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High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF)

Thomas Hickmann

The High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) was formally established in July 2013 through a resolution of the United Nations General Assembly (United Nations 2013). It is a key outcome of the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The HLPF replaced the earlier Commission on Sustainable Development that was widely seen as being incapable of attracting the attention of high-level policymakers and of fostering concrete actions and policy impact on sustainable development (Abbott and Bernstein 2015). Therefore, the HLPF was endowed with a stronger mandate to provide political leadership for sustainable development, and it was designed as the central platform for the review and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In the annual events of the HLPF at the headquarters of the United Nations in New York, heads of state, ministers and societal stakeholders assess the progress of SDG implementation, and countries submit and present their respective Voluntary National Reviews.

While the HLPF takes a central position in the global governance system to promote SDG implementation in domestic settings, researchers have pointed out that it lacks clear means to hold governments accountable for advancing the SDGs (Beisheim and Fritzsche 2022; Partzsch 2023). First and foremost, the reporting system is essentially a soft governance instrument based on the idea to foster peer-to-peer learning about best or good practices of SDG implementation in national jurisdictions (Bernstein 2017). Governments are free to decide whether they submit Voluntary National Reviews or not and how they formulate their individual reports. While a large number of countries have submitted reports, most reports fail to critically engage with the problems of goal implementation and instead rather showcase single success stories. Civil society actors do not have a strong role in the review and thus cannot act as watchdogs drawing attention to deficiencies and delays in SDG implementation. Growing political conflicts in multilateral settings and limited resources are additional reasons that impede the effectiveness of the HLPF.

Looking ahead, the HLPF could become more impactful if it would evolve into a forum with stronger mechanisms for accountability, potentially incorporating binding commitments or clearer enforcement measures. The forum's inclusivity could be expanded

through larger participation of civil society, local governments and the private sector to ensure that diverse perspectives are reflected in discussions. Finally, integration of digital tools and platforms could help improve transparency and accessibility of the HLPF, making it more responsive to global and regional challenges as they arise. Such ideas to upgrade the HLPF, however, are highly unlikely to materialize, because conflict lines from other areas of global cooperation and fears of governments to be publicly shamed for underperformance continue to block the further development of the HLPF (Beisheim 2021).

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Human rights

Andrea Schapper

Human rights are intersubjectively shared norms and principles to which everyone is entitled by virtue of being human (Schmitz and Sikkink 2013). According to social contract theory, human rights define the relationship between a state government and its citizens. However, we increasingly see other actors governed by human rights and engaged in human rights governance, such as non-governmental actors or multinational corporations (Schmitz and Sikkink 2013). Most human rights are anchored in international or regional legal frameworks and institutions. Within the United Nations (UN) human rights system, there are nine core international human rights instruments and their respective monitoring bodies (OHCHR 2024).

Human rights play a key role in all three dimensions of sustainable development, including economic, social and environmental concerns. The preamble of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development highlights that one objective of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is ‘[...] to realize human rights for all’ (United Nations General Assembly 2015). The Agenda is based on important human rights principles, like non-discrimination and equality. Some SDGs have strong overlaps and synergies with concrete human rights. Examples are zero hunger (SDG 2) and the right to food; good health, well-being (SDG 3) and the right to health; or quality education (SDG 4) and the right to education. Whereas these are mainly economic, social and cultural rights, goals like gender inequality (SDG 5) and reduced inequalities (SDG 10) embrace civil and political rights as well. In addition to