common and clear understanding regarding the quality of the new forum: Should it be just a 'platform' or should it be more than that, and if so, how? The wording in the document was ambiguous enough to allow for interpretation and, thus, allow for consensus. Member states decided to postpone the issue and "to launch an intergovernmental as well as open, transparent and inclusive negotiation process under the General Assembly to define the format and organizational aspects of the high-level forum" (UNGA 2012, para 86).

To prepare for this, UN-DESA (the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs) invited UN member states and experts for informal discussions in New York in early 2013. During several informal rounds, elements of a modalities resolution were discussed. At the time, by the way, Steven Bernstein (2013, p. 10) wrote a paper commissioned by UN-DESA and suggested that the HLPF would have great potential as an orchestrator, "that can provide leadership, guidance, knowledge, and political authority, but largely work through or in cooperation with intermediaries to build coherence and integration across the system and at multiple levels". After formal intergovernmental negotiations had concluded, the UN General Assembly adopted resolution 67/290 in July 2013 (UNGA 2013). This and following resolutions on the HLPF do indeed have some good wording, suggesting a potential orchestrating role by the HLPF, but some key issues have remained unresolved.

(a) It starts with the *name*: just as the Rio+20 document, the resolution speaks of "a universal, intergovernmental high-level political forum" – still in small letters. Even though, by now, everyone uses HLPF as the regular name – this illustrates the underlying conflict about the *role and authority* of the forum.
In this regard, one of the conflicts at the time was whether the new forum should remain *under ECOSOC* (where the CSD was positioned) or rather be situated under the UNGA (like the HRC after its upgrade from the Commission on Human Rights in 2006). The compromise was a hybrid model: every year the new forum with universal (!) membership would meet "under the auspices" of ECOSOC in July, and, in addition to that, every four years it would also come together "under the auspices of the General Assembly" at the level of Heads of State and Government in September. The underlying concern in this context was that the new forum – that some UN member states envisioned as an "apex" institution (see Strandenaes 2015) – would take away authority from the ECOSOC as a Charter body and a "principal organ in the integrated and coordinated follow-up of the outcomes of all major UN conferences" (as explicitly stated in UNGA 2013, preamble) in the field of economic, social and environmental issues. Some UN member states, therefore, wanted to keep the HLPF 'small', and thereby avoid that the new forum would challenge the ECOSOC's 'turf'.

It was also decided that the HLPF should not have its own *Bureau* (that usually consists of one member state from each of the UN's five regional groups). Rather, the HLPF has to rely on the ECOSOC Presidency and Bureau. This conflict became again visible, for example, when there was discussion whether the HLPF's documents should have their own symbol or would need to use ECOSOC symbols (it is now E/HLPF/year/#).

Last but not least, this conflict over the role and authority of the HLPF also had implications for its *budget*. The resolution only transfers the CSD's voluntary trust fund to the HLPF (UNGA 2013, para. 24) but does not specify any other additional budgetary measures. Moreover, *secretarial* support stems from existing structures: The CSD's secretariat, UN-DESA's Division on Sustainable Development, supported the annual HLPF between 2013 and 2018. Since early 2018, in the context of reforms demanded by UN member states, UN-DESA's new "Office of Intergovernmental Support and Coordination for Sustainable Development" (the former ECOSOC support office) organizes the forum, while the renewed Division on Sustainable Development Goals focuses on providing substantive support and capacity building regarding the SDGs and related thematic issues.

(b) UN member states also debated the *output* of the HLPF. They decided that the HLPF's outcome documents should be *negotiated declarations*, i.e. a Ministerial Declaration every year and a Political Declaration every four years (UNGA 2013, para. 6d and 7g). This gives the New York UN missions a high-level of *control* over the documents because they run these negotiations, in a routine manner. After the HLPF adopts the Ministerial Declaration, it still needs to get adopted during the ECOSOC's High-level Segment before it becomes part of the ECOSOC report to the General Assembly. Every four years, the Political Declaration is to be submitted *directly* for the consideration of the General Assembly. That was another compromise, stemming from the chosen 'hybrid' model of the HLPF taking place under the auspices of the two UN-bodies. But, more importantly, the *relevance* of these declarations is not clear as there is no visible follow-up. Since the declarations are pre-negotiated by the New York UN missions and later adopted without any changes at the end of the HLPF meeting, the value added to the work of the General Assembly's second committee and beyond is unclear.

