

Beisheim, Marianne

**Research Report**

## Conflicts in UN reform negotiations: Insights into and from the review of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

SWP Research Paper, No. 9/2021

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin

*Suggested Citation:* Beisheim, Marianne (2021) : Conflicts in UN reform negotiations: Insights into and from the review of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, SWP Research Paper, No. 9/2021, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin, <https://doi.org/10.18449/2021RP09>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/253240>

**Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:**

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

**Terms of use:**

*Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.*

*You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.*

*If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.*

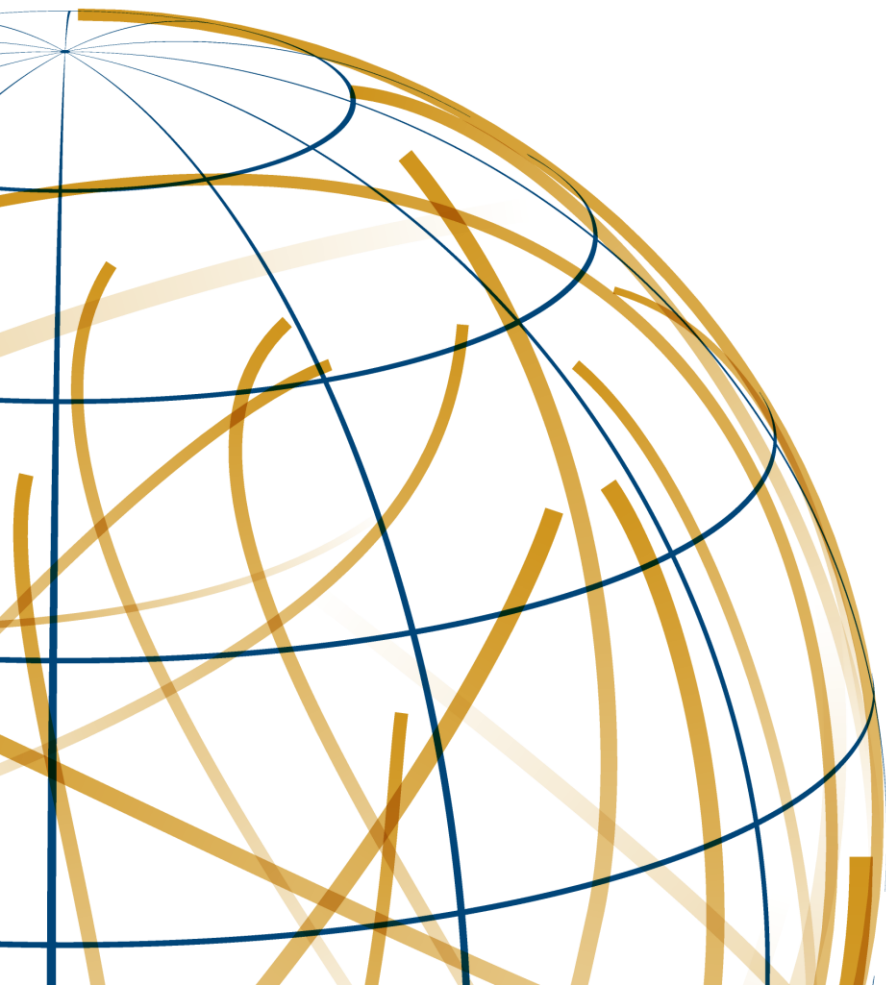
SWP Research Paper

---

*Marianne Beisheim*

# Conflicts in UN Reform Negotiations

Insights into and from the Review of the  
High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development



Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for  
International and Security Affairs

SWP Research Paper 9  
December 2021, Berlin

- The UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) is widely appreciated as a venue where representatives of the member states, the UN system and stakeholders can discuss the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This study analyses the negotiations on the HLPF review conducted in 2020/21 under the UN General Assembly.
- The intended strengthening of the HLPF was blocked by numerous conflicts over environmental and development issues as well as overarching conflict lines concerning the international order. Lessons should be drawn for future UN reform processes.
- The resulting resolutions largely confirm the status quo. The few incremental improvements should now be realised. The German government and the EU should work to improve the preparation and follow-up for the HLPF meeting in July 2022. The new Coordination Segment of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), which meets for the first time in February 2022, offers an important opportunity.
- The German government and the EU should prepare ambitious annual UN strategies that also cover their work in ECOSOC and the HLPF. The identified conflict themes should be taken into consideration.
- The UN Secretary-General's report "Our Common Agenda", requested by the member states and published in September 2021, creates a window of opportunity for progress on UN reforms.
- By early 2024, when the next HLPF review is due, the German government and the EU should have developed reform proposals. They should communicate these in good time in the Alliance for Multilateralism and seek to build coalitions of the willing.

**SWP Research Paper**

*Marianne Beisheim*

# Conflicts in UN Reform Negotiations

Insights into and from the Review of the  
High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

**Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik**  
**German Institute for**  
**International and Security Affairs**

SWP Research Paper 9  
December 2021, Berlin

**All rights reserved.**

© Stiftung Wissenschaft  
und Politik, 2021

SWP Research Papers are  
peer reviewed by senior  
researchers and the execu-  
tive board of the Institute.  
They are also subject to fact-  
checking and copy-editing.  
For further information  
on our quality control pro-  
cedures, please visit the  
SWP website: [https://  
www.swp-berlin.org/en/  
about-swp/quality-  
management-for-swp-  
publications/](https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/about-swp/quality-management-for-swp-publications/).  
SWP Research Papers reflect  
the views of the author(s).

**SWP**

Stiftung Wissenschaft und  
Politik  
German Institute  
for International  
and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3 – 4  
10719 Berlin  
Germany  
Phone +49 30 880 07-0  
Fax +49 30 880 07-200  
[www.swp-berlin.org](http://www.swp-berlin.org)  
[swp@swp-berlin.org](mailto:swp@swp-berlin.org)

ISSN (Print) 2747-5123  
ISSN (Online) 1863-1053  
doi: 10.18449/2021RP09

*Translation by Meredith Dale*

(English version of  
SWP-Studie 22/2021)

## Table of Contents

5	<b>Issues and Recommendations</b>
7	<b>The Review of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development</b>
10	<b>Conflicts and Conflict Lines at the United Nations</b>
12	<b>Analysing the Negotiations: Dynamics, Conflicts, Outcomes</b>
12	First Round 2019/20 — Dynamics in the Negotiations
14	First round 2019/20 — Conflicts and Outcomes
16	Second Round 2020/21 — Dynamics in the Negotiations
18	Second Round 2020/21 — Conflicts and Outcomes
24	<b>Conclusions and Recommendations</b>
24	The Future Work of the HLPF: Foreseeable Conflicts and Recommendations
25	Future UN Reforms: Conflict Lines and Lessons Learned
28	Outlook: “Our Common Agenda” — a Window of Opportunity
31	<b>Abbreviations</b>

*Dr. Marianne Beisheim is a Senior Associate in the Global Issues Division at SWP.*

*This Research Paper was prepared within the framework of the research project “HLPF Review: Process, Positions, Politics & Practicable Reform Options”, funded by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).*

### Conflicts in UN Reform Negotiations. Insights into and from the Review of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

Many United Nations member states are quick to call for effective multilateralism and demand reforms. Yet at the same time it is the states themselves that obstruct multilateral processes and block change. The reason for this is irreconcilable differences — *conflicts* — over various issues. The present study analyses the negotiations under the UN General Assembly on the review of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) that was conducted in 2020/2021 in conjunction with the review of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Old and new conflicts in the field are revealed, along with overarching *conflict lines* that will also continue to affect future UN reform processes.

The analysis of the negotiations and resolutions on the HLPF and ECOSOC reviews reveals that:

- Most states appreciate the HLPF as a venue where representatives of the member states, the UN system and stakeholders can discuss and draw lessons from the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- Nevertheless multiple conflicts hindered the planned strengthening of the HLPF. As well as differences over environmental and development issues, these also included overarching conflict lines relating to the international order. Diverging interests and narratives concerning UN mandates and disagreements over politically charged terminology obstructed efforts to achieve consensus on reforms.
- As a result the resolutions on the HLPF and ECOSOC largely confirmed the status quo. Certain incremental improvements were achieved and should be put into practice.
- The new Coordination Segment established under the resolution on ECOSOC creates the possibility of realising outcome-oriented processes in advance of the next HLPF in July 2022. The first opportunity for this will be in February 2022.
- Positive outcomes from the formal and informal HLPF formats should be followed up and fed into the subsequent processes.



- The German government and the European Union should accentuate the positive in the resolutions on ECOSOC and the HLPF. Both should institute an ambitious annual *UN strategy* including their work in ECOSOC and the HLPF. With timely strategic coordination, the ECOSOC meeting in the first half of 2022 could be used proactively to set priorities more visibly at the HLPF in July. In order to achieve tangible results, the German government and the EU should lay out in their strategies how they intend to proceed. The Federal Government should discuss its strategy for the HLPF during its annual national HLPF conference.

In the associated processes they should exemplify and defend their own values. For example the German government should involve non-state actors meaningfully in its own processes and strengthen its engagement in the ECOSOC Committee on Non-governmental Organisations. By the beginning of 2024, when the next ECOSOC and HLPF reviews are due, Germany and the EU should be clear about what they expect from the two institutions and develop corresponding reform proposals.

The identified *conflict lines* — above all between the EU on one side, the G77+China and the Russian Federation on the other — hampered the negotiations on the HLPF review and need to be considered when preparing both the annual UN strategy and the reform proposals. They include reservations over sovereignty, concerns over loss of power, geopolitical conflicts, diverging priorities on human rights, differences over the right to development and participation by non-state actors, budget and resource questions, and conflicts of values around environment, development, gender and family.

The HLPF review has failed to adequately strengthen the UN structures in the field of sustainable development. The UN Secretary-General's report "Our Common Agenda", requested by the member states and published in September 2021, creates a window of opportunity for progress on UN reforms. Germany and the EU should actively support the Secretary-General's proposals for a forward-thinking, more inclusive and networked multilateralism. The German government should set corresponding objectives in good time. Then, in the framework of the EU and the Alliance for Multilateralism, supporters should be sought and concrete joint initiatives developed.

# The Review of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

In 2015 the member states of the United Nations agreed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, among other things defining seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030.<sup>1</sup> The High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) was given “a central role in overseeing a network of follow-up and review processes”.<sup>2</sup> Its mandate was to provide “political leadership, guidance and recommendations” for ongoing implementation of the SDGs.<sup>3</sup> The Forum meets annually under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and additionally every four years under the auspices of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).

The present study builds on earlier findings that the HLPF has to date — despite certain positive developments — struggled to fulfil its mandate.<sup>4</sup> This applies to all of its three central responsibilities (see Figure 1, p. 9): Firstly, there is a lack of impactful preparation and follow-up for the HLPF’s annual *thematic and SDG reviews*, which examine progress and the reasons for lack thereof. Secondly, the *Voluntary National Reviews* (VNRs) presented to the HLPF are widely

presented as a success but actually suffer deficits. Since 2016 almost all member states, namely 176, have informed the HLPF how they are implementing the SDGs. Some have even done so more than once, accounting for the total of 247 VNRs.<sup>5</sup> This level of interest leaves the HLPF little time for the individual reports: fifteen minutes per country for the presentation, another fifteen for the discussion. Moreover the quality of the reports is uneven and improvable, as are the national and local monitoring processes on which they are based.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the consequences of HLPF reporting are unclear. This raises questions over their relevance beyond showcasing? Thirdly, the findings of all these reviews do not flow into the annual *ministerial declaration* adopted at the HLPF. It is negotiated in advance and merely approved at the end of the meeting. Furthermore, in the absence of politically relevant follow-up, the ministerial declaration is regarded as ineffective.

The 2013 UNGA resolution establishing the HLPF already provided for a review of “the format and the organizational aspects of the forum” once it was operational (abbreviated in the following to “HLPF review”).<sup>7</sup> Planning for a periodical review makes sense

1 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, A/RES/70/1 (New York, October 2015), [https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A\\_RES\\_70\\_1\\_E.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_70_1_E.pdf) (accessed 11 November 2021). Referred to in the following as “2030 Agenda”.

2 Ibid., paragraph 82.

3 UNGA, *Format and Organizational Aspects of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development*, A/RES/67/290 (New York, August 2013), paragraph 29, <https://undocs.org/A/RES/67/290> (accessed 19 April 2021).

4 See Marianne Beisheim, *UN Reforms for the 2030 Agenda: Are the HLPF’s Working Methods and Practices “Fit for Purpose”?* SWP Research Paper 9/2018 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, October 2018).

