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?