(c) From the start, there have been proposals that the HLPF should also incorporate *reviews* (Beisheim 2013, 2014, 2015; Halle, Najam & Wolfe 2014). The format of the HLPF's review mechanism became another field for conflict. Many UN member states feared "finger pointing" and that peer reviews would be too "prescriptive" (Beisheim 2015). In the end, as a successor of the ECOSOC's Annual Ministerial Reviews (on the subject of the MDG's implementation), UN member states settled for *voluntary, state-led* reviews that would start in 2016 (when the Post-2015 Agenda and SDGs had been adopted). In 2015, the 2030 Agenda (UNGA 2015) defined the principles and format of this rather soft peer-learning mechanism. And after the first round of *Voluntary National Reviews* (VNRs) in July 2016, UN member states specified more details in Res. 70/299 (UNGA 2016). The wording, however, allows for broad interpretation; opening clauses leave it to the UN member states to decide how to produce their VNRs.

Moreover, there were also the usual battles around what *other processes* should feed into the HLPF and its reviews (like Financing for Development or the 10-year framework of programmes for sustainable consumption and production) and what groups of "*most vulnerable countries*" should have extra slots to discuss their specific challenges (like LDCs, SIDS, LLDCs etc.). While the resolutions did specify that these issues should be addressed by the HLPF, they did not determine *how* this is to be achieved in a meaningful way. The same applies to the *Thematic and SDG Reviews*, as only themes and clusters were agreed upon, foreseeing that these goals and their interlinkages should be reviewed in-depth, while the operational details were left open (UNGA 2016, para. 3-4).

(d) Another area of conflict has been the *role and access of non-state actors*. Civil society groups had asked for institutionalized ways of meaningful participation in the HLPF, linked to a strong accountability mechanism, with UN member states as duty bearers and citizens as rights holders. Resolution 67/290 has comparatively good wording on participation on non-state actors (UNGA 2013, para 14-16; see also Strandenaes 2014). UN member states decided, that "the representatives of the major groups and other relevant stakeholders shall be allowed: (a) To attend all official meetings of the forum; (b) To have access to all official information and documents; (c) To intervene in official meetings; (d) To submit documents and present written and oral contributions; (e) To make recommendations; (f) To organize side events and round tables, in cooperation with Member States and the Secretariat" – but all this "while retaining the intergovernmental character of the forum" (UNGA 2013, para 15). This compromise formula already indicates the contestation that has been surrounding the issue of involving non-state actors from the beginning.

### *(2) The HLPF's current working methods and practices to provide leadership*

While the negotiations of the SDGs brought about institutional innovations (Chasek & Wagner 2016; Dodds et al. 2016; Kamau et al. 2018), the HLPF itself struggles to become and remain stronger than its predecessor, the CSD. Succeeding the global goal-setting in 2015, the HLPF's major task has been the "follow-up and review" of SDG implementation. This has been done through a multitude of reports feeding into the HLPF (like, for example, the UN Secretary General's SDG Report), through Thematic and SDG Review panels, and a growing number of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) presented each year.[2] These reviews are implemented as a rather soft peer-learning mechanism (Beisheim 2018; Bexell & Jönsson 2019; Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen, Dahl & Persson 2018).

The *preparatory processes* for the annual HLPF is where most of the orchestration efforts can be observed. Most of this is done (not so much by "the HLPF" but) by UN-DESA together with the ECOSOC Presidency and Bureau. In practice, it is these people who draft and establish the program of the HLPF, while also being involved in the composition and

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[2] For a more detailed mid-term review of the HLPF's working methods and practices see Beisheim (2018).

direction of panel discussions during the HLPF, e.g. by producing background papers for the Thematic and SDG Reviews. Aside from this, UN-DESA has some space to run and orchestrate these processes but it is always at a stretch, both because of UN member states' attempts to keep control and oversight, and their unwillingness to fund UN-DESA's activities properly. This limits the HLPF's de facto ability to orchestrate (Fritzsche 2020). Moreover, UN-DESA's preparatory efforts not always "fruition" in the HLPF's panels. The composition of the panels is often quota- (and vanity-) driven and panelists tend to ride their hobby horses. Moreover, the "interactive discussion" among UN member states and others (that follows the panel presentations) is often neither well attended nor well used. Instead, UN member states either read out their general prepared statements or send low-ranking delegates to sit in the chair and take notes. The high-ranking delegates rather prefer to attend bi-laterals with their counterparts or other meetings taking place aside from the official HLPF proceedings. This again shows that the HLPF is indeed rather seen and attended by many as a meeting and marketplace – a platform – i. e. not a body that takes relevant decisions in the plenary sessions.