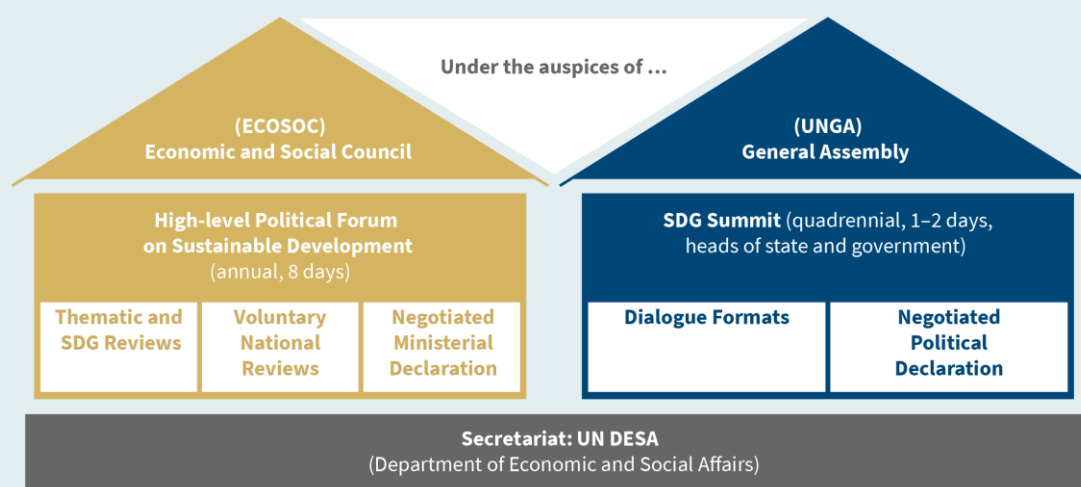
5 As reported to the author by representatives of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), December 2021.

6 *Partners for Review, Voluntary National Reviews Submitted to the 2019 High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development – a Comparative Analysis* (Bonn: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, 2019); Ana de Oliveira and Shannon Kindornay, *Progressing National SDG Implementation: An Independent Assessment of the Voluntary National Review Reports Submitted to the United Nations High-level Political Forum in 2020* (Ottawa: Cooperation Canada, 2021).

7 UNGA, *Format and Organizational Aspects* (A/RES/67/290) (see note 3), paragraph 29.

Figure 1

## The High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development



© 2021 Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)

Source: [sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf)

if one wishes to nurture a “learning institution”.<sup>8</sup> But UN reforms have never been simple or easy, and as we will see, they have not been made any easier by the crisis of multilateralism.

In 2016, shortly after the first HLPF following adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the member states discussed details of the HLPF process for follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.<sup>9</sup> They refined some of the rules and postponed the date for the first HLPF review, in order to complete a full four-year cycle before that review (2016–2019). That cycle ended with the Forum’s meeting under the auspices of the General Assembly in September 2019. At this so-called SDG Summit the heads of state and government adopted a political declaration with ten action points. In one of these they reiterated their commitment to strengthen the HLPF through an ambitious and effective review:

“To demonstrate our determination to implement the 2030 Agenda and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, we need to do more and faster. To this end, we commit to ...

(j) **Strengthening the high-level political forum:** we pledge to carry out an ambitious and effective review of the format and organizational aspects of the high-level political forum and follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the global level during the seventy-fourth session of the General Assembly with a view to better addressing gaps in implementation and linking identified challenges with appropriate responses, including on financing, to further strengthen the effective and participatory character of this intergovernmental forum and encourage the peer-learning character of the voluntary national reviews.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Thorsten Benner et al. define organisational learning as a “knowledge-based process of questioning and altering an organisation’s rules to change its practice”. Ibid., “Internationale Bürokratien und Organisationslernen: Konturen einer Forschungsagenda”, *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* 16, no. 2 (2009): 203–36 (218).

<sup>9</sup> UNGA, *Follow-up and Review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the Global Level*, A/RES/70/299 (New York, August 2016), paragraph 21, <https://undocs.org/A/RES/70/299> (accessed 10 August 2021).

<sup>10</sup> UNGA, *Political Declaration of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development Convened under the Auspices of the General Assembly*, A/RES/74/4 (New York, October 2019) [bold in original], <https://undocs.org/A/RES/74/4> (accessed 14 May 2021).

## Box 1

**The context and empirical basis of the research project<sup>a</sup>**

The project team followed the negotiating processes for the HLPF review from November 2019 to June 2021 in the scope of a research project funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). In-person participant observation was possible until March 2020.<sup>b</sup> The project held two seminars with academics, politicians and stakeholders involved or interested in the process.<sup>c</sup> In 2021 the author of the present study had access to the intergovernmental negotiations in the online format necessitated by the pandemic.<sup>d</sup> That wealth of material forms the basis for the present study, which reviews, analyses and evaluates the overall process.

**a** See also the project website: “HLPF Review: Process, Positions, Politics & Practicable Reform Options: Researching the Reform Debate on the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development”, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/swp/about-us/organization/swp-projects/high-level-political-forum-on-sustainable-development-hlpf> (accessed 8 July 2021). Special thanks go to Felicitas Fritzsche and Chiara Miescher for their contributions in the context of the project.

**b** In 2019 and 2020 members of the project team were able to participate in person in expert group meetings organised by DESA, in working meetings of various networks, and in one of the early sessions in the first round of negotiations. They were also able to conduct background discussions with various actors.

**c** The interim findings have been published in various publications and consultation papers, for example, Marianne Beisheim and Steven Bernstein, “The High-Level Political Forum Review 2020: An Opportunity to Fulfill the HLPF’s Mandate”, in *Challenges and Opportunities for Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, ed. Friends of Governance for Sustainable Development, Governance for Sustainable Development, vol. 4 (New World Frontiers, February 2020), 138–45. See also SWP Dossier “Sustainable Development Governance”: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/topics/dossiers/sustainability-climate-and-energy/sustainable-development-governance> (accessed 8 July 2021).

**d** The project team compared at least two independently prepared sets of notes for each of the seven “informals”, including the seven successive drafts of the resolution(s) and the two final texts, along with additional written submissions from the negotiating groups and member states. During and after the negotiations, we discussed our assessments of the process and the results with other observers.

The document thus specifies the objectives of the review, albeit only in vague terms. The chosen formulations already indicate where conflicts would be found.

In 2018 the member states agreed to conduct the negotiations for the HLPF review “in conjunction with” those for *strengthening ECOSOC*.<sup>11</sup> It subsequently became clear, however, that the member states had very different ideas about what this should mean, both for the process and outcome of the negotiations and for the interaction between ECOSOC and HLPF. ECOSOC is a principal organ of the UN with 54 member states and has a far-reaching mandate on economic and social questions. Unlike the HLPF, ECOSOC may meet year-round and it possesses an apparatus commensurate to its status. The work of ECOSOC and its subsidiary organisations and processes had already been adjusted in the context of the 2030 Agenda, above all in connection with reforms to the UN development system.<sup>12</sup> For the work of the HLPF, a change to the ECOSOC calendar was especially relevant: The one-day ECOSOC Integration Segment, which draws together the key messages from the various ECOSOC processes, has since 2019 been held on the day before the opening of the HLPF.<sup>13</sup> However it proved impossible to meaningfully process the submissions in the brief time available. Likewise, it was impossible to adequately reflect the outcomes of the HLPF at the ECOSOC High-level Segment (HLS), which is held immediately after the HLPF and is closely intertwined with the latter’s Ministerial Segment.

**11** UNGA, *Review of the Implementation of General Assembly Resolution 68/1 on the Strengthening of the Economic and Social Council*, A/RES/72/305 (New York, July 2018), paragraph 2, <https://undocs.org/A/RES/72/305> (accessed 10 August 2021).

**12** Max-Otto Baumann and Silke Weinlich, *Unfinished Business: An Appraisal of the Latest UNDS Reform Resolution*, Briefing Paper 13/2018 (Bonn: German Development Institute, 2018).

**13** UNGA, *Review of the Implementation of GA Resolution 68/1* (A/RES/72/305) (see note 11), paragraph 11, 12.

# Conflicts and Conflict Lines at the United Nations

The negotiations on the HLPF review are the object of this study, whose key question is: *What positions were adopted by the central actors, and which conflicts can be identified?* A conflict is constituted by an “irreconcilable difference between at least two actors” and represents a “situation in which two or more actors pursue irreconcilable goals or insist on different means to achieve a shared goal”.<sup>14</sup> The conflict actors here are the member states,<sup>15</sup> specifically their negotiating groups, which in the investigated negotiations formulate their own positions and sometimes explicitly contradict the positions of other member states and negotiating groups. UN staff and non-state actors may also operate as conflict actors, but are not the focus of this analysis of the intergovernmental negotiations.<sup>16</sup>

Aside from the conflicts over specific issues in the HLPF review, the study also considers overarching *conflict lines*, in the sense of recurring differences between the same actors across multiple conflicts.<sup>17</sup> The end of the Cold War, which dominated the UN’s work as long as it lasted, exposed old and new conflict lines in UN negotiations, especially in relation to development models and paradigms of social and

international order.<sup>18</sup> In international relations, conflict research distinguishes between conflicts about values (especially difficult to resolve through compromise), conflicts about means to be used to achieve a common goal, and conflicts of interest or conflicts about relative or absolute gains in power or other contested goods.<sup>19</sup> These are ideal types and in reality multiple aspects frequently play a role. The overarching conflict lines that surfaced in the HLPF review are discussed in the concluding chapter. They encompass: reservations over sovereignty, diverging priorities on human rights, differences over participation by non-state actors, geopolitical conflicts and struggles over power and influence, budget and resource questions, and conflicts about values, especially around gender and family issues.

**14** Michael Zürn, *Interessen und Institutionen in der internationalen Politik: Grundlegung und Anwendungen des situationsstrukturellen Ansatzes* (Wiesbaden, 1992), 139, doi: 10.1007/978-3-663-10384-4 (own translation).

**15** Its universal membership is a notable feature of the HLPF. As well as the 193 current member states of the United Nations it also includes those that are members only of specific Specialised Agencies, specifically Niue, the Cook Islands, the Holy See and the Palestinian Territories.

**16** Extraneous aspects can also play a role; these may include sectoral and departmental interests (in-fighting over mandates and budgets) as well as personal career motives and preferences. These aspects were impossible to record in any serious scientific form, as any evidence, such as it was, remained anecdotal and unattributable.

**17** Similar: Lars Brozus, *Globale Konflikte oder Global Governance?* (Wiesbaden, 2002), 37.

**18** Ibid.

**19** Building on Michael Zürn et al., “Problemfelder und Situationsstrukturen in der Analyse internationaler Politik: Eine Brücke zwischen den Polen?” in *Theorien der Internationalen Beziehungen: Bestandsaufnahme und Forschungsperspektiven*, ed. Volker Rittberger, *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, special issue 21 (Wiesbaden, 1990), 151 – 74 (156f.).

## Box 2

**Negotiations under the UN General Assembly**

Votes on resolutions and decisions in the UN General Assembly are prepared with the help of so-called “informals”. In these informal preparatory meetings various *negotiating groups* play an important role (their composition varies depending on the issue at hand).

The biggest negotiating bloc is the *Group of 77 (G77)*,<sup>a</sup> established in 1964 by seventy-seven countries of the Global South. It now has more than 130 members. The People’s Republic of China (China) does not see itself as a member (any longer), but usually coordinates with the group to function as *G77+China*. China’s influence on the G77 has grown, as have tensions within the group. Demands for respect for national sovereignty and economic and social rights have a unifying influence. The Group’s foreign ministers meet annually at the beginning of the UN General Assembly. The G77 has representations at all the UN’s principal locations. Its chair rotates between the regions. Currently the Republic of Guinea holds the Chairmanship of the G77 in New York for the year 2021.

Within the group of developing countries the topic of sustainable development is especially important to Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS), and special attention is often paid to their needs.

The *EU delegation* in New York represents the interests of the European Union member states in the UN General Assembly and in the UN Economic and Social Council.<sup>b</sup> A joint position is worked out in advance in multi-stage

coordination and consultation meetings. In New York this functions through the member states’ missions or permanent representations. Relevant EU institutions are also involved. The EU Commission possesses official observer status at the UN General Assembly.

At the beginning of a negotiating process the President of the General Assembly appoints two ambassadors as *co-facilitators*, one from the Global North and one from the Global South. They organise the informals and lead the process of agreeing a draft text. They are supported by the UN Secretariat.

The process ends with the so-called *silence procedure*, designed to ascertain whether consensus has been achieved. The President of the General Assembly communicates the agreed draft from the co-facilitators to all parties and names a deadline for objections. If a negotiating group or state objects (breaks the silence), informal talks continue until a revised draft can be placed under silence. If the deadline passes without any member state expressing reservations, the draft resolution will be formally tabled for one of the following sessions of the General Assembly and adopted unanimously or put to a vote if requested. The absence of face-to-face contacts during the Covid-19 pandemic expanded the role of this procedure.

Resolutions and decisions of the UN General Assembly are recommendatory, and not legally binding. Accordingly follow-up and review mechanisms tend to be soft in nature.

<sup>a</sup> See the G77 website, <https://www.g77.org/> (accessed 14 October 2021).

<sup>b</sup> See the website of the European Union delegation at the United Nations in New York, [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-new-york\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-new-york_en) (accessed 14 October 2021).



