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Making follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda effective and inclusive – strengthening the High-Level Political Forum of the United Nations

In 2019, the member states of the United Nations (UN) will take stock of their experience with the UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). The HLPF monitors to what extent the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDGs) are realised at the global level. The HLPF does enjoy a high level of acceptance: By next year, the majority of UN members states will have voluntarily reported on the state of implementation of the Agenda, and many states are represented at the meetings at the ministerial level. Moreover, the HLPF has established itself at the UN level as a network of the state representatives and interest groups on sustainability issues. Still, it is a weak institution: As an exchange forum without decision-making powers, the HLPF cannot take binding decisions on how the pressing global challenges can be met – the rising number of people suffering from hunger, continuing rampant extreme poverty and growing social inequality within many states as well as the impacts of climate change that are becoming more and more apparent. In view of these developments, there is an urgent need to strengthen the HLPF with regard to binding decision-making, reporting and the participation formats.

Strengthening civil society participation in the overall monitoring process

In the framework of the HLPF, the participation of civil society takes place through the UN Major groups, in which civil society organisations registered as stakeholders with the UN Economic and Social Council are active. Here, they can communicate their positions and demands on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the monitoring of the progress to the UN member states in the HLPF. Civil society does not have any say in shaping policies beyond this. Instead, some govern-

ments continue to limit civil society participation in the HLPF, despite the fact that critical-constructive comments on the UN reports, but especially on the Voluntary National Reviews (VNR), by civil society, e.g. in the form of shadow reports, would actually be beneficial. As a watchdog, civil society can enrich the implementation efforts of states with innovative ideas.

We therefore call on the German government to

- support the establishment of a civil society forum, similar to the SDG Business Forum. In this framework, civil society actors can exchange views on the implementation and the monitoring of the Agenda and formulate common demands to the government representatives;
- promote formats in the HLPF framework through which civil society can participate comprehensively and substantially, including through
 - the presentation of the civil society reports on national implementation and/or on the VNR in the framework of the official reporting,
 - a right of the UN Major Groups to ask questions during the presentation of the VNR,
 - substantial participation of the UN Major Groups in the negotiation of the ministerial declaration. In addition, the latter should be negotiated in its final version only during the HLPF so that it can reflect the discussions that took place during the respective HLPF meeting;

- push all UN member states to protect and expand the spaces for civil society participation, also with respect to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In particular, it should use its Partners for Review programme for this purpose;
- comprehensively involve civil society in the drafting of the VNR and push other states, particularly in the framework of Partners for Review, towards such an involvement.

For integrated, high-quality reporting

The HLPF monitors the achievement of the 2030 Agenda goals based on a variety of reports, e.g. by the UN Secretary-General, the UN Statistical Commission and the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Sustainable Development. There are also the thematic reviews on the individual goals of the 2030 Agenda, the VNRs and the reports of the UN regional forums. In addition, the science-based Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) is published every four years. While this plurality of reports impressively illustrates the complexity and the comprehensive efforts of the various actors at all levels, it does not reveal anything about the actual state of the Agenda's implementation. Neither does it provide an overall picture of the core issues of the 2030 Agenda, namely »Leave no one behind«, a coordinated approach and transformation.

The entire reporting lacks an integrated »nexus« approach that stresses the linkages between the SDGs and points out their thematic and political interdependencies. One example of this is the nexus between access to clean drinking water, food security and climate change. Such an approach could allow conflicting goals to be identified and could indicate points to be addressed: Where should policies be better coordinated, how can the goal »Leave no one behind« be approached further?

Moreover, reporting should take place in a significantly closer exchange with the representatives of the UN Major Groups, who represent different stakeholders from civil society. For instance, this could take place in the framework of a UN Multi-

Stakeholder Forum in advance of the official presentation of the reports.

We therefore call on the German government to

- push for high-quality reporting at the HLPF that follows the nexus approach and is more strongly oriented towards the principles of »Leave no one behind«;
- push for a standardized reporting format;
- therefore also prepare its voluntary review in 2021 accordingly;
- lead the way at the HLPF and the SDG summit in 2019 and accordingly design its own side events;
- promote a more interactive reporting process and more space for discussion, which could be achieved e.g. by creating a UN-HLPF Multi-Stakeholder Forum.

Bringing financing issues into the HLPF – critically examining the role of the private sector

The goals of the 2030 Agenda can only be achieved if corresponding financial means are provided. Financing issues should therefore be systematically and prominently discussed also in the framework of the HLPF. So far, this discussion has exclusively taken place in the UN Financing for Development Forum. While the report of the Forum does enter into the consultations of the HLPF, there is no debate on which available funds should be used for individual goals and how, or exactly how additional funds should be mobilised.

The ascription of the role of a financial backer of sustainable development to the private sector must be considered extremely problematic in this context. The trillion that are required for achieving the SDGs according to the World Bank are to be mobilised through its activities. The private sector is now widely deemed to be »the solution« to pressing development issues. This is also reflected in the SDG Business Forum, which holds its meetings in parallel with the HLPF, with the participation of a variety of government and business representatives

and in camera. Critical voices, which are now almost exclusively heard from NGO representatives, question this development: To what extent are there conflicts between profit-oriented business activities of companies and the non-profit goals of the 2030 Agenda? Are public funds, for instance in the areas of basic public services and infrastructure, not a more appropriate financing option? These discussions hardly take place on the HLPF itself. This should change.

We therefore call on the German government to

- push for a collective discussion of implementation and financing issues in the framework of the HLPF;
- initiate an evidence-based discussion at the HLPF level on the role of the private sector, in particular on its contribution to achieving the principle of »Leave no one behind«, i.e. overcoming hunger and poverty as well as social inequality. Respect for human rights as well as minimum social and ecological standards by companies must be placed at the centre of the debate.

Making the 2030 Agenda and the HLPF more widely known in Germany

The 2030 Agenda with its goals and also the HLPF have to become more widely known in Germany, too. High-level expert panels and annual conferences at the federal level can certainly contribute to this. However, these events mainly receive attention

in the expert community but hardly have an impact within the broader population. Relevant target groups should therefore additionally be addressed at the regional and local level in formats suitable for them. Information and Knowledge on sustainability should also be promoted more strongly. The public can also be reached if the German parliament engages with the 2030 Agenda and monitors the progress. The German government should present parliament not only with the Progress Report on the German Sustainable Development Strategy, but also with its voluntary review for the HLPF.

We therefore call on the German government to

- submit the next voluntary review for the HLPF in 2021 to the German parliament for deliberation, sufficiently in advance of the reporting at the UN;
- host an annual national conference in the run-up to the HLPF, at which the implementation of the Agenda in and by Germany is discussed;
- offer regular regional events, e.g. through the RENN network, at which relevant actors in the federal states and municipalities are specifically supported in their efforts to realise the 2030 Agenda;
- offer much more support, also financially, to civil society organisations and initiatives in their political work regarding education and information on the 2030 Agenda.

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