*Formally*, "political leadership, guidance and recommendations" are to be achieved through an inter-governmentally negotiated *Ministerial Declaration* when the HLPF meets every year under the auspices of ECOSOC and a *Political Declaration* when it meets under the auspices of the GA. The HLPF's mandate speaks of an "action-oriented agenda" (UNGA 2013, para. 2). But the Ministerial Declaration cannot feature actionable recommendations that are based on the HLPF's reviews and findings, as the document is negotiated *before* the HLPF. This is done by the New Yorker UN missions, which means these negotiations are deeply entrenched in group dynamics and are affected by the typical conflicts around wording on politically contentious issues (like the right to self-determination of peoples living under colonial and foreign occupation, sexual and reproductive health and rights, common but differentiated responsibilities, human rights issues, recently also the multilateral trade and climate regime). In the end, since the HLPF is supposed to reach consensus (ibid., para. 5), the declarations use "agreed language" with typical compromise wording and mirror the lowest common denominator of UN member states' interests. Unfortunately, this kind of output will not bring about suitable recommendations for the transformative change that the 2030 Agenda calls for and that would be needed in this "decade of action and delivery" (launched by the heads of state and government during the 2019 SDG Summit).

Moreover, there is no clear *follow-up* system: The annual Ministerial Declaration gets adopted by ECOSOC and becomes a part of ECOSOC's report to the General Assembly. What happens thereafter remains in the dark. The 2019 Political Declaration had the title "Gearing up for a Decade of Action and Delivery for Sustainable Development". In that declaration, member states committed to a (rather vague) ten-point action plan. To put this action plan into practice, means of implementation and concrete policy guidance would be required. Instead, there is no clear mechanism as to how the UN or member states will work on these ten action points in the coming HLPF cycle. Beyond the

declarations there is only a formal report, purely procedural, and since 2015, the ECOSOC President (supported by UN-DESA) writes up a summary of the HLPF' sessions. That summary draws out general lessons and showcases relevant results. It, however, has no formal role and there is no institutionalized follow-up process, diminishing its status and relevance.

Beyond that formal document and process, "leadership, guidance and recommendations" are also generated through more *informal* peer-to-peer exchanges on "good practices". These "good practices" are identified in both the more formal review processes of the HLPF, and in more informal peer learning formats like special events and side events, labs and learning events, or exhibitions. The time and space for interventions by non-state actors in the official HLPF meetings are extremely limited. Since 2017, non-state observers of the HLPF have even required a secondary pass in addition to the UN Grounds Pass in order to gain access to the conference rooms in the UN building; both are difficult to obtain. Only 30 to 70 seats in the gallery of the negotiation room are available for the more than 2,000 registered non-governmental participants. This is why most of these participants show up in the informal events. These livelier, but at times also somewhat chaotic deliberations are what make up the HLPF's charms – and also a good part of its relevance if government officials and other delegates take innovative ideas back to their home institutions. Nevertheless, to say it once again, the formal outcome document of the HLPF does not build on these processes. The follow-up is left entirely to UN member states' discretion.

### (3) The HLPF Review 2020/21: Old conflict lines reappear

Already in 2013, UN member states agreed to review the "format and organizational aspects" of the HLPF after the first years (UNGA 2013, para 29). In 2016 they decided to conduct this "HLPR Review" during the 74th General Assembly (2019/2020) (UNGA 2016, para. 21). While in 2019 there were a number of informal consultations that produced some ideas,[3] the formal process started in February 2020. In the current political context, given the crisis of multilateralism, it was clear that bold proposals and in-depth reforms would be difficult to realize. Incremental improvements to working methods and practices, however, seemed to be within the realm of possibility (Beisheim 2018, 2020; Beisheim & Bernstein 2020a, 2020b). But negotiations have been slow and difficult from the beginning. When the Covid-19 pandemic caused additional disruptions in March 2020, the negotiations were more or less stalled. They are now likely to be postponed to the 75th General Assembly.