# Analysing the Negotiations: Dynamics, Conflicts, Outcomes

The UN member states began negotiations on the HLPF review in 2020. However, the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic led them to defer most of the unresolved issues from this first round of negotiations to the next General Assembly. The second round opened in spring 2021. The issues, and to some extent the conflicts too (see Figure 2, p. 13), were similar in both rounds. But there were tangible differences in their dynamics and in the intensity of the conflicts over particular issues (see Figure 4, p. 23). First the respective dynamics of both rounds of negotiations are briefly outlined and the central conflict actors identified. Against that backdrop, the debates are analysed and the outcomes — as codified in three resolutions — described.

## First Round 2019/20 – Dynamics in the Negotiations

In mid-January 2019, the President of the General Assembly appointed the UN ambassadors of Georgia and Benin as co-facilitators to lead the intergovernmental negotiations on the ECOSOC and HLPF reviews. Initially there had been disagreement over whether there should be one or two pairs of co-facilitators. The G77+China would have preferred two pairs to maintain a clearer distinction between the two processes — presaging, as we shall see, a conflict line that was to become important at a later stage.

Representatives of states, UN institutions and NGOs had already begun discussing the topic in November 2019. This initially occurred in the scope of a retreat hosted by the Norwegian UN mission (which at the time held the ECOSOC Presidency) and the UN Foundation and attended by UN ambassadors, representatives of the UN system, experts and non-state actors.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> “The Future of the HLPF: Reflections and Next Steps”, retreat held on 1 November 2019.

Many of the state and non-state contributors argued for the HLPF to be strengthened.<sup>21</sup> In particular the various major groups and other stakeholders (MGoS) had signalled great interest in advance of the negotiations. Since 2018 they had organised multiple meetings on the topic and worked on position papers with ambitious proposals.<sup>22</sup> The Secretariat (UN DESA) held two expert group meetings in 2019: The first in May focussed more on lessons from the first HLPF cycle;<sup>23</sup> the second in December discussed concrete ideas for reforms. While the invited experts presented ambitious proposals, more sceptical voices also emerged among the participating representatives of member states, suggesting that far-reaching reforms were unrealistic. The Secretariat published the findings and recommendations in a report.<sup>24</sup> Mexico in particular staked out strong positions in a non-paper that it prepared as Chair of the Group of Friends of the Voluntary National Reviews, Follow-up and Review of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (although the document was not supported by

<sup>21</sup> The discussions referred to here were held under the Chatham House rule, so it is not possible to attribute positions any more closely.

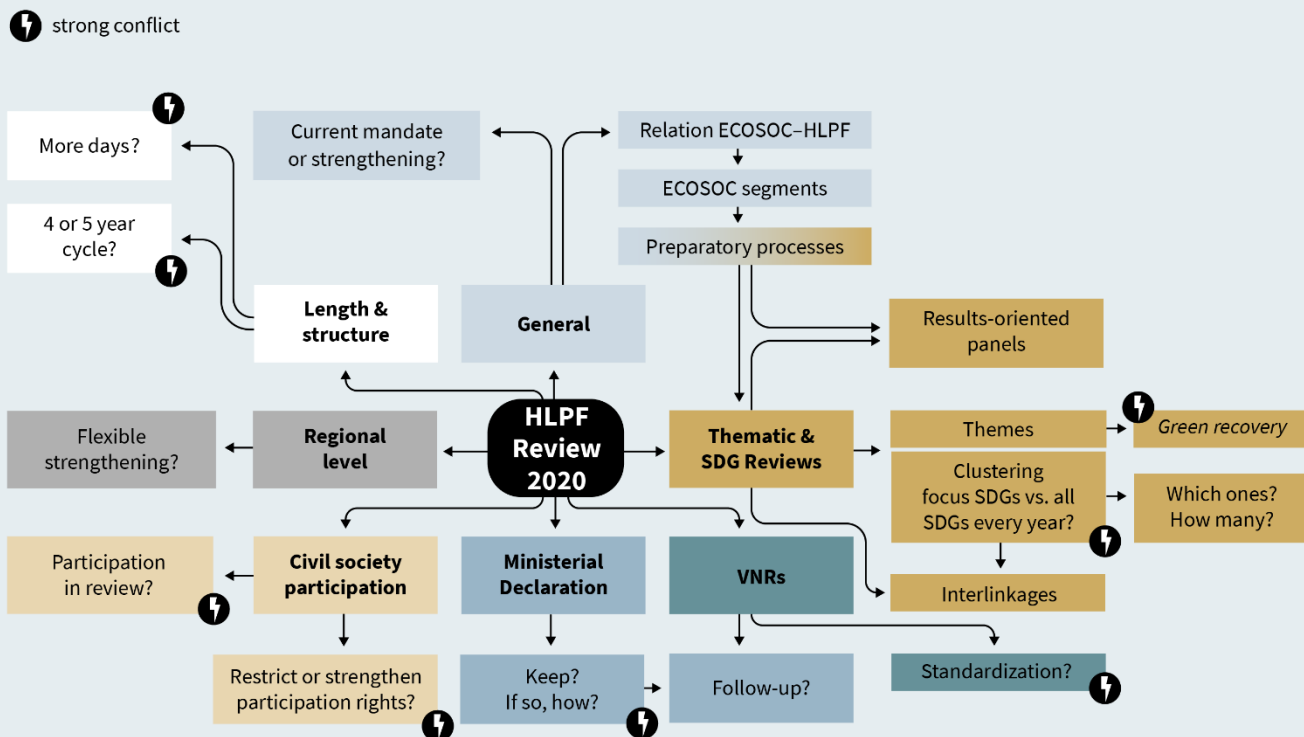
<sup>22</sup> Most recently for example Women’s Major Group, *Position Paper on HLPF Review* (February 2021), <https://www.womensmajorgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/HLPF-Review-FINAL-1.pdf> (accessed 27 July 2021).

<sup>23</sup> UN DESA, “Expert Group Meeting on Lessons Learned from the First Cycle of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF)” (May 2019), [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/23135Summary\\_of\\_EGM\\_on\\_HLPF\\_review\\_FINAL.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/23135Summary_of_EGM_on_HLPF_review_FINAL.pdf) (accessed 8 July 2021).

<sup>24</sup> UN DESA, “Expert Group Meeting: The Way Forward — Strengthening ECOSOC and the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development” (December 2019), [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/25424Summary\\_of\\_EGM\\_on\\_HLPF\\_Review\\_34\\_December.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/25424Summary_of_EGM_on_HLPF_Review_34_December.pdf) (accessed 8 July 2021).

Figure 2

## HLPF Review 2020: Issues and Conflicts



© 2021 Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)

Source: own research

the group as a whole).<sup>25</sup> Mexico proposed extending the HLPF cycle from four to five years in order to accommodate detailed VNRs from *all* UN member states and adding meeting days to enable annual discussion of *all* 17 SDGs. This received mixed responses.

Despite the informal preparations the member states entered the negotiations in January 2020 with widely diverging ideas. Some had participated actively in the preparatory meetings and had correspondingly high expectations. Others had not yet entered the discussions, seeing no great call for reform. Many countries had some notion about what they would in principle like to see improved, but lacked concrete executable concepts.

<sup>25</sup> Unpublished non-paper. On its content see Marianne Beisheim, *Reviewing the HLPF's "Format and Organizational Aspects" – What's Being Discussed?* Working Paper, Global Issues Division, 2020/01 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, February 2020), [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/arbeitspapiere/WP\\_Beisheim\\_Reviewing\\_the\\_HLPF\\_s\\_200205.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/arbeitspapiere/WP_Beisheim_Reviewing_the_HLPF_s_200205.pdf) (accessed 7 October 2020).

The co-facilitators opened the negotiations in February 2020 with a first exploratory meeting. In early March they published a non-paper<sup>26</sup> and invited two experts to present the reform ideas discussed thus far to an informal meeting of the member states in New York.<sup>27</sup> Former ECOSOC President Inga Rhonda King (St. Vincent and the Grenadines) shared her experiences and recommendations, while the author of the

<sup>26</sup> *Non Paper by the Co-facilitators: High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development: Thematic Reviews, VNRs and Other HLPF-related Issues* (New York: United Nations, 5 March 2020), [https://www.un.org/ecosoc/sites/www.un.org/ecosoc/files/files/en/2020doc/HLPF-ECOSOC-Review-Thematic-Meetings\\_Nonpaper\\_HLPF.pdf](https://www.un.org/ecosoc/sites/www.un.org/ecosoc/files/files/en/2020doc/HLPF-ECOSOC-Review-Thematic-Meetings_Nonpaper_HLPF.pdf) (accessed 5 August 2021).

<sup>27</sup> President of the General Assembly, *Letter from the Co-facilitators for the Intergovernmental Negotiations for the Review Process of the ECOSOC and the HLPF, Conveying the Dates of the Forthcoming Thematic Review Meetings* (New York: United Nations, 26 February 2020), <https://www.un.org/pga/74/wp-content/uploads/sites/99/2020/02/HLPF-ECOSOC-Review-Thematic-Meetings.pdf> (accessed 5 August 2021).



present study outlined options for the HLPF review,<sup>28</sup> including three proposals developed in the scope of the research project.<sup>29</sup> The co-facilitators intended to follow up with the first negotiating session, but it had to be cancelled because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Instead member states were asked to convey their positions in writing. There was, however, no further discussion of these submissions.

### The pandemic hindered the UN negotiations on the HLPF.

The subsequent negotiations had to be conducted online because of the pandemic and proceeded extremely slowly. By April 2020 the co-facilitators were already flagging the absolute necessity to include the impacts of the pandemic in the review, and recommended postponing it for that reason. Emerging conflicts were another contributing factor that led the member states to agree, under the difficult circumstances, to continue to negotiate “only immediate provisions” for the next HLPF cycle. At the end of April the co-facilitators presented the zero draft for a very brief resolution, to which a number of member states submitted equally brief responses in advance of the next meeting at the end of May. A revised draft was discussed in mid-June and the final draft was placed under silence procedure on 7 July. The silence was broken,<sup>30</sup> and a new revised version placed under silence procedure on 28 July, this time successfully. In early August 2020 the member states finally adopted the brief resolution. It principally defined the theme of the 2021 HLPF and the SDGs to be reviewed in-depth that year (focus SDGs). The rest of the negotia-

tions (and with them most of the conflicts) was postponed to the 75th UN General Assembly.<sup>31</sup>

### First round 2019/20 – Conflicts and Outcomes

In its first cycle (2016–2019) the HLPF discussed one overarching theme each year and examined a selection of six or seven focus SDGs. Additionally, SDG 17 (means of implementation) was reviewed every year. Certain member states had long criticised the way the annual focus SDGs had been defined ad hoc and without recognisable logic in the 2016 resolution.<sup>32</sup> When the negotiations began in January 2020, the question of the annual *clustering* of the focus SDGs emerged as a bone of contention. Certain member states, represented most vehemently by Mexico, regarded the cluster approach as mistaken, on the grounds that it siloed issues and obscured the broader picture. They also argued that it was important to mobilise all-of-government and not just individual ministries. Others believed that the tight timetable of the HLPF restricted the number of SDGs that could be adequately examined in depth. Additionally, they argued, focus SDGs had to be clearly identified to ensure the participation of relevant sectoral actors (beyond the sustainable development community), which had been one of the central achievements of the HLPF. Ultimately this was left unresolved as events unfolded and the issue of pandemic response became increasingly urgent. Accordingly the developing countries pressed hard for the 2021 HLPF to prioritise SDGs 1–3 (poverty, hunger, health). Other actors suspected that this could endanger the integrity of the 2030 Agenda. In the end the member states agreed on a broad theme for 2021. While centring pandemic recovery, it also reflected the concerns of the 2019 Political Declaration.<sup>33</sup> Under this theme the reso-

<sup>28</sup> See Beisheim, *Reviewing the HLPF's “Format and Organizational Aspects”* (see note 25).

<sup>29</sup> The reform options “Sherpa”, “Spring Meeting” and “GSDR-informed SDG Reviews”. See handouts at <https://www.swp-berlin.org/die-swp/ueber-uns/organisation/swp-projekte/hochrangiges-politisches-forum-zu-nachhaltiger-entwicklung-hlpf> (accessed 28 July 2021).

<sup>30</sup> President of the General Assembly, *Letter from the Co-facilitators for the Intergovernmental Negotiations for the Review Process of the Economic and Social Council and the High-Level Political Forum, on the Breaking of the Silence Procedure* (New York: United Nations, 9 July 2020), <https://www.un.org/pga/74/2020/07/09/review-process-of-economic-and-social-council-ecosoc-and-the-high-level-political-forum-on-sustainable-development-hlpf/> (accessed 5 August 2021).

<sup>31</sup> UNGA, *Review of the Implementation of General Assembly Resolution 67/290 on the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, Resolution 70/299 on the Follow-up and Review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the Global Level and Resolution 72/305 on the Strengthening of the Economic and Social Council*, A/RES/74/298 (New York, August 2020), <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/74/298> (accessed 10 August 2021).

<sup>32</sup> UNGA, *Follow-up and Review* (A/RES/70/299) (see note 9).

