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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development: An orchestrator, more or less?

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Abstract

The UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) is at the heart of the UN's follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Analysing the first full cycle of the HLPF (2016–19), we ask *what and how the HLPF delivers*. In the early debates on its mandate, experts suggested that the HLPF could be an *orchestrator*, arguing that it would likely have to rely upon indirect and non-hierarchical forms of governance. Others asked for more or expected less. For the analysis of the HLPF's (orchestration) qualities, we study the proceedings of the HLPF and specifically the HLPF's review of SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions, one of the most contested goals and therefore an interesting hard case. Taken together, DESA as the secretariat of the HLPF does indeed use orchestration to make the most out of the forum's mandate, both through convening and shaping third actors' activities. Political conflicts and limited resources, however, negatively impact what they can do and what the HLPF can deliver. The results of the UN's recent negotiations on the review of the HLPF's 'format and organizational aspects' (2020–21) did not change that.

1 | THE HLPF IN THE LITERATURE

The High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) is at the heart of the United Nation's (UN) sustainable development governance. UN member states established the HLPF at the 2012 Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development as 'a universal, intergovernmental high-level political forum' (UNGA, 2012, para. 84) and in 2013 adopted the resolution on the HLPF's mandate (UNGA, 2013). In 2014/15, in the context of the negotiations of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development (Dodds et al., 2016; Kamau et al., 2018), they assigned the HLPF with 'a central role in overseeing follow-up and review at the global level' (UNGA, 2015, para. 47).

In our analysis, we will discuss the HLPF's proceedings and deliverables. The early literature expected the HLPF to be an orchestrator. Others argued for something stronger, an 'apex body' that reviews implementation and takes decisions. Again others warned of yet another weak institution that does not add any value. Almost mid-way through to 2030, the governance around the SDGs and the HLPF's *actual* performance has not gained much scholarly attention (Sianes, 2021). Our empirical research asks *what the HLPF delivers and how*. For the 'what' we check against the deliverables in the HLPF's mandate. The forum is supposed to deliver: (i) follow-up and review; (ii) a platform for dialogue and action-oriented agenda-setting; and (iii) political leadership and guidance. For our analysis of 'how' the HLPF delivers, we check the HLPF's

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proceedings, the thematic week and the ministerial segment as well as the many parallel events. This comprises orchestration activities, especially in the context of an in-depth study of the review of SDG 16 in 2019.

Most of the literature on the HLPF stems from the time of the HLPF's creation. In an early study commissioned by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), Bernstein (2013, p. 35) pictures the HLPF as the 'dedicated home for sustainable development in the UN system' and suggests it should be an 'orchestrator, building links to intermediaries' within the UN system as well as other international organizations, (public-)private networks, and stakeholder initiatives in the broader sustainable development governance architecture. Orchestration has been defined as an indirect and non-hierarchical mode of governance where 'one actor, the orchestrator, enlists the voluntary assistance of a second actor, the intermediary to govern a third actor, the target, in line with the orchestrator's goals' (Abbott et al., 2015b, p. 349). The orchestrator 'engages an intermediary, on a voluntary basis, to pursue shared governance goals', the former steers through inducements, the latter voluntarily accepts this (Abbott et al., 2020b, p. 15). An example is international organizations that orchestrate NGOs to monitor state compliance (Tallberg, 2015), something we also see in the HLPF's follow-up and review.

Later, in light of its mandate and resources, Abbott and Bernstein (2015, p. 222) argue that the HLPF must orchestrate 'by default and by design'. Scrutinizing the HLPF, they conclude that its 'mandate is vast, but its legal authority and resources are highly constrained' (Abbott & Bernstein, 2015, p. 231). Nonetheless, the HLPF has in their view a high degree of legitimacy and can be considered a focal actor, due to its universal membership and its connections to both, the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the UN General Assembly (UNGA). In addition to this, they put forward that there are various intermediaries available, such as other UN agencies, including ECOSOC, or other international or regional organizations, partnership schemes and transnational actors. In fact, as Bernstein (2017, p. 222) points out, the HLPF entered 'a crowded field of orchestrators' and 'must therefore be an orchestrator of orchestrators that promotes coordination within a fragmented system'. All of this, Abbott and Bernstein (2015, p. 231) conclude, makes orchestration 'the best available governance strategy' for the HLPF. They even put forward that 'the HLPF's success should be evaluated in terms of its role as orchestrator, not in the traditional terms of rules and enforcement' (Abbott & Bernstein, 2015, p. 231). At the same time, Abbott and Bernstein (2015, p. 225) claim that a certain minimum level of 'authority and resources' may be required, 'below which institutions cannot even orchestrate'.