So far, several *conflict lines* have become visible (Beisheim 2020) or, as this paper intends to show, have re-surfaced:

(i) Already in early 2020, it became clear that viewpoints of UN member states diverge as to how *ambitious* the exercise of the HLPF Review should be. Some join the many NGOs

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[3] For a more comprehensive assessment of the proposals discussed early in the context of the HLPF Review see Beisheim 2020.

and call for making the HLPF a more capable body. Others, like the Russian Federation, do not want to discuss any changes in the modalities of the HLPF and the G77 and China stated that they "do not envision a total overhaul of the HLPF" but would like to see "a few adjustments" (statements May 8, 2020). Others do not want to discuss any measures with programme budget implications (PBI).[4] This became (again) relevant as some member states called for additional meeting days to conduct more meaningful reviews.

In that context, another conflict shows up again: In 2018, member states had decided to hold the HLPF Review "in conjunction with" the *Review of ECOSOC* (UNGA 2018). Now, however, there is disagreement as to whether the negotiations should result in a common or separate resolution. In this context, the Russian Federation reiterated that the ECOSOC is the "principal Charter body for coordination, policy review, policy dialogue and recommendations on issues of economic and social development as well as for implementation of the international development goals agreed at major UN conferences and summits in the economic, social, environmental and related fields", whereas "the HLPF is a platform for overseeing follow-up and review of the Agenda 2030 at global level" (quoted from their statement during informal consultations, May 8, 2020). The Russian Federation draws from this that "these mechanisms are of different weight". The G77 and China supported this view in the (latest) round of (virtual) informal consultations on May 8th, 2020. Accordingly, this formula can also be found in the zero draft resolution sent out by the co-facilitators on April 24th, 2020 (PGA 2020). In contrast to this, other UN member states request a stronger alignment of the ECOSOC functional commissions with the HLPF. This pretty much corresponds to the old conflict line from 2013 regarding the role and authority of the HLPF and its relationship to ECOSOC.

(ii) Related to this, the following conflict lines resurge with regard to the modalities of the *Ministerial/Political Declaration:* Generally, many UN member states appear to feel that, in the past, the annual Ministerial Declarations have not been sufficiently action-oriented. However, there are diverging views as to what this means. While some UN member states want to keep the ministerial declaration, others do not support this, because they question its value-added. Some UN member states have advocated for providing only summaries of the annual HLPF, while having a rather short and concise Political Declaration every four years. Others suggest to add voluntary national acceleration commitments in an Annex, so that the declaration becomes more meaningful for the "decade of action and delivery".

(iii) Aside from this, inconclusive issues regarding the *framework for Thematic and SDG Reviews* have re-emerged. Many agree, that the mobilizing power of the individual SDG Reviews needs to be preserved, bringing relevant decision makers from beyond the more narrow sustainable development community to attend the HLPF (thereby adding to its relevance). Nevertheless, referring to the results of the 2019 Global Sustainable

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[4] A PBI is a statement detailing the administrative, financial and programmatic changes that the adoption of a draft resolution would entail. This then has to be dealt with in the UNGA's Fifth Committee.

Development Report (GSDR), many UN member states want to see a strengthened focus on the integrated, indivisible and interlinked nature of the SDGs, on synergies and trade-offs, spillovers and challenges, and overarching principles. Based on these observations UN member states draw diverging conclusions. Some want to continue with the SDG Reviews and terminate the Thematic Reviews, while others want to do the opposite. Among those, some want to keep the Thematic Reviews, but not in the form of a single panel during the HLPF but as an analysis of a cross-cutting theme that runs through all discussions. Especially Mexico has criticized the model of "clustering" individual SDG Reviews each year as too silo-ish. In the context of the "Informal Group of Friends of the VNRs, Follow-up and Review of the HLPF", Mexico tabled a proposal that suggests to use six days of the annual HLPF for Thematic Reviews on all "entry points" outlined in the 2019 GSDR (IGS 2019). Other UN member states fear, however, that having only cross-cutting Thematic Reviews at the HLPF would neither produce in-depth assessments of SDG progress, nor promote very concrete recommendations. The EU, China and others, as of now, would like to keep the reviews of individual SDGs. This clearly shows that, there is appetite for a renewed model that nevertheless preserves the benefits of the old one. The zero draft resolution, tabled by the co-facilitators of the intergovernmental negotiations on May 8th, contains a compromise solution (combining GSDR-inspired cross-cutting themes with a number of focus-SDGs), but no agreement could be reached up until now.