<sup>33</sup> The theme of the 2021 HLPF was: “Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development: building an inclusive and effec-

lution went on to name considerably more SDGs than in previous years for discussion at the HLPF in July 2021 (SDGs 1, 2, 3, 8, 10, 12, 13, 16 and 17).<sup>34</sup>

Mexico made further proposals in the first round of negotiations. These included shifting meeting days from ECOSOC to the HLPF to gain time to discuss all SDGs and VNR reports. In the end this proposal was not further debated. It is worth noting here that the question of additional days is a red flag for the main financial contributors and provokes stiff resistance from the United States of America (United States), Japan, the European Union, the United Kingdom and the Swiss Confederation (Switzerland). Only Norway was initially prepared to fund an additional day – but, like the others, preferred the option of cancelling a different day to compensate.

In this context the question resurfaced of how the UN's *Regional Forums on Sustainable Development* – which the five UN Regional Commissions hold each spring – could be used more effectively to prepare the HLPF. This was already a conflict in 2015 – in the context of the negotiations on the 2030 Agenda – because member states differed in their assessment of their respective regional organisations and the prospect of collaborating with their neighbours. Here again, the status quo was retained in amicable but vague wording.

### Conflict over participation rights for non-state actors becomes obvious.

Another conflict crystallised around *participation rights for non-state actors* in the annual HLPF and in the negotiations on the review itself. In the HLPF resolution in 2013 member states had agreed comparatively generous participation rights for non-state actors.<sup>35</sup> As the negotiations began it became clear that a number of member states, including the Russian Federation and the G77+China, intended to curtail these rights by introducing a “no objection” clause. That would mean that representatives of non-state organisations would only be permitted to be in the room and participate if no member state objected

at the beginning of the session. Their push for this provision is not a one-off, but has a longer history.<sup>36</sup> Introducing the procedure for the HLPF would have heavily restrained the participation rights of non-state actors.

Numerous member states also rejected the idea of providing a space for relevant stakeholders to present inputs to the negotiations on the ECOSOC and HLPF reviews. A paragraph in the final draft of the resolution, proposing this for the following year's review, was deleted after the Russian Federation and the G77+China broke the silence.

Entrenched conflicts over wording also sparked debate. For example no consensus was reached over the use of the term “green”, which also coloured the discussion about responses to Covid-19 and calls for a “green recovery”. Here again, the silence was broken and the contested formulation ultimately deleted.<sup>37</sup> The same conflict resurfaced in the negotiations on the HLPF ministerial declaration, which began in June 2020 and as in preceding years turned out to be difficult. It proved impossible to reach a consensus on the draft text of the ministerial declaration. The pandemic arrangements made it impossible to hold majority voting during the July 2020 HLPF. As a result, for the first time, the ministerial declaration could not be adopted.

The question of the future of the annual *ministerial declaration* was also discussed in the negotiations on the HLPF review. Numerous member states expressed their dissatisfaction with the status quo. Some countries, including several EU member states, argued for the ministerial declaration to be abolished. It was always strongly watered down to account for political differences, they argued, and therefore offered too little added value. Others, including Germany, see it as a useful tool for generating political visibility and creating incentives for high-ranking political representatives to participate in the HLPF. This issue and others – including all matters associated with the voluntary national reviews – were left unresolved

tive path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development.”

34 UNGA, *Review of the Implementation of GA Resolution 67/290* (A/RES/74/298) (see note 31), paragraph 4.

35 UNGA, *Format and Organizational Aspects* (A/RES/67/290) (see note 3), paragraph 14, 15, 16, 22.

36 International Service for Human Rights (ISHR), “Accreditation Procedure Threatens to Undercut Civil Society Participation at UN Meeting” (Geneva and New York, 24 April 2013), <https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/accreditation-procedure-threatens-undercut-civil-society-participation-un-meeting/> (accessed 5 August 2021).

37 President of the General Assembly, *Letter from the Co-facilitators for the Intergovernmental Negotiations for the Review Process of the Economic and Social Council and the High-Level Political Forum, on the Breaking of the Silence Procedure* (see note 30).

in the first round, when it became apparent that the negotiations were going to be postponed.

Altogether the first round of negotiations on the ECOSOC and HLPF reviews showed that few states had changed their position since 2012/13, most strikingly Mexico,<sup>38</sup> and many conflicts dating from the negotiations on the first resolutions on the HLPF remain virulent. It was interesting that the conflicts mostly revolved around the HLPF, while proposals to reform ECOSOC were hardly raised in the first round of negotiations. That was to change in the second round.

## Second Round 2020/21 – Dynamics in the Negotiations

The second round of negotiations began at the end of January 2021, now with two new, experienced co-facilitators, the UN ambassadors of Austria and Senegal. Unlike their two predecessors, the co-facilitators were quick to present a road map with a timetable. The final draft resolution was to be ready by early April, the process completed before the start of negotiations on the 2021 ministerial declaration. This clear sense of purpose encouraged the member states and negotiating groups to develop their positions on the issues more quickly and decisively. It was also noticeable that all involved had in the meantime become accustomed to negotiating online. The two co-facilitators also consulted the MGoS and their representatives were given access to the online negotiations.

The negotiations took time because all the groups initially adopted maximalist positions for leverage. The dynamics of the negotiations were quite unlike the first round. The issues discussed were largely the same but the priorities had shifted and the debates were much more fundamental. The conflicts turned out to be considerably more pronounced and intensified rapidly. One reason for this was that the draft resolution presented by the co-facilitators after an initial consultation was a great deal more ambitious than any document discussed officially in the first round.<sup>39</sup> While the EU responded positively to the

draft, the G77+China were more reserved. They took a great deal of time to put their criticisms on the table, probably in part on account of internal disagreements. Until that point, the ambassador of the Republic of Guinea, which chairs the G77 in 2021, had read out the group's statements.<sup>40</sup> In the subsequent "hot phase" of the negotiations he delegated the role of spokesperson to an experienced negotiator who expressed extensive and vehement criticism of the draft resolution. The latter encountered an equally experienced and no less energetic negotiator representing the EU delegation. The pair's long and intense verbal exchanges characterised the negotiations.<sup>41</sup>

### Conflicts between EU and G77+China dominated the second round of negotiations.

The question of the *format of the resolution(s)* was itself *conflictual*. The G77+China stressed that while they had agreed to negotiate the reviews of ECOSOC and HLPF "in conjunction", that did not mean that both could be collapsed into a single resolution. That was not appropriate, they said, where ECOSOC was a principal organ of the UN while the HLPF was just a forum. That difference in status, they argued, also needed to be reflected formally. In response the two co-facilitators suggested formulating a single resolution with separate annexes on ECOSOC and the HLPF. The G77+China rejected this and proposed instead treating the HLPF review as an annex to the resolution on ECOSOC. That in turn was unacceptable to the EU, which argued that the HLPF had universal membership, was institutionally "under the auspices of ECOSOC" (rather than "under ECOSOC"), and moreover also met every four years under the auspices of

*Council and on the Review of the Implementation of General Assembly Resolutions 67/290 on Format and Organizational Aspects of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development and 70/299 on the Follow-up and Review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the Global Level* (New York, 12 February 2021), <https://www.un.org/pgal/75/wp-content/uploads/sites/100/2021/02/PGA-letter-HLPF-ECOSOC-Review-zero-draft.pdf> (accessed 5 August 2021).

<sup>38</sup> In 2013 Mexico had still been an explicit opponent of a strong HLPF, with the then Mexican ambassador expressing fears that strengthening the HLPF could weaken ECOSOC.

<sup>39</sup> President of the General Assembly, *Zero Draft of the Resolution on the Review of the Implementation of General Assembly Resolution 72/305 on the Strengthening of the Economic and Social*

<sup>40</sup> Republic of Guinea in the name of the G77 and China, "Statement on Behalf of the Group of 77 and China" (New York, 26 February 2021), <https://www.g77.org/statement/getstatement.php?id=210226> (accessed 8 July 2021).

<sup>41</sup> Description of negotiations based on notes made by the project team, see Box 1, p. 9.

the General Assembly.<sup>42</sup> The next proposal from the co-facilitators was to frame the decisions in two resolutions with identical chapeau texts. This was also rejected. At the last informal meeting at the end of April the G77+China stressed that the format issue was a red line: two resolutions would be required, with texts adequately reflecting the differences between ECOSOC and the HLPF. In the end it was agreed to prepare two resolutions with similar chapeau texts and a single document number (75/290), suffixed A and B respectively. This conflict over the format is rooted in differences over the respective status of ECOSOC and the HLPF (see next section, p. 18).

The question of the *cycle of future ECOSOC and HLPF reviews* formed a side-show in this conflict. The EU argued for the two reviews to continue to be negotiated together every four years with just one pair of co-facilitators. The G77+China responded that it had been decided to negotiate every two years about a further strengthening of ECOSOC. The member states agreed that the next round of negotiations would be during the 78th General Assembly, presumably in spring 2024, and that the theme and focus SDGs for the 2024 HLPF should be defined a year in advance in a separate process in order to ensure timely preparation by the UN secretariat and system.

After three months' work on the text the final drafts of both resolutions were placed under the silence procedure in mid-May 2021.<sup>43</sup> After the G77+China and the Russian Federation broke the silence, informal consultations in small meetings behind the scenes were initially fruitless. A second version was placed under the silence procedure at the beginning of June. Again the G77+China broke the silence, with the EU and others following suit in order to ensure that their own demands were also discussed in the consultations. Soon the co-facilitators were able to place a third version under the silence procedure.

This further watered-down version ensured an apparent breakthrough; at least the silence lasted to the deadline. The very next day, 16 June 2021, the resolutions were supposed to be adopted by the General Assembly. But the G77+China suddenly demanded further amendments that had previously been rejected, including additional references to development agendas and watering down or removal of wording on human rights, gender and SDG-16 issues.<sup>44</sup>

This move was unusual; the EU was alarmed, and concerned it could create a precedent: A group demanding new amendments after a successful silence procedure called into question the entire established process.<sup>45</sup> The General Assembly eventually dealt with the two draft resolutions on 25 June 2021. Despite final appeals by the co-facilitators the G77+China insisted on putting their amendments to a vote, where they received a majority. The Group's spokesperson stated that it had tried hard to persuade the co-facilitators to modify the draft resolution. Only after that route had failed had the Group felt compelled to take this course.<sup>46</sup> The EU member states, the United States (which engaged in the process late and not very proactively) and others abstained in the vote on the amended resolution on ECOSOC. The resolution on the HLPF was adopted in consensus by acclamation. After the vote, certain members of the Group distanced themselves from some of the amendments forced through by the G77+China.<sup>47</sup> Argentina,

<sup>44</sup> UNGA, Guinea (on Behalf of G77+China): Amendment to Draft Resolution A/75/L.101, A/75/L.104 (New York, June 2021), <https://undocs.org/A/75/L.104> (accessed 12 August 2021). SDG-16 ("peace, justice and strong institutions") was always the most politically controversial of the Sustainable Development Goals.

<sup>45</sup> European Union, *Explanation of Position at Adoption of Resolution on the ECOSOC/HLPF Review on Behalf of the European Union and Its Member States*, as read out in the session (16 June 2021).

<sup>46</sup> Republic of Guinea in the name of the G77 and China, "Statement on the Adoption of the Resolutions on 'Review Process of the Implementation of General Assembly Resolution 67/290 and 70/299 on the Follow-up' and 'Review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the Global Level and Resolution 72/305 on the Strengthening of the Economic and Social Council'" (New York, 25 June 2021), <https://www.g77.org/statement/getstatement.php?id=210625> (accessed 8 July 2021).

<sup>47</sup> United Nations, "Adopting 2 Texts, General Assembly Calls for Stronger Economic and Social Council Role, Agrees to Establish High-Level Political Forum Format at Seventy-Seventh Session", Meetings Coverage (New York, 25 June 2021).

<sup>42</sup> For this reason the HLPF is not listed under ECOSOC in the UN organigram. See United Nations Department of Global Communications, *The United Nations System* (New York, July 2021), [https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/un\\_system\\_chart.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/un_system_chart.pdf) (accessed 5 August 2021).

<sup>43</sup> President of the General Assembly, *Letter from the Co-facilitators for the Intergovernmental Negotiations for the Review Process of ECOSOC and the HLPF Regarding the Final Draft Resolution for the Silence Procedure* (New York: United Nations, 12 May 2021), [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/27619PGA\\_Letter\\_HLPF\\_ECOSOC\\_Silence\\_Procedure.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/27619PGA_Letter_HLPF_ECOSOC_Silence_Procedure.pdf) (accessed 22 July 2021).

Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Lebanon and Uruguay declared that gender issues should be addressed in all ECOSOC processes. Guatemala also supported that stance and added that the work of ECOSOC and the HLPF should be guided by the UN75 Declaration – which the G77+China’s amendment had removed.

