Coherent Governance, the UN and the SDGs

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Key Messages:

1. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) require appropriate institutional support to integrate them effectively into institutions and practices, to coordinate activities, and to mobilize resources for implementation. The High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) can be a lead "orchestrator of orchestrators" towards these ends, but will require high-level participation, innovative modalities for North-South dialogue, and links with "intermediaries" within and outside of the UN.

2. Monitoring and review processes are crucial to ensure accountability, facilitate learning among countries and stakeholders, and incentivize implementation processes. Reviews should be systemic, science-based and multi-dimensional, and focus on commitments and actions of countries, international institutions, and non-state actors and networks. The quadrennial United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) meetings of the HLPF could consider revisions or modifications of the SDGs over time as new knowledge becomes available.

3. State-led mutual review of national sustainable development progress mandated under the HLPF could be organized around common challenges – for example countries coping with megacities or running out of water. Such reviews would provide systemic evaluations rather than focus only on specific goals. International institutions should be reviewed on their progress in mainstreaming SDGs and targets into their work programs or adequately focusing on areas unaddressed by other stakeholders. These reviews should be considered nodes in a wider system of review and accountability.

4. The new Global Sustainable Development Report (a collection of assessments and reviews by UN and other actors), part of the HLPF's mandate to improve the science-policy interface, should not simply collect other reviews, but also bring together knowledge required to fill implementation gaps and identify cause-effect relationships and transition pathways, possibly overseen by a meta-science panel.

5. Governance of the SDGs should be designed to mobilize action and resources at multiple levels and through diverse mixes of government and non-state actors, partnerships, and action networks. This diversity in means of implementation must be balanced by state-led mechanisms to ensure accountability, responsibility, coherence and capacity to incentivize long-term investments for sustainable development.

Coherent Governance

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) should address systemic challenges across economic, social, and ecological dimensions of sustainable development. The first policy brief in this series addressed goal-design requirements to ensure achievement of this purpose. Our recommendations included developing multi-layered, differentiated targets at all governance levels and framing SDGs to bridge gaps among sectoral silos. However, even if the SDGs are fully coherent and adapted to national capacities and circumstances, they will still require appropriate institutional arrangements to integrate this purpose into institutions and practices.

These institutional tasks will be difficult as existing international and non-state organizations tend to focus primarily on their own particular domain, have established ideas about their missions, and might be reluctant to accept governance embedded in the goal-setting process at higher levels. Calls for coordination may even be perceived as threatening. Therefore, successful governance requires not only well-formulated SDGs, but coherent institutional arrangements to provide necessary leadership and legitimacy, coordination and review mechanisms, expertise and capacity-building, and material resources to aid implementation. We offer suggestions along each of these lines.

Leadership and the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

Twenty years of experience suggest that attempts to integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development into global governance systems will require political leadership and an institutional champion to overcome sectoral silos. Lessons can be learned from other recent attempts to mainstream cross-cutting concerns, such as gender, into international institutions. In that case, the consolidation of UN entities concerned with gender equality into UN Women, with political leadership from the Commission on the Status of Women, has successfully fostered gender mainstreaming within internal operations of entities throughout the UN system. UN Women also supports strong accountability mechanisms including UN country team performance indicators and reporting on mainstreaming in program delivery and actual development results (UN 2013a, box 9). In contrast, reforms of interagency mechanisms, such as the creation of the Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) and the UN Delivering as One initiative (to create coherence in program delivery), have made little progress on mainstreaming sustainable development due to a lack of political leadership (Evaluation Management Group 2012). The CEB, for example, is still struggling to implement a UN-wide Environmental and Social Sustainability Framework, which stalled under the leadership of the Environmental Management Group. The Delivering as One pilot-phase report stated that, despite some limited success towards gender equity, the coordination and coherence needed to integrate the delivery of environment and development programs had not occurred. Therefore, it is no surprise that so many calls for integration, implementation and coherence appeared (53, 135 and 25 times respectively) in the Rio+20 outcome document,

The Future We Want, and that they constitute core mandates for the new High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), Rio's main institutional product (UNGA 2012).