In a way this discussion about the format of the Thematic and SDG Reviews also opened up another Pandora 's Box. More or less implicitly, UN member states again started to discuss a hierarchy of goals: China and the Russian Federation understand eradicating poverty as the paramount overarching global challenge. Other member states want to see other "cross-cutting" SDGs being reviewed on an annual basis, like SDG 5 (Gender) or SDG 16 (Governance). And now, in the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, the debate around "building back better" (United Nations 2015 [Sendai Framework]) is gaining new relevance.


(iii) *The framework for VNRs:* Many UN member states perceive the *limited time* for the VNRs as a major issue. Some member states would like to allocate more time to the VNRs. Some want to give this time especially to high-ranking officials from capitals for *presenting* the reports. Yet again others would like to allocate more time to the interactive *debate* of the VNR results (rather than more time for presentations), also giving more time to non-state actors (the Major Groups and other Stakeholders) to comment.
What is more important for the argument here: there seems to be less interest in the question of how to improve the *quality* of the VNRs. In this context, there is again disagreement about the role of the voluntary guidelines for the VNRs. A few member states want to further develop these into a template, but others, like the G77 and China, resist any standardization of country reports. The Russian Federation, for example, gives the above reasoning on the HLPF's limited mandate as an explanation why the HLPF's VNRs are 'naturally' of a different (i. e. lower) quality than other ones. G77 and China support them in wanting the HLPF to mainly focus on the *global* dimension of SDG

implementation (and not interfere with national-level activities). The US joins them in claiming that the HLPF's VNRs are no accountability mechanism. NGOs have the opposite position, asking for more accountability and for tougher peer reviews that follow the model of the Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights Council (see, for example, Adams 2019; Forus 2019; Action for Sustainable Development et al. 2019; Marmo 2019). The academic literature claims that institutional design matters for reviews to be effective. Carraro, Conzelmann and Jongen (2019), for example, show in their study of five different peer review mechanisms that institutional factors are relevant for effectively exerting peer pressure, like the specificity of recommendations, the transparency of the reviews, and systems for follow-up and monitoring. The HLPF's reviews and outcome documents do not produce very specific recommendations and there is no systematic follow-up in place. As this paper argues, some UN member states never wanted and still do not want to give the HLPF these institutional powers. And, most likely, others hide behind them.

(iv) *Stakeholder participation*: Despite the positive wording in resolution 67/290 (see above), Russia and the G77 and China now bring up the so-called „no-objection" procedure whereby non-state actors shall be barred from participating if a single UN member state objects. The same dispute is already very present in the Human Rights arena in Geneva, and more and more also at UN headquarters in New York. In parallel, the already known formula "intergovernmental nature", "member state driven", "state-led" are being brought up again in that context. And just now, the inclusivity of the HLPF Review itself is an issue: While some UN member states, such as the EU and the UK, would like to involve stakeholders more broadly in the discussions, others, such as the Russian Federation or the G77 and China insist on maintaining purely intergovernmental negotiations.

### Discussion & Way forward

In 2018 and 2019, during multiple informal meetings on the upcoming HLPF Review (under Chatham House rule), it was mainly the supporters of a strengthened HLPF that were interested and participated actively in the discussions, shaping them (see the proposals covered in Beisheim 2020). Many participants said they would like to keep the HLPF 'fresh' and relevant and make it more so – for it to become even more of a „spark", as someone described it during an informal retreat, to set off action, investments, and other measures to move the 2030 Agenda forward. During another informal meeting, an Ambassador called the 2030 Agenda a "golden nugget" for multilateralism, proving that the UN is capable of making the world a better place. In the course of the formal intergovernmental negotiations, however, countries that are critical of strengthening the HLPF became more active and, accordingly, pre-existing unresolved conflicts have reappeared. Moreover, the HLPF Review is about to become another victim of the current crisis of multilateralism, the growing strategic rivalry between the US and China and the

many contestations and the politicization of global governance (Kreuder-Sonnen & Zangl 2016; Zürn 2018). In this situation, it is doubtful whether the HLPF and its UN support system will be put in a position to become more than a (rather weak) orchestrator and more than a platform for voluntary and non-binding peer exchange, as some would have interpreted its mandated wording.

On the one hand, over the years, the HLPF has developed its own identity, mainly because of its universal membership in combination with the high level of interest and participation.[5] From the beginning and over time even more so, some UN member states and many NGOs want(ed) more from the HLPF, recalling its mandate to provide political leadership, guidance and recommendations. This has been confirmed by a survey conducted by UN-DESA in 2019: only 38% out of 234 total respondents thought that the HLPF has so far fulfilled its function by providing leadership and guidance best; and 83% find it (most) important that "political guidance and recommendations for follow up" should be covered by the ministerial declaration in the future (UN-DESA 2019).