## Second Round 2020/21 – Conflicts and Outcomes

Conflicts over the *status of and relationship between ECOSOC and HLPF* dominated the second round of negotiations. They had already played a prominent role in the negotiations on the HLPF mandate in 2013.<sup>48</sup>

### Differences over the relationship between ECOSOC and HLPF dominated second round of negotiations.

The conflict in 2021 followed similar lines: Certain member states, above all from the EU, but also from the G77, would like to have strengthened the HLPF. But the G77+China and the Russian Federation insisted that nothing should be allowed to weaken the authority of ECOSOC as a principal organ under the UN Charter. In their eyes the HLPF is merely a “platform” for informal exchange between representatives of states. As the group’s spokesperson put it, the HLPF “under” the ECOSOC is but a segment just like others. This “monster” should not be made any larger. In addition to this formal institutional reasoning, the G77+China also cited substantive aspects. There were other relevant mandates and processes under ECOSOC apart from the 2030 Agenda, the Group asserted – without naming them. ECOSOC did not exist for the HLPF and the HLPF should not dominate ECOSOC.<sup>49</sup>

The diverging assessments of ECOSOC also influenced positions on its review, which was negotiated in parallel. For example there were widely diverging demands concerning the *ECOSOC processes*: everything from a thorough streamlining abolishing entire segments and forums to expansion of the same. The European Union, the United States and the United Kingdom for example called for the abolition of both the Development Cooperation Forum (DCF) and the High-level Segment (HLS) of ECOSOC, on the grounds that they duplicated the work of more recently established bodies and produced no added value. The G77+China insisted on retaining both, cautioned in general against drastic changes at this juncture and instead proposed strengthening the existing framework of ECOSOC. In most questions it was agreed to retain the status quo.

One notable exception is the new *Coordination Segment* to launch the main phase of ECOSOC work in February each year. This is the only surviving remnant of the most important reform idea put forward by the Austrian co-facilitator, who had originally argued for an entire ECOSOC Focus Week in February. It was to begin with a prominent launch meeting to ensure that high-ranking political delegations made their way to New York and enhance the political visibility of the work of the Economic and Social Council in the national capitals. But the negotiating parties saw various problems with the idea, including travel costs for the national delegations. In the end they agreed on a one- or two-day Coordination Segment, replacing the existing one-day Integration Segment and the annual late January half-day meeting of the ECOSOC Presidency with the chairs of the ECOSOC Functional Commissions and Expert Bodies. The G77+China had originally resisted that replacement. In order to coordinate ECOSOC’s work effectively through this new segment, its meeting is time-tabled before the first working sessions of the ECOSOC

2021), <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/ga12342.doc.htm> (accessed 5 August 2021).

48 Marianne Beisheim, *Reviewing the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals and Partnerships. A Proposal for a Multi-level Review at the High level Political Forum*, SWP Research Paper 1/2015 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, January 2015).

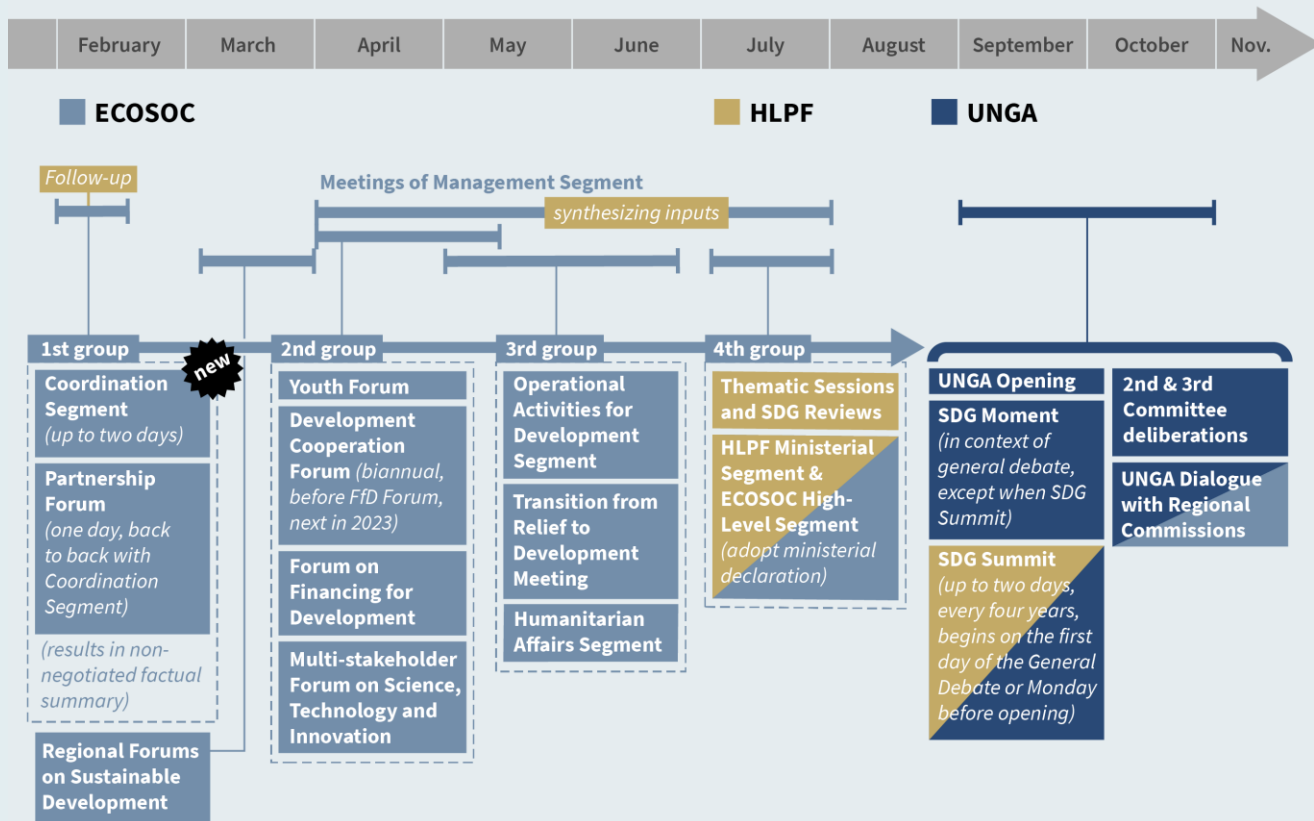
49 In contrast to this position, the Forum was viewed in some quarters in the early days as an “apex body” and was expected to agree the political guidelines for ongoing implementation of the 2030 Agenda. International Institute for

Sustainable Development (IISD), *HLPF 2015 Highlights: Friday, 26 June 2015*, Earth Negotiations Bulletin (29 June 2015), <https://enb.iisd.org/events/hlpf-2015/report-main-proceedings-26-june-2015> (accessed 5 August 2021); Jan-Gustav Strandenaes, *The Beginning of a New Future – The World of HLPF and the 2030 Global Agenda on Sustainable Development. An Independent Study on HLPF Undertaken for UNDESA* (July 2020), <https://stakeholderforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/The-Beginning-of-a-New-Future-The-World-of-HLPF-and-the-2030-Global-Agenda-on-Sustainable-Development.pdf> (accessed 5 August 2021).



Figure 3

## ECOSOC and HLPF processes



Source: As decided in resolutions A/RES/75/290 A & B, not covering all elements or hierarchies

© 2021 Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)

subsidiary bodies (see Figure 3, p. 19).<sup>50</sup> The one-day ECOSOC Partnership Forum is to be held back-to-back with it, so that other supporting actors can be mobilised. Its format is unchanged because G77+China resisted broadening the format as a Multi-Stakeholder Partnership Forum.

There were also conflicts over the question of how the outcome of the new Coordination Segment should be formalised: No-one wanted to negotiate another formal resolution, certainly not in January. Initially above all G77+China resisted an informal summary of

the ECOSOC Presidency, because it lacked the formal status to formulate political guidance. Agreement was reached on a “non-negotiated factual summary” to be prepared by the ECOSOC Presidency in consultation with the ECOSOC Bureau.<sup>51</sup> Official recommendations thus remain the preserve of the *ministerial declaration* which is adopted each year in July by the UN member states first in the Ministerial Segment of the HLPF and then in the High-level Segment of ECOSOC. The resolutions find florid terms to describe the declaration — which is to be “concise, focused, action oriented and forward looking” and define “priority areas” — while the processes by which this is to be achieved remain unclear.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> See UNGA, *Review of the Implementation of General Assembly Resolution 72/305 on the Strengthening of the Economic and Social Council: Review of the Implementation of General Assembly Resolutions 67/290 on the Format and Organizational Aspects of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development and 70/299 on the Follow-up and Review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the Global Level: A: Economic and Social Council*, A/RES/75/290 A (New York, June 2021), paragraph 16, <https://undocs.org/A/RES/75/290%20A> (accessed 12 August 2021).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. The Bureau consists of five vice-presidents, who are UN ambassadors elected by the respective five regional groups.

<sup>52</sup> UNGA, *Review of the Implementation of General Assembly Resolution 72/305 on the Strengthening of the Economic and Social Council*.

It is certainly positive for the HLPF that the new Coordination Segment has an explicit mandate to build a bridge between the ECOSOC years: to feed the previous year's deliberations and the associated decisions, including the ECOSOC/HLPF ministerial declaration, into the current year's programme of work.<sup>53</sup> That creates an opening to improve the (so-far inadequate) follow-up to the ministerial declaration and heighten its resulting (so-far low) relevance for the broader work of the UN. As the basis for this, the UN Secretary-General is requested to include in his report to ECOSOC "the main theme lessons learned from the thematic reviews and voluntary national reviews following the conclusion of the July high-level political forum, with recommendations for follow-up by countries, various segments and forums of the Council, the United Nations system and relevant stakeholders".<sup>54</sup> The UN Secretariat is requested to prepare an informal note with corresponding recommendations.<sup>55</sup> To improve follow-up the resolution also proposes to task the participants of the HLPF meetings in 2022 and 2023 to review and follow up the implementation of the Political Declaration of 2019 (adopted by the HLPF under the auspices of the General Assembly) and of the previous ministerial declarations.<sup>56</sup>

Although the new Coordination Segment is not the "Spring Meeting" originally supported by Germany to improve the preparation of the HLPF's thematic and SDG reviews, it does at least go in that direction. The resolution also names (and thus officially acknowledges) the expert meetings organised by the UN Secretariat as a basis for preparing the reviews, along with the Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR).<sup>57</sup> The ECOSOC Management Segment is also to discuss the central findings and recommendations from the

current years work at its June meeting and provide a report to the HLPF in July.<sup>58</sup> All this is intended to better connect and continuously improve processes, in order to produce tangible results. Its success will depend above all on how it is implemented by the ECOSOC Presidency, the Secretariat (UN DESA) and not least the member states.

With respect to *thematic priorities* the member states relatively quickly agreed that pandemic response and recovery would remain a high priority in 2022 and 2023 and should therefore be reflected in the choice of themes.<sup>59</sup> In general there was a desire to enhance ECOSOC and the HLPF in light of the pandemic but no consensus on how exactly to achieve this. Many G77 countries felt unprepared to deal with additional UN reforms whose effect on their interests was unclear. At the same time it became clear that the experience of the pandemic had not fundamentally shifted positions and demands. Instead the effects of the pandemic were employed to lend weight to pre-existing demands. On the one side, the G77 countries demand additional funds for the United Nations and for development cooperation. On the other side, these demands met a lukewarm reception from the main financial contributors and donor countries.

There was controversy to the end over the question of which *cross-cutting issues* should be included in the ECOSOC and HLPF mandates in the respective resolutions.<sup>60</sup> Several attempts by the co-facilitators failed to achieve agreement on a list. Shortly before the vote on the resolution in the General Assembly the

*cil: Review of the implementation of General Assembly Resolutions 67/290 on the Format and Organizational Aspects of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development and 70/299 on the Follow-up and Review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the Global Level: B: High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, A/RES/75/290 B (New York, June 2021), paragraph 33, <https://undocs.org/A/RES/75/290%20B> (accessed 12 August 2021).*

<sup>53</sup> UNGA, *Review of the Implementation, A: ECOSOC* (A/RES/75/290 A) (see note 50), paragraphs 4, 17, 18, 20.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 4.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 20.

<sup>56</sup> UNGA, *Review of the Implementation, B: HLPF* (A/RES/75/290 B) (see note 52), paragraph 15.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 16.

<sup>58</sup> UNGA, *Review of the Implementation, A: ECOSOC* (A/RES/75/290 A) (see note 50), paragraph 28. This refers to the existing synthesis of voluntary submissions by functional commissions of the Economic and Social Council and other inter-governmental bodies and forums).

<sup>59</sup> The theme for 2022 is "Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development"; for 2023: "Accelerating the recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at all levels".

<sup>60</sup> UNGA, *Review of the Implementation, A: ECOSOC* (A/RES/75/290 A) (see note 50), paragraph 19; UNGA, *Review of the Implementation, B: HLPF* (A/RES/75/290 B) (see note 52), paragraph 32. At various points the drafts mentioned poverty eradication, integration of a gender perspective, human rights, governance, effective rule of law and good governance, social protection, climate change and environmental issues, and the principle of Leaving No One Behind.