The HLPF can be the lead institution to monitor, review, and steer action on the SDGs within the UN system. It will need to strike a balance between requisite political leadership and steering at the global level with the reality that action and resources must be mobilized at multiple levels by a wide range of public and private actors. It must also provide international leadership while promoting country/stakeholder ownership of policies, priorities, and relevant targets.

By design, the HLPF possesses little direct authority or resources. Orchestration is an apt metaphor for the leadership it can thus provide – it can serve as a directorial platform through which states can manage, coordinate and attempt to combine policies coherently. As a governance strategy, Abbott et al. (2014) describe orchestration as working indirectly through intermediary organizations and relying primarily on soft modes of influence to guide and support them. This will not be easy. The HLPF enters a crowded field of existing orchestrators already engaged with the concerns particular SDGs will aim to address (including UN agencies, international financial institutions, the World Trade Organization (WTO), the G-20, and "action networks" such as "Every Woman Every Child" and "Sustainable Energy for All"). It must therefore be an orchestrator of orchestrators that promotes coordination within a fragmented system without igniting counter-productive turf wars or feeding perceptions of competition.

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Lessons learned from the operation of the Commission on Sustainable Development, which the HLPF effectively replaces, suggest three conditions for success (Bäckstrand et al. 2012; Stakeholder Forum 2012; UN 2013b).

First, the HLPF must take advantage of its unique hybrid structure – with universal membership that meets under the UN General Assembly (UNGA) at the head of government level quadrennially and, in other years, under the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) at the ministerial level – to attract world leaders and ministers, not just with environmental or developmental portfolios, but also from the areas of finance, industry and trade.

Second, it must provide a forum to address evolving North-South disagreements over sustainable development while promoting equitable, coherent, and integrated responses. Such issues may become ever more polarized as demands for energy and resources increase in step with population growth and rising consumption. Left unaddressed, these issues may lead countries and private actors to engage in land, water and mineral hoarding, securitize resources, insist on absolute territorial sovereignty, or use financial power to

create resource monopolies.

Third, the HLPF should prioritize the operationalization of policies designed to improve systemic normative and institutional coherence across the UN system, Bretton Woods institutions and the WTO. Examples include finance for development, technology innovation and diffusion, and market access for environmental goods and services. While the HLPF's mandate invites direct dialogue among relevant organizations, it will need to strengthen and bring focus to existing linkages under the CEB and ECOSOC's annual joint sessions or develop new modes of interaction.

Establishing its position and legitimacy early on will be important if the HLPF is to influence ECOSOC, the Development Cooperation Forum, and the UN Development Group, through which delivery and implementation within the UN system is coordinated. The HLPF's influence can then also filter down to specific coordinating mechanisms such as UN-Water, UN-Energy, UN-Oceans, or other interagency mechanisms that might be mandated to address specific SDGs. Similarly, the HLPF could act as a problem-solving forum, providing political direction on inter-institutional impasses that constrain progress on SDGs.

Direct Governance Functions: Science, Monitoring and Review

A key lesson from the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) era is that monitoring and review processes are crucial to ensure accountability, facilitate learning, and keep pressure on implementation processes. These mechanisms are the most challenging *direct* governance functions required for effective SDGs.

Monitoring systems for SDGs should be systemic, with sensitivity to signals of systemic transition and linkages among multiple parts or processes of a system (e.g., food, water, jobs and energy when monitoring intensification of agriculture); linkages across distances; and linkages among stakeholders to understand their different interests and perspectives. Such monitoring will be too expensive for single organizations, so mechanisms must be put in place to collect and synthesize information from multiple sources and then organized in the spirit of learning and openness to mutual adjustment.