On the other hand, this analysis about the current format of the HLPF and the course of the negotiations on the HLPF Review shows that there is (again) no consensus on how to carry out and develop the broader institutional architecture of global sustainable development governance. There is no agreement for taking the HLPF towards "hierarchization" (Kim et al 2020), i. e. "beyond simple interplay management and orchestration by more structural change that establishes *hierarchical orders* among institutions and actors in global governance" (Biermann & Kim 2020, p. 9). This is true both for its role vis-à-vis the UN system and the member states or other stakeholders. And, unfortunately: It is not only "the usual suspects" that are the spoilers here. Rather, while many UN member states claim that they want the HLPF to become a high-level forum with universal membership that takes relevant decisions on the future course of action, they are unwilling to provide the powers or the resources that would be necessary for this. This could be called another case of "organized hypocrisy" (Brunsson 1989) due to inconsistent and conflicting norms and demands put on international organizations.

Interestingly enough, even before the HLPF started with reviewing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs, Abbott and Bernstein claimed that there may be a certain minimum level of "authority and resources, below which institutions cannot even orchestrate" (2015, p. 225). This might well be the fate of the HLPF when UN member states cannot agree upon seeing more in the HLPF than a "platform" and to better equip the HLPF with an ambitious, less ambiguous mandate and appropriate resources.

In their work on orchestration, Abbott et al. (2015) use a two-by-two matrix and plot hierarchical vs. non-hierarchical as well as direct vs. indirect modes of governance. As they themselves say, the ensuing governance modes are prototypes; in reality we must rather assume a continuum. For sure, the HLPF would be (and likely stay) on the non-hierarchical (and frequently indirect) side of this scale. Nevertheless, fulfilling the forum's

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[5] 2016: 1500 participants, 2017: 2458 participants, 2018: 2200 participants, 2019: more than 2000 participants (UN-HLPF website).

tasks and providing leadership, guidance and recommendations, would require a governance quality that goes beyond rather weak orchestration. Also, the history of the CSD has shown that a more robust mandate would be useful even if the main governance mode remains orchestration. The CSD's perception of being a "talk shop" undermined its work and ultimately its impact (also see Kaasa 2007; Mittler 2008). The reputation of an institution is important. Hege, Chabason & Barchice (2020, 4) warn that the HLPF may lose "popularity and credibility because of a lack of concrete outcomes" and suggest that the HLPF "should invite inter-governmental bodies to collaborate on joint action plans". However, given the many barriers for cooperation within the UN system (Müller 2010), the HLPF would need an upgrade for successfully exercising such a coordinating role. As this paper has shown, there was and is no consensus on such a role for the HLPF.

Reflecting these results, one could even go so far as to say that the HLPF in its current form – not having its own decision-making structures and an independent voice – does not qualify as a "governor", rather the forum is really only an eight-day meeting. The decisions on the formal output, the ministerial declaration, are taken by the UN member states (here the UN missions' staff). And this main output 'of the HLPF' does not even build on the proceedings of the annual forum. The orchestration work is mainly been executed by UN-DESA, and they depend on the political will of the ECOSOC Presidency and Bureau. Hence, it is them who qualify as orchestrators. At the same time, neither these actors nor 'the HLPF' are in a position that would allow them to 'guide' the UN system. Taken together, the HLPF's procedures (at least the formal ones) are not 'fit for purpose', i. e. to deliver on "political leadership, guidance, and recommendations". Rather, as of now, the HLPF is indeed a 'platform' – for a multitude of actors that may use those eight days to present and informally exchange on 'good practices'.

In June 2020, UN member states will most likely decide to postpone the HLPF Review. As for future developments, it is difficult to say how the Covid-19 driven debate around SDG-sensitive recovery and "build back better" will influence the HLPF's agenda and its fate as an institution. It would be desirable that a strengthened HLPF plays a key role in this, building upon its mandated function to also address "new and emerging sustainable development challenges" (UNGA 2013, para. 18). However, most likely we might (again) see a mix out of
- an unresolved normative dissent, hidden in consensus formula;
- some pragmatic middle-of-the road compromises; and
- many vague formulations of objectives without clear ideas or guidance on how to achieve them, yet again covering unresolved conflict lines.

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