G77+China and the Russian Federation were still criticising what they regarded as excessive emphasis on gender issues in the final draft of the ECOSOC resolution, and the G77+China tabled an amendment to have the passage removed.<sup>61</sup>

In the past the overarching thematic discussions included a special session during the HLPF for “countries in special situations”. The countries involved insisted on retaining this session and rejected the idea of instead treating their concerns more generally as cross-cutting issues. There was also debate about which countries to list in the resolution. All sides agreed that African countries, the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and the Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) should be included. But the formulation for countries experiencing (civil) war was contested. Agreement was reached on “countries in conflict and post-conflict situations” (as in the 2030 Agenda).<sup>62</sup> The “middle-income countries” were again listed separately. They pointed out that their status excluded them from access to classical development funding. Another difficulty concerned the wording in the drafts on “territorial integrity and national sovereignty of states”. Here there were disagreements within the G77+China.<sup>63</sup>

While the first round of negotiations saw significant differences on the *reviews of individual focus SDGs*, this issue played a minor role in the second round. It was fairly quickly agreed to distribute the eight SDGs remaining after 2021 to the years 2022 and 2023.<sup>64</sup> A degree of quibbling about whether specific SDGs fitted better in one or other year did not lead to red lines being drawn. Only the attempt by the co-facilitators to take up the proposal of an annual review of SDG 16 – introduced at early stage by Liechtenstein – met with determined resistance from the G77+China and the Russian Federation, which ultimately identified it as a “definite red line”. Certain EU member states found the idea interesting in principle but feared a Pandora’s box effect that could lead to a reopening and renegotiation of the SDGs. They conse-

quently supported the proposal at best half-heartedly. It was not included in the final resolution.

### No agreement to harden the VNRs.

It initially appeared as though consensus would be achieved on the *Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)*. Generally the parties agreed that this component of the HLPF could be regarded as a success. Quite a number of member states initially even called for more time for the VNRs. But the main financial contributors to the UN Budget refused the resources that would be needed to fund additional days. Some countries also expressed reservations about whether delegations from poorer countries could afford to participate for longer.

There was also disagreement over what the additional time should be used for. While the more conservative member states demanded more time for high-ranking national delegations to present the reports, the EU and others wanted more time for interactive discussion of the reports. In the draft resolution the countries were invited to share “feedback, proposals and targeted recommendations” after VNRs were presented.<sup>65</sup> The G77+China suspected that this was a pretext for “naming and shaming”. As their spokesperson explained, they feared that this could deter states from voluntary reporting and argued for it to be removed. Rather than hardening the VNRs, it was better to “keep them voluntary and for peer learning”. In the end countries were invited “to continue to share their own experience and lessons learned, constructive feedback and ideas to accelerate progress”.<sup>66</sup>

The co-facilitators also sought to more explicitly mandate informal formats and good practices in the preparation and presentation of the VNRs, for example the preparatory workshops and deepening VNR Labs organised by the Secretariat (UN DESA). But the G77+China felt that no expansion of the mandated format was needed because the VNR system “works fine as it is”. The G77+China therefore demanded the removal of any wording on VNRs that went further than the existing resolutions. Only a few very mild

61 UNGA, *Guinea (on Behalf of G77+China): Amendment to Draft Resolution (A/75/L.104)* (see note 44).

62 UNGA, *Review of the Implementation, B: HLPF (A/RES/75/290 B)* (see note 52), paragraph 17.

63 Morocco distanced itself.

64 2022: SDGs 4, 5, 14, 15 and 17; 2023: SDGs 6, 7, 9, 11 and 17.

65 President of the General Assembly, *Zero Draft of the Resolution on the Review of the Implementation of General Assembly Resolution 72/305* (see note 39).

66 UNGA, *Review of the Implementation, B: HLPF (A/RES/75/290 B)* (see note 52), paragraph 20.



formulations remained.<sup>67</sup> For example countries are “encouraged to participate in the various preparatory processes” for the VNRs organised by DESA. Countries that conduct VNRs should be given priority for organizing side events. The resolution encourages all countries to work towards “strengthening the evidence, science, evaluation and data basis” of their reviews. Countries reporting for the second or third time should consider “as much as possible, the impact of measures taken since the last review”. The latter has been lacking in the reporting so far. Additionally all countries — and especially those that have to date not reported at all — are encouraged to report once in the four-year HLPF cycle (there was no consensus on this in 2015).

One formulation on *accountability* that was already controversial in 2015 did not make it into the final document this time. The phrase appeared in the zero draft of the resolution, encouraging countries to use the VNRs as a rigorous and integrated framework to report to all their citizens on their implementation of the 2030 Agenda, maximise and track their progress and promote fulfilment of their commitments and accountability to their citizens. The final text states only that countries may use their reporting “to raise awareness” about implementation of the SDGs.<sup>68</sup> The question of mentioning *parliaments* in connection with the VNRs remained controversial; the resolution does at least use the term “accountability at the national level” in this context.<sup>69</sup> The G77+China also rejected any connection between VNRs and human rights obligations, which they said was not covered by the mandates of the VNRs and the HLPF.

Voluntary *local reviews* are mentioned positively in a paragraph of their own, and this recognition of their role can be regarded as progress. Increasing numbers of cities and local authorities had in recent years presented such “Voluntary Local Reviews” (VLRs) to the HLPF. The G77+China noted during the negotiations that VLRs possessed no official status unless they were recognised by the country involved. At their instigation the text was weakened in the course of the negotiations and a standard flexibility clause inserted (“in accordance with national circumstances, policies, and priorities”).<sup>70</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., paragraph 18–27.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., paragraph 27.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., paragraph 21.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., paragraph 30.

Another contested topic in the negotiations was *civil society participation*. Here it can be regarded as a success that the two resolutions do not mention the “no objection” procedure. In the first round of negotiations the G77+China and the Russian Federation demanded that the HLPF meetings apply this procedure. The EU and other states objected that this would violate the participation rights anchored in the existing resolutions on the HLPF. The G77+China and the Russian Federation raised the same demand again at the first meeting of the second round of negotiations, but now only for ECOSOC. Later the G77+China demanded that both draft resolutions consistently refer to “relevant” stakeholders. This begs the question of who would decide who is relevant, and by what criteria, and would potentially have introduced a kind of “no objection” procedure by the back door. A compromise was agreed: The two resolutions refer to the existing arrangements for the HLPF and ECOSOC. The resolution on the HLPF employs the wording “relevant stakeholders” in reference to the participation of non-state actors beyond the MGoS and ECOSOC-accredited NGOs. The possibility of non-state actors participating in the HLPF via web-based interfaces is innovative.<sup>71</sup> However to allay reservations, for example of the Russian Federation, the phrase “while retaining the intergovernmental nature of the forum” had to be added.

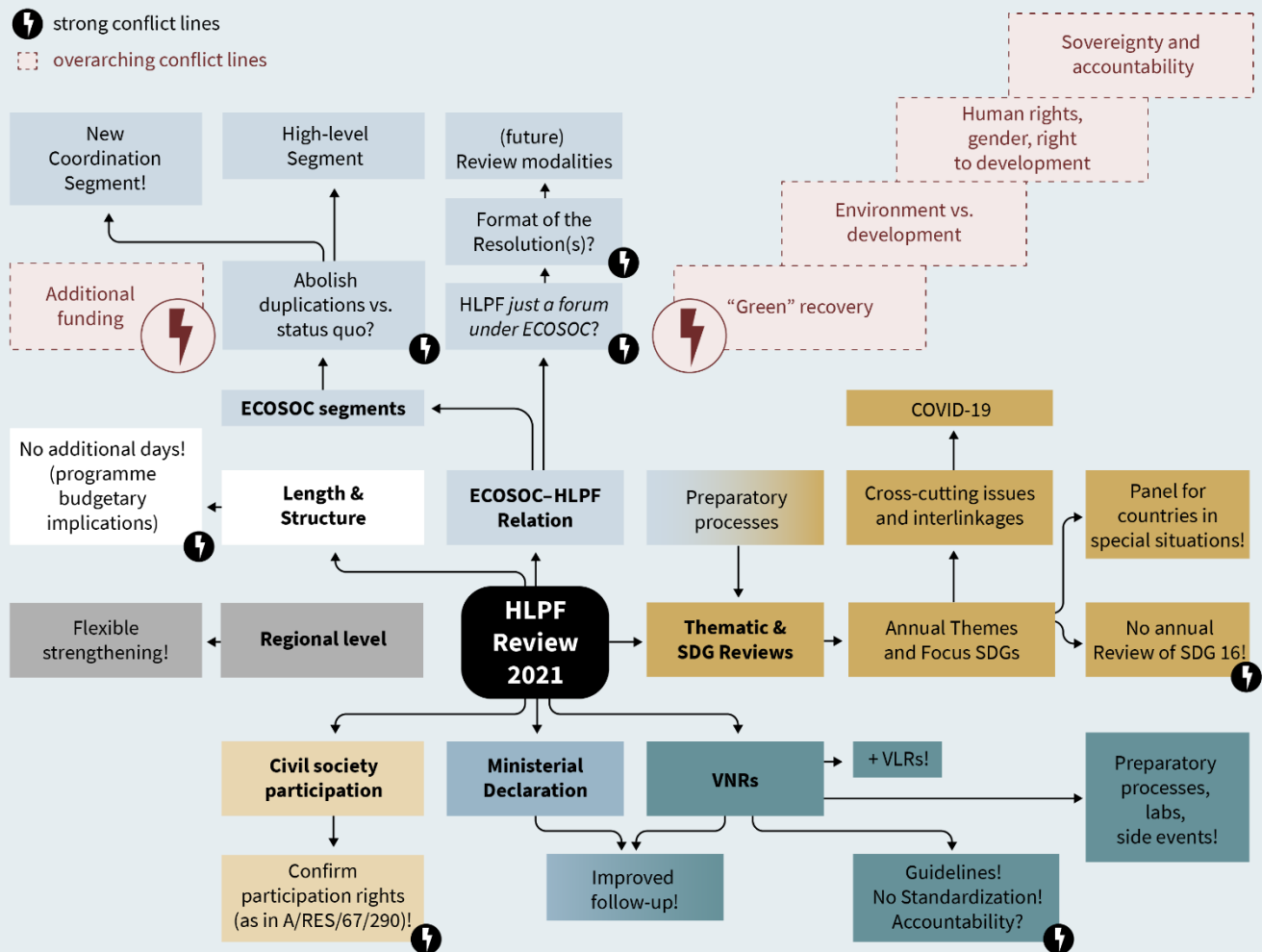
There were other conflicts that cannot be discussed in detail here for reasons of space. These relate more to ECOSOC and are less significant for the HLPF. They include discussions about the specific mandates for other ECOSOC segments, such as the Humanitarian Affairs Segment. The debate about the so-called triple nexus played a role here (an approach designed to improve the integration of humanitarian aid, development cooperation and peace-building). Delegations contested references to security issues and the work of the UN Security Council. These disputes also fit into the conflict line between the EU and the G77+China and the Russian Federation, with other states joining on both sides.

While the outcome was largely to retain the status quo, a number of positive innovations have nevertheless remained in the texts. The resolution on the HLPF contains mostly incremental improvements, in particular formalisation of existing informal formats such as the VLRs. The most interesting institutional innovation is found in the resolution on ECOSOC: the

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., paragraph 35.

Figure 4

## HLPF Review 2021: Issues, conflicts and results



© 2021 Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)

Source: own research

very promising – although as yet unproven – new Coordination Segment.

Following adoption by the General Assembly both the G77+China and the EU and other countries stressed the need to continue to think hard about further reforms of ECOSOC and the HLPF. Member states agreed that the next round of negotiation should take place during the 78th General Assembly in 2023/24. For this, two lessons should be kept in mind: Firstly concrete conflicts around the HLPF and ECOSOC formats will most likely continue to burden the negotiations. Secondly, the negotiations are also hampered by entrenched overarching conflict lines (see Figure 4), above all between the EU on one side and the G77+China and the Russian Federation on the other. Both points are discussed in the conclusion

below, together with implications for both the further work of the forum and for future UN reform processes.

# Conclusions and Recommendations

## The Future Work of the HLPF: Foreseeable Conflicts and Recommendations

The German government and the EU should work for progressive interpretation and implementation of the 2021 UN resolutions on ECOSOC and the HLPF. It would be useful for the German government to prepare a timely *strategy for the annual HLPF* (as part of its UN strategy). This should be presented at the annual national HLPF conference and define which overarching messages and findings from its current work it wishes to share, namely, with respect to the annual theme, the respective focus SDGs and the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). For this, the (synthesis) reports prepared by the UN system should be taken into account. Then both the German submissions to the EU coordination and the German actions during the HLPF (like statements in the HLPF plenary and side events) should convey those messages in order to maximise visibility and impact. The strategy should be coordinated between departments, also to reap synergies across policy areas. Such an integrated, systemic strategy “that connects policy fields and takes a holistic approach” is also recommended in the outlook paper published by the German State Secretaries’ Committee for Sustainable Development in June 2021.<sup>72</sup> That same document also states that achieving the 2030 Agenda is a “defining task of the highest priority”.<sup>73</sup> This should be reflected in Germany’s engagement for the HLPF.

<sup>72</sup> The Federal Government, *Making Transformation Happen – Outlook for German Sustainable Development Policy* (Berlin: State Secretaries’ Committee for Sustainable Development, 14 June 2021), <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/974430/1939518/622a112ddc34ad8d43ec287fd8b10cf2/perspektivenbeschluss-nachhaltigkeitspolitik-engl-data.pdf?download=1> (accessed 12 July 2021).

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 3.