One suggestion is to develop a meta-science panel to integrate the findings from the multiple existing science panels or distributed science panels appointed to address different SDGs. These panels can identify knowledge gaps on the interplay among sustainability challenges, and provide early warning signals of emerging sustainability threats. Such a panel or panels might oversee, or at least provide significant input, into the Global Sustainable Development Report that is part of the HLPF's mandate to improve the science-policy interface. Scholarly work has linked the provision of usable knowledge through science panels to effective implementation (Haas and Stevens 2011). The development of science and innovation systems capable of addressing the transition challenge and to provide context-relevant advice should itself be reflected in the SDGs as

an essential component of implementation and capacity building.

State-led mutual review of national sustainable development progress and plans – part of the HLPF mandate when it takes over the Annual Ministerial Review (AMR) in 2016 – is thus only one, though a central, node in a wider system. Such reviews could use national sustainable development plans as baselines and assemble information from other reviews as part of its process. Experience with the AMR suggests the need to develop incentives and support for participation, focus on learning opportunities, and use comparable measures while establishing multi-layered and differentiated targets and indicators (see Policy Brief 1). This would allow comparable systems of evaluation, might help identify gaps in achieving certain targets, and could trigger calls for corrective and coherent action and means of implementation.

The systemic AMR could be organized around common challenges – for example countries coping with megacities, with vulnerable coastlines, or that are running out of water. Such reviews would be among "peers," maximizing opportunities for learning and providing systemic evaluations rather than focusing on specific goals. International institutions should also be reviewed on their progress in mainstreaming SDGs and targets into their work programs or adequately focusing on areas unaddressed by other stakeholders.

SDG implementation can be enhanced when regional commissions, countries, provinces and municipalities generate and receive technical and scientific inputs and support to inform sustainable development stakeholder engagement and activities on multiple governance levels.

The broader lesson is that the monitoring and review process should be multi-dimensional and include the new Global Sustainable Development Report (a collection of assessments and reviews by various parts of the UN and other actors). Rather than just stapling together other reports, it should also focus on knowledge required to fill implementation gaps. It might also bring together new knowledge on cause-effect relationships and identify transition pathways rather than simply highlight static or symptomatic measures.

Review processes should foster exchange and learning. For example, the quadrennial UNGA meetings of the HLPF can be an opportunity to consider revisions or modifications of the SDGs as new knowledge becomes available.

Mobilization of Means of Implementation

Progress on the SDGs will require continuing

entrepreneurship and reliable, predictable resource mobilization. SDG implementation can be enhanced when regional commissions, countries, provinces and municipalities generate and receive technical and scientific inputs and support to inform sustainable development stakeholder engagement and activities on multiple governance levels.

Partnerships, action networks and transnational actors, including non-state sustainability standard setters along marketplace supply chains, will also be crucial players. The 1400 voluntary commitments made at and since Rio+20 account for the vast majority of financial and other resources thus far for the means of implementation of the SDGs. However, the $636 Billion figure cited after Rio for these commitments does not differentiate existing from new commitments nor is there yet an accountability mechanism to ensure that the commitments fit with a future set of SDGs.

Earlier experiences with partnerships during the MDG era show that lack of institutionalized review mechanisms and of clear, quantifiable benchmarks to measure performance contributed to uneven effectiveness (Bäckstrand et al. 2012: 133-141). Moreover, partnerships "have a poor record of promoting systemic change [and] partnerships with a focus on specific, short-term quantifiable results can also detract funding from long-term investment essential to promote long-term development," and, if they create "separate parallel structures," can weaken country ownership (UNTT 2013: 8). Third-party reviews of voluntary commitments can help, but should be integrated into the HLPF review mechanism to ensure coherence and accountability.

SDGs cannot be successfully implemented without government commitments, long-term investments, and new sources of funding. While official development assistance from the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) countries and from new non-western donors is important for addressing poverty and other global issues, there will need to be greater reliance on development finance from private sector investments, NGO and foundation support, and domestic resource mobilization. However, investment must be channeled to sustainable development generally, and in particular to low carbon technologies, green growth, and infrastructure development. Investments must also be made in inclusive development, even if risk-reward ratios and long time frames traditionally place them "outside the investment parameters" of many long-term investors (ECOSOC 2013).

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