

Reflections on review and accountability at the 2017 HLPF

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(1) VNRs: mind the gap

Is review falling down the gap between national and global levels?

- Does the review happen **before the HLPF**, within a country, with the “findings” of “their review” presented at the HLPF?
- Or, does the review happen “**at the HLPF**”, with what happens before just the “preparations”?

“The following components are suggested as a way to help countries to frame the preparations for voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum, bearing in mind that each country will decide on the scope of their review and the format in which they want to present their findings.” – *UN VNR guidelines*

At the HLPF

- Through VNRs and presentations, states *are* giving “an account” of what they are doing (“narrative accountability”)

But

- Judgement of whether that account is *accurate and adequate* is difficult – how to assess this?
- How much appetite - and capacity - for investigation and dialogue? (so, little “deliberative accountability”)
- Timing, format is against meaningful, interactive review
- Can’t/shouldn’t expect SDG progress report; thematic review to contribute much to more critical review *of countries* (but...)

At the domestic level – “inclusive, participatory” national review?

- As above: standards, appetite, capacity, timing, all issues
- In general, not clear *how much* meaningful national review, *of what, by who*, goes into preparation for a VNR
- Certainly, civil society awareness of VNRs and how to get involved is limited: stakeholder participation in review has been limited
- [Together2030 2017 Perceptions Survey](#):
 - 32% of respondents not aware their country was undertaking a VNR
 - 75% of respondents not aware of the process for preparing the VNR

(2) More, better review of the SDGs: three core features

*(i)reviewers with capacity and willingness for (constructive)
critical investigation and engagement*

- UN system, civil society, parliament, academia, governments themselves, could all be potential candidates
- All likely reviewers face challenges; serious work needed to overcome them
- Data uneven, but it is out there – bringing it to bear is a challenge
- Could any of these play a greater role?

(ii) standards, norms by which to assess

SDGs don't offer clear standards for judgement

- 'aspirational' goals, targets, indicators don't apply, equally, everywhere
- national differentiation is expected and welcome

BUT standards can be established:

Within the SDGs – e.g. “leave no-one behind” – focus on most disadvantaged

Policy coherence, universality (“cherry picking”)

Beyond the SDGs - Human Rights, other global agreements

National contexts – government commitments; national policy debates and “relevance” of SDGs

Data – when it is obviously bad

(iii) A mechanism allowing 'reviewers' to engage with 'reviewees'

Review beyond the HLPF

- National level, before and after HLPF (encouraged, reinforced in guidelines and at HLPF)
- Effective transmission mechanism linking global to national and vice-versa
- The role of parliaments, and of stakeholders (beyond the 'usual suspects'?)
- regional mechanisms and informal networks (less pressure)

Review at the HLPF

- Can the format be (gradually) revisited to ease timing, allow more meaningful scrutiny?
- Can more space (including "virtual" space) be created around the HLPF?
- How does civil society use its space most effectively?

Wider questions:

- How is governance by *global-yet-voluntary, universal-yet-national* goals working? (and what's the place of the HLPF in this architecture?)
- The more review and accountability the better? - *how much* review, *of what*, *by whom*, *at what level*, can this voluntary system stand?
- How does diverse civil society balance its expert, watchdog, representative functions?