## Forming the new ECOSOC Coordination Segment in February 2022.

Member states, including the German government and also the EU, should be proactive about the new Coordination Segment of ECOSOC. By February 2022 they should have concrete proposals for how to shape the work of ECOSOC and HLPF. These should relate to the annual theme and recommend which decisions from last year’s ministerial declaration the ECOSOC system should take up and how. Given that the ministerial declaration will continue to be negotiated *before* the HLPF by the New York UN missions, engagement in the ECOSOC Management Segment in June 2022 is called for. It would be helpful to have a strong statement on what aspects and recommendations from the previous year’s HLPF and the current ECOSOC processes should be included in the 2022 ministerial declaration. Ideally substantive inputs from the capitals should dominate the negotiations (not the usual New York conflict lines).

Most member states tend to welcome informal meetings and voluntary initiatives around the HLPF. Nevertheless, the analysis of the negotiations reveals that there is no consensus over official mandating of these formats or formal recognition of their outcomes. There are different reasons for this, whether because of the associated costs or because it is regarded as inappropriate for intergovernmental processes. Neither stance is liable to change in the foreseeable future. Interesting outcomes produced for example by the VNR Labs or other parallel events at the HLPF will therefore only be reflected in official documents like the ministerial declaration if state representatives take them up and negotiate them in. Otherwise important strengths of the forum will remain idle.

The format and organisational aspects of the HLPF will be negotiated once more in 2024 (again in conjunction with the next ECOSOC review). Most countries will probably continue to reject a stricter frame-

work for more action-oriented HLPF processes, citing political and/or financial reasons. But without proper guidelines there is a danger that review panels will only deliver more or less lofty statements, appeals and abstract demands. This puts the hoped-for learning processes — on how to implement the SDGs quickly and efficiently — at risk.

The importance of the co-facilitators cannot be overstated: their commitment, the level of trust, their standing within their own negotiating group (here G77 or EU), and their organising and negotiating skills. These are the factors behind the most promising outcomes of the 2021 negotiations. Experience shows that it is helpful to maintain close contact with the co-facilitators, especially towards the end of the process, to ensure consultation during the final consensus process and avoid being out-negotiated. Strategic application of negotiating leverage has proven its worth. At the same time excessive and combative insistence on maximalist demands obstructs the work of the co-facilitators.

The divide between Global North and Global South over ECOSOC's orientation, capacity and funding, and its relationship to the HLPF remains central. This also affects almost all other reform topics, such as demands for streamlining versus deepening or for expanding the role of ECOSOC and HLPF. The demand — above all from the United States and United Kingdom — to abolish the High-level Segment of ECOSOC risks unintentionally also weakening the Ministerial Segment of the HLPF. Germany and the EU should bear that in mind when developing their positions. Concerning the relationship between ECOSOC and HLPF, member states should remember the significance of the wording carefully chosen in 2013: “under the auspices” of ECOSOC and General Assembly. That is not the same as “under ECOSOC”. As explained above, the hybrid status of the HLPF as defined in the original resolution (67/290) is important and needs to be respected, otherwise the HLPF will be massively undermined.

By early 2024 the German government and the EU need to develop a vision of what they expect from ECOSOC and HLPF, in order to develop reform proposals on the basis that “form follows function”. Neither the current EU strategy papers on priorities for the upcoming General Assembly nor those on the future of multilateralism have much to say about

ECOSOC or the HLPF.<sup>74</sup> One possibility would be to think about better combining the advantages of both institutions: the HLPF attracts many highly motivated participants from all member states but has a restricted mandate and duration, while ECOSOC is a principal organ of the UN meeting all year round with a far-reaching mandate and apparatus, and representatives from fifty-four member states.<sup>75</sup> The circumstance that the reviews of both institutions are to remain linked offers the opportunity to continue to improve the interplay of ECOSOC and HLPF processes. Especially if a thorough restructuring of ECOSOC is off the table for the foreseeable, it could make great sense to optimise utilisation of existing synergies. The German government should also continue to develop longer-term reform visions for a more impactful UN sustainability council.<sup>76</sup> That means remaining in discussion with interested partners both within the EU and globally.

## Future UN Reforms: Conflict Lines and Lessons Learned

Altogether the analysis shows that in the year of the UN's 75th anniversary there was little appetite for incisive or extensive change. Behind that fact lie motives and conflict lines with which the German government and the EU need to grapple. UN reforms — more broadly than just in the process analysed here — are often obstructed by overarching conflict lines that are liable to remain relevant in future nego-

<sup>74</sup> Council of the European Union, *EU Priorities at the United Nations and the 75th United Nations General Assembly, September 2020–September 2021: Council Conclusions* (13 July 2020), Doc. no. 9401/20 (Brussels, 13 July 2020); European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council on Strengthening the EU's Contribution to Rules-based Multilateralism* (Brussels, 17 February 2021).

<sup>75</sup> Marianne Beisheim and Felicitas Fritzsche, *ECOSOC und HLPF Review 2021: Bau- und Andockstellen für einen vernetzten Multilateralismus* (Bonn: Global Policy Forum, March 2021).

<sup>76</sup> See the discussion in Marianne Beisheim, Cornelia Füllkrug-Weitzel, Lisi Maier, Imme Scholz, Silke Weinlich and Heidmarie Wiczorek-Zeul, *Reform Options for Effective UN Sustainable Development Governance* (Berlin: German Council for Sustainable Development, March 2021), [https://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/RNE\\_policy\\_paper\\_for\\_effective\\_UN-Sustainable\\_Development\\_Governance\\_1\\_March-2021.pdf](https://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/RNE_policy_paper_for_effective_UN-Sustainable_Development_Governance_1_March-2021.pdf) (accessed 2 December 2021).

tations. The issues here are sovereignty, power, values and interests.

### **Sovereignty reservations impede deeper and broader cooperation.**

Member states' fundamental reservations over sovereignty form a major obstacle to deeper cooperation in the UN. A broad majority is unwilling to risk their own sovereignty and the prohibition on interference in internal affairs, nor to countenance a supranational quality in UN processes. The relevance of this conflict line is reflected in the founding in early July 2021 of the Group of Friends in Defence of the Charter of the United Nations. Its founding members include the Republic of Belarus, the People's Republic of China, the Republic of Cuba, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation, the Syrian Arab Republic and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. This seventeen-member group advocates above all for the sovereign equality of states and the prohibition on interference in internal affairs. And it is also these states that most vocally articulate reservations over UN reforms, often with reference to the UN Charter. This is framed as a conflict of values and will therefore be especially hard to overcome.

Such misgivings are neither new nor restricted to the aforementioned states. Generally the literature notes that the UN member states have been unable to agree on anything more than weak arrangements for international environmental and sustainability governance.<sup>77</sup> Goals are set at the global level, but how they are concretely achieved remains the business of the member states. So what they wish to contribute to solving global problems – which activities they pursue to implement goals at home or elsewhere – remains the sovereign decision of each member state. Follow-up and review by the UN employs weak and mostly voluntary reporting mechanisms, if at all. The lower the status of the document – be it a legally binding treaty or, as in the case of the 2030 Agenda, a non-binding resolution of the General Assembly – the weaker the follow-up mechanisms accepted by the states tend to be. Complaints about capacity prob-

lems are frequently heard from the G77, often justified, sometimes a pretext. The Russian Federation argues that it is not appropriate to apply the hard monitoring and verification mechanisms of legally-binding agreements to the 2030 Agenda.

The conflict over national sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs is also reflected in disputes over the significance and interpretation of *human rights*.<sup>78</sup> The negotiations for the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs already saw conflicts about the extent to which the SDGs should be formulated in terms of human rights (both with respect to economic, social and cultural rights, and concerning political/civil rights, the latter above all in the context of SDG 16). In 2014/15 it proved impossible to “connect the SDGs systematically with the human rights system and thus to grant the political objectives a legally binding character”.<sup>79</sup>

More broadly, diverging interpretations of *individual rights versus group rights* are reflected in the debate about the principle of “leaving no one behind” that is foundational to the 2030 Agenda. The EU locates the principle at the level of the individual and advocates for special attention to be given to the rights and access of hitherto marginalised persons. On the other side, the G77 interprets the principle as meaning that weaker countries should not be left behind. The debate over the “*right to development*” plays out in a similar way: While the developing countries interpret it as a right for states and demand a transformation of the international (economic) order, the industrialised countries regard it more as an obligation on developing countries to institute internal reforms to ensure that their citizens can realise their right to development.<sup>80</sup> This conflict line too will remain important in future negotiations.

<sup>77</sup> See for example, Marjanneke J. Vijge et al., “Governance through Global Goals”, in *Architectures of Earth System Governance: Institutional Complexity and Structural Transformation*, ed. Frank Biermann and Rakhyun E. Kim (Cambridge [UK], 2020), 254 – 74.

<sup>78</sup> Above all in the context of the debates over “humanitarian intervention”. See Peter Rudolf, *Menschenrechte und Souveränität: Zur normativen Problematik “humanitärer Intervention”*, SWP-Studie 40/2001 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, December 2001).

<sup>79</sup> Walter Eberlei, “Global nachhaltige Entwicklung mitgestalten: Agenda 2030 und Zivilgesellschaft”, in *Entwicklungspolitik in Zeiten der SDGs*, ed. Tobias Deibel (Duisburg and Bonn: Institut für Entwicklung und Frieden, 2018), 89 – 92 (90).

<sup>80</sup> Felix Kirchmeier, *The Right to Development – Where Do We Stand?* Occasional Paper 23 (Geneva: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2006), 10, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/global/50288.pdf>; Karin Arts and Atabongawung Tamo, “The Right to Development in International Law: New Momentum Thirty Years



In relation to external and internal sovereignty, many member states, including the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China (China), also reject (expanding) participation of *non-state actors* in UN processes, believing that to compromise the inter-governmental character of the forum, respectively the UN as a whole. The “no objection” procedure demanded in the negotiations has already been established in the area of human rights.<sup>81</sup> The question of which non-state actors to include, and how, is also contested. The Russian Federation and certain developing countries and emerging economies are content to include business and sometimes also scientific and academic representatives. But it is increasingly hard for human rights groups to gain access.<sup>82</sup> ECOSOC is responsible for the UN's cooperation with non-state actors, and hosts the Committee on NGOs, where elected UN member states decide which non-state organisations are granted consultative status. The mandates for the 2030 Agenda and the HLPF call for comprehensive participation by stakeholders in the implementation of the SDGs and in all processes of the HLPF. The Committee on NGOs should not stand in the way of such activities. The EU states together with the United States should resume more active advocacy on this question.

### Concerns over loss of power impede UN reforms.

Concerns about losing power, influence or other benefits of the status quo drive all involved: the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (P5 states),<sup>83</sup> the EU and the G77 alike. The latter fear dominance by the Global North, the former being outvoted by the majority. This also reflects a deep mistrust between the UN states, which often suspect that the respective other side is pursuing a “hidden

agenda” through reform proposals. Overstretch could be another reason for representatives of states with thinly staffed UN missions to tend towards caution. They hope to at least avoid relative loss of power for which their government might reprimand them.

*Geopolitical* conflicts also play a role in torpedoing negotiations at the UN. For example the Middle East conflict creates problems in almost every resolution and negotiated declaration on the issue of sustainability because the G77 routinely demands a clause on “occupied territories”.<sup>84</sup> For this reason in 2018 and 2019 the ministerial declaration of the HLPF had to be adopted by majority vote. Similarly, developments in parallel negotiations or at political summits can have positive or negative effects. In general the sharpening system rivalry between the United States and China is not conducive to negotiations on UN reforms. In January 2020, the United States asserted that China is subverting DESA and other UN organisations and named a special envoy to address this.<sup>85</sup>

Finally, where questions of power are concerned, the delicacy of the cohesion of the G77+China must be noted. Some members doubtless disagree with certain aspects of the course adopted by the stronger states in the negotiating group. They comply because they do not want to lose the group's backing. Occasionally states cautiously distance themselves from the group position before or after a vote. There have been attempts to motivate individual countries to dissent with the group's position. If common interests are discernible, offers of cooperation can certainly

<sup>84</sup> For example in the 2021 HLPF ministerial declaration: “We call for further effective measures and actions to be taken, in conformity with international law, to remove the obstacles to the full realization of the right to self-determination of peoples living under colonial and foreign occupation, which continue to adversely affect their economic and social development as well as their environment.” See United Nations, *Ministerial Declaration of the High-level Segment of the 2021 Session of the Economic and Social Council and of the 2021 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development* (July 2021), paragraph 29, [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/28530MD\\_Rev4\\_for\\_Silence\\_Procedure.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/28530MD_Rev4_for_Silence_Procedure.pdf) (accessed 22 July 2021).

<sup>85</sup> Colum Lynch, “U.S. State Department Appoints Envoy to Counter Chinese Influence at the U.N.”, *Foreign Policy* (online), 22 January 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/22/us-state-department-appoints-envoy-counter-chinese-influence-un-trump/> (accessed 22 July 2021); see also Courtney J. Fung and Shing-hon Lam, “Chinas ‘bürokratischer Fußabdruck’ in den UN”, *Vereinte Nationen* 68, no. 6 (2020): 243–48.

Down the Line?” *Netherlands International Law Review* 63, no. 3 (2016): 221–49 (224).

<sup>81</sup> International Service for Human Rights, “States Should Reject Procedure That Results in Exclusion of Non-government Organisations from UN” (1 February 2013), <https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/states-should-reject-procedure-results-exclusion-non-government-organisations-un/> (accessed 22 July 2021).

<sup>82</sup> Kristin M. Bakke et al., “When States Crack Down on Human Rights Defenders”, *International Studies Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2020): 85–96.

<sup>83</sup> China, France the Russian Federation, the United States and the United Kingdom.

make sense. But from the power perspective there is little incentive to leave the UN's largest negotiating block.

### Old conflicts of interest between environment and development resurface.

The conflict lines described above are closely interwoven with various *conflicts of interests and values*. Behind disagreements over sustainability issues is often fear of trade-offs between environment and development. This starts with general questions about blame and responsibility for non-sustainable development and often ends in bickering over terms such as “green economy” and now also “green recovery”. Developing countries fear that their growth opportunities could be curtailed by regulations and by conditions imposed on their financing options.

Another important interest of the donor countries plays into the question of UN reforms, namely *budget and resource questions*. Firstly, hardly any country is willing to increase its contribution to the UN's core budget. The national finance ministries object to such commitments, blocking any reform proposals with programme budgetary implications. Secondly, financing for (sustainable) development is a big issue. This often concerns questions of *fairness*; in the sustainability context known as the conflict over Common But Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR).<sup>86</sup> The negotiations on the 2030 Agenda have papered over this conflict – without resolving it.<sup>87</sup>

One conflict about values that often complicates the conclusion of UN negotiations concerns family and gender issues, including abortion. Disputes about these issues are a long-standing conflict line that was already dominant at the global conferences of the

1990s.<sup>88</sup> The Russian Federation, the G77+China and the Holy See also expressed their conservative positions on these questions in the negotiations on the resolutions on the ECOSOC and HLPF reviews.

Lastly, “pet issues” of individual member states or diplomats may play a role. They sometimes want treaties and processes associated with their country to remain internationally visible. One example would be the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, upon which Japan places great value. Similarly, Switzerland does not want to see the UN's Geneva location sidelined. UN ambassadors tend to push for references to resolutions and declarations that they played an important role in negotiating. Sweden, for example, wanted to see the 2019 political declaration of the HLPF referenced in the resolution.

The experience of the negotiations for the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda demonstrates that a stocktaking process can be helpful at the beginning of negotiations.<sup>89</sup> That means clarifying sensitivities at an early stage, identifying old and new conflicts, resolving misunderstandings, establishing ownership of outcomes and exploring an acceptable narrative complete with an agreed vocabulary for thorny issues. This was especially difficult in online negotiations during the pandemic, which offered too little scope for confidential exchange. Suitable venues should be created, also in order to tackle the big issues involved in the overarching conflict lines.

### Outlook: “Our Common Agenda” – a Window of Opportunity

The current “bottom up” models of global governance are sovereignty-friendly but ill-suited for “*Transforming Our World*”, as the title of the 2030 Agenda puts it. Beyond merely setting global goals, one necessary next step would be to multilaterally agree concrete policy guidelines for achieving them.

The Declaration on the Commemoration of the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the United Nations states: “The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is our road map and its implementation a

<sup>86</sup> See also Clara Nobbe, *Universality, Common But Differentiated Responsibilities and the Sustainable Development Goals*, Working Paper, Global Issues Division, 2015/01 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, April 2015).

<sup>87</sup> Manuel Rivera, “Entpolitisierung im Konsens: Ein kritischer Blick auf die Entstehung der SDG”, in *Globale politische Ziele*, ed. Philipp Lepenies and Elena Sondermann (Baden-Baden, 2017), 219–46; see Jean-Philippe Thérien and Vincent Pouliot, “Global Governance as Patchwork: The Making of the Sustainable Development Goals”, *Review of International Political Economy* 27, no. 3 (2020): 612–36 (629). The latter speak of “normative bricolage that conceals deep value cleavages” (p. 629).

<sup>88</sup> Brozus, *Globale Konflikte oder Global Governance?* (see note 17), 210.

<sup>89</sup> Pamela S. Chasek and Lynn M. Wagner, “Breaking the Mold: A New Type of Multilateral Sustainable Development Negotiation”, *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics* 16, no. 3 (2016): 397–413.

necessity for our survival. Urgent efforts are required. Therefore, we are not here to celebrate. We are here to take action.”<sup>90</sup> Twelve “commitments” follow, one of which is: “We will upgrade the United Nations” (paragraph 14). At the end of the Declaration the member states call on the UN Secretary-General to “report back ... with recommendations to advance our common agenda and to respond to current and future challenges”.

The UN Secretary-General tabled his response, a report titled “Our Common Agenda”, in September 2021 (see Box 3, p. 30). The upcoming debate on the report offers a window of opportunity to make progress on necessary UN reforms.

The report mentions ECOSOC and the HLPF only at the margins. The same can be said of the German government’s May 2021 white paper on multilateralism:<sup>91</sup> even though Germany is virtually a de facto permanent member of the Economic and Social Council and supplies a significant portion of its budget. On the basis of its established coordinating function and its new Coordination Segment, ECOSOC could become an important node in a more closely networked multilateralism. The HLPF already represents a highly innovative incubator for inclusive and networked multilateralism, as indicated by its panels with contributions from across the spectrum of the UN system, the large number of voluntary national and now also local reviews, the parallel forums, the number and quality of side events with extensive stakeholder participation, and all in all its thematically integrated, participatory and inclusive work.<sup>92</sup>

At the same time the analysis of the negotiations on the HLPF and ECOSOC reviews reveals a deep conflict between the member states over precisely this type of multilateralism, being broader than purely intergovernmental relations. While it is unlikely that this will be resolved any time soon an attempt could at least be made to build bridges. For example multi-stakeholder initiatives could be integrated more closely with classical intergovernmental processes

and structures. To this end, the Alliance for Multilateralism could work to better connect its pioneering initiatives with UN processes. That would also mean upgrading the UN partnership structures. The annual ECOSOC Partnership Forum could achieve greater visibility through its interaction with the new ECOSOC Coordination Segment.<sup>93</sup> The HLPF’s mandate includes offering “a platform for partnerships”.<sup>94</sup> But instead of merely offering a platform it would make more sense to develop a coherent UN approach orientated on legitimate and effective partnerships.<sup>95</sup> The report proposes strengthening the UN Office on Partnerships.<sup>96</sup> In the past funding questions were a problem.<sup>97</sup> Now digital solutions are regarded as the way forward. In the Strengthening Institutions action area of the Alliance for Multilateralism Germany should work to develop a proposal for an effective UN networking node for multi-stakeholder initiatives. Ideally a revamped office and/or digital hub would enable both the member states and the UN bureaucracy to support partnerships competently and efficiently.

With the Alliance for Multilateralism the new German government is well positioned to intervene more proactively in the UN reform discussions. To date Germany has engaged in New York above all in the debate on reforming the UN Security Council. As a non-permanent member of the Security Council Germany has formed the Group of Friends on Climate and Security and has been driving the “Women, Peace and Security” agenda. Given that, it is likely worthwhile to include ECOSOC and the HLPF in a more strongly integrated (UN reform) strategy.<sup>98</sup> Every two

<sup>93</sup> UNGA, *Review of the Implementation, A: ECOSOC* (A/RES/75/290 A) (see note 50), paragraph 15.

<sup>94</sup> UNGA, *Format and Organizational Aspects* (A/RES/67/290) (see note 3), paragraph 8c.

<sup>95</sup> See also UNGA, *Declaration on the Commemoration of the Seventy-fifth Anniversary* (A/RES/75/1) (see note 90), paragraph 16 on boosting partnerships.

<sup>96</sup> See UN, *Our Common Agenda – Report of the Secretary-General* (New York, 2021), p. 75, paragraph 122, <https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/> (accessed 14 October 2021).

<sup>97</sup> Marianne Beisheim and Nils Simon, “Multistakeholder Partnerships for the SDGs: Actors’ Views on UN Metagovernance”, *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations* 24, no. 4 (2018): 211–230.

<sup>98</sup> See also Marianne Beisheim and Felicitas Fritzsche, “Foreign Sustainability Policy”, in *German Foreign Policy in Transition: Volatile Conditions, New Momentum*, ed. Günther

<sup>90</sup> UNGA, *Declaration on the Commemoration of the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the United Nations*, A/RES/75/1 (New York, September 2020), paragraph 6, <https://undocs.org/A/RES/75/1> (accessed 12 August 2021).

<sup>91</sup> The Federal Government, *A Multilateralism for the People: Federal Government White Paper* (Berlin, 2021).

<sup>92</sup> Marianne Beisheim and Felicitas Fritzsche, “Für einen vernetzten Multilateralismus”, *Peace Lab* (blog), 18 January 2021, <https://peacelab.blog/2021/01/fuer-einen-vernetzten-multilateralismus/> (accessed 12 July 2021).



Box 3

### The Report “Our Common Agenda”<sup>a</sup>

In “Our Common Agenda” UN Secretary-General António Guterres addresses all twelve commitments laid out in the Declaration on the Commemoration of the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the United Nations. As a result the report’s scope is rather broad and contains a multitude of proposals.<sup>b</sup> After outlining the problem, the four main chapters cover (1) “a renewed social contract”, (2) a new generational contract, (3) “a new global deal to deliver global public goods” and (4) “adapting the United Nations”.

Guterres lays out his vision of an inclusive and networked multilateralism, arguing that the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the fragility of our interconnected world. An inclusive and networked approach can make multilateral action more effective and resilient, he writes, especially in connection with the Decade of Action on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs declared by the UN member states. “Inclusive” means mobilising and including all relevant actors including non-state stakeholders. “Networked”, Guterres writes, means drawing together “existing institutional capacities”, so as to ensure that all are working together towards a common goal, solving complex problems across sectors effectively and efficiently.

**a** UN, *Our Common Agenda – Report of the Secretary-General* (New York, 2021), <https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/> (accessed 14 October 2021). The report was prepared by a UN team led by Volker Türk (Assistant Secretary-General for Strategic Coordination in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General). The work was supported by intense consultation processes.

The report contains many other proposals for institutional reforms, including the following recommendations:

- A “Summit of the Future” in 2023 with preparatory processes including “UN Futures Labs”.
- A Strategic Foresight and Global Risk Report (every five years) and an Emergency Platform for complex global crises.
- A UN Special Envoy for Future Generations and a UN Youth Office.
- A repurposed Trusteeship Council to function as a multi-stakeholder body to tackle emerging challenges and to serve as a deliberative forum to act on behalf of succeeding generations.
- A High-level Advisory Board on improved governance of global public goods.
- Civil society focal points in all United Nations entities.
- A Biennial Summit on financing between the Group of 20, the Economic and Social Council, the Secretary-General and the heads of international financial institutions.

**b** For a good overview, see “Key Proposals across the 12 Commitments”, *ibid.*, 6f., or [https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common\\_Agenda\\_Key\\_Proposals\\_English.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Key_Proposals_English.pdf) (accessed 14 October 2021).

years the German government prepares a retrospective report on cooperation with the United Nations that is discussed in the cabinet. Perhaps even more important would be a coherent annual *UN Strategy*, to plan and coordinate the German government’s future activities. If a first such strategy can be drawn up in 2022, it should also consider which of the UN Secretary-General’s reform proposals Germany wishes to support and how, which issues the EU should address in ECOSOC, and what contribution Germany wishes to make to the 2022 HLPF.

Maihold, Stefan Mair, Melanie Müller, Judith Vorrath, and Christian Wagner, SWP Research Paper (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, December 2021, forthcoming), 58–60.

## Abbreviations

BMZ	Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development
CBDR	Common But Differentiated Responsibilities
DCF	Development Cooperation Forum
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council (UN)
FfD	ECOSOC Forum on Financing for Development
G77	Group of 77 (negotiating coalition of countries of the Global South)
GSDR	Global Sustainable Development Report
HAS	Humanitarian Affairs Segment (of ECOSOC)
HLPF	High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (UN)
HLS	High-level Segment (of ECOSOC)
IISD	International Institute for Sustainable Development (Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada)
LDCs	Least Developed Countries
LLDCs	Landlocked Developing Countries
MGoS	Major Groups and other Stakeholders
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OAS	Operational Activities for Development Segment (of ECOSOC)
QCPR	Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
UN DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
VLR	Voluntary Local Review
VNR	Voluntary National Review

## Further Reading

Marianne Beisheim

**UN-General Assembly of “Hope”.  
A More Collaborative Debate, an  
Innovative Report, and an SDG Moment**  
SWP Comment 53/2021, Oktober 2021

Marianne Beisheim and Felicitas Fritzsche

**“Foreign Sustainability Policy”**  
in *German Foreign Policy in Transition: Volatile Conditions,  
New Momentum*, ed. Günther Maihold, Stefan Mair,  
Melanie Müller, Judith Vorrath, and Christian Wagner,  
SWP Research Paper (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft  
und Politik, December 2021, forthcoming), 58 – 60.