While Abbott and Bernstein (2015, p. 223) caution that successful orchestration by the HLPF is uncertain,

Policy Implications

- The next review of the HLPF's format and organizational aspects will happen in early 2024. UN member states should commit to providing DESA with a mandate and budget that sufficiently enable and support its orchestration activities.
- Interested actors should continue to push for a mandate and resources to follow-up the HLPF's outcomes, appraising the HLPF's reviews, plenary sessions and also parallel events. DESA should be mandated to identify relevant findings and promising actions for peer learning.
- Member states should use the new annual ECOSOC coordination segment in February for discussing those findings and actions, not only for coordinating the ECOSOC system but for giving political guidance to relevant international decision- and policy-making processes.
- The UN should also seek ways to at least loosely couple the HLPF's informal parallel events with the official proceedings.

they object to the idea that the HLPF could have been 'cynically designed to fail'. In that vein, some had warned that the forum could become 'another talk-shop' (Espey et al., 2015, p. 30). Dimitrov (2020, p. 627) draws similarities between the HLPF and its predecessor, the Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD) (see also Andresen, 2007; Kaasa, 2007; Wagner, 2005), which he views as an empty institution, defined as being intentionally designed by UN member states to be without capacity, producing no outputs in terms of 'regulatory policymaking or policy implementation'. Building on the Secretary-General's report on lessons learned from the CSD, Bernstein (2013, p. 3) suggested the new forum 'should do everything the CSD did and more'.

Before Rio+20, experts had suggested upgrading the CSD to a Sustainable Development Council (modelled after the Human Rights Council); and afterwards, there was hope that the HLPF could become an 'apex body' that reviews implementation, takes decisions and delivers political guidance, thereby ultimately steering the UN system's efforts on the 2030 Agenda and SDGs (IISD, 2015; Strandenaes, 2012, 2015), also recalled by two of our respondents (I, 27 February 2021; III, 28 February 2020). But member states could not agree on a stronger institutional set-up with elements of hierarchical steering. Several NGOs still call to turn the HLPF into an institution with such powers (Forus, 2019;

Women's Major Group, 2021). Similarly some scholars call for more 'hierarchization' in sustainable development governance (Kim et al., 2020), going 'beyond simple interplay management and orchestration by more structural change that establishes hierarchical orders among institutions and actors in global governance' (Biermann & Kim, 2020, p. 9). And some suggest the HLPF could serve as a 'focal point' in that context (Vijge et al., 2020, p. 259).

The above articles and their analyses, however, are not based on an empirical account of the actual (orchestration) work of the HLPF after 2015. This is the gap we want to fill.

2 | ASSESSING THE HLPF'S DELIVERABLES AND PROCEEDINGS – ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODS

An international forum does not govern or orchestrate by itself. We need to consider *agency*, i.e. *who orchestrates* (see also Abbott et al., 2020a). In the UN, the most relevant actors are the member states. As regards the HLPF, those member states that hold the ECOSOC Presidency and the ECOSOC Bureau decide on the programme of the forum. Together they are five Permanent Representatives from the UN regions and elected annually (UN, 1992, rule 18–20). The literature often identifies the international organization's secretariats as orchestrators (Abbott et al., 2020a). The early literature on the HLPF adopts this approach (e.g. Bernstein, 2013) and our findings correspond to this. The secretariat for the HLPF is located within DESA. Beyond that, when investigating instances of orchestration, we also need to take into account the 'third UN', encompassing stakeholders working within the UN context (Carayannis & Weiss, 2021). The 2013 resolution on the HLPF grants the 'Major Groups and other Stakeholders' (MGoS), which consist inter alia of representatives from civil society organizations, academia, or the private sector, comprehensive participation rights (UNGA, 2013, para. 14). The 2030 Agenda calls on these non-state actors to support the implementation of the SDGs and their follow-up and review during the HLPF (UNGA, 2015). Hence, they may be seen as potential intermediaries and target actors.

The HLPF's *mandate* is broad (UNGA, 2013, 2015, 2016). We focus on three mandated deliverables. Member states agreed that the HLPF shall have 'a central role in overseeing a network of follow-up and review processes at the global level' (UNGA, 2015, para. 82). Accordingly, the HLPF features thematic and SDG reviews as well as all Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). In a broader sense, second, the forum should be a platform 'for regular dialogue and for stocktaking and

agenda-setting' (UNGA, 2013, para. 18). In this context, there are other mandated deliverables like discussing challenges for countries in special situations, considering new and emerging issues, enhancing integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development, or providing a platform for partnerships as part of the forum's 'action-oriented agenda' (UNGA, 2013, para. 2). As for the outcome, third, member states agreed that the HLPF should 'provide political leadership, guidance and recommendations' (UNGA, 2013, para. 2). For this, member states negotiate and adopt a declaration.

The forum meets annually for eight days in July under the auspices of ECOSOC, and, in addition, every four years for up to two days in September at the level of heads of state and government under the auspices of the UNGA. In terms of *proceedings*, the annual HLPF starts with a five-day long *thematic week* during which the progress on the SDGs and overarching themes is assessed in thematic and SDG reviews. During the three-day long *ministerial segment*, national progress reports are presented. At its end, the outcome document has to be adopted, which is a negotiated ministerial declaration in those years when the HLPF meets under the auspices of the ECOSOC. In parallel to these formal proceedings, there are many side and special events. Every four years, a political declaration is adopted by heads of state and government when the HLPF meets under the auspices of the UNGA in September, the so-called *SDG Summit*. As its format is very different from the annual HLPF under the auspices of ECOSOC we do not cover it in great detail here.

We take these mandates and distinctions as point of departure for our analysis of what the HLPF delivers and how, scanning specifically for forms of *orchestration*. Abbott et al. (2015a) conceptualize various techniques for enlistment: convening intermediaries, coordinating them, setting their agenda and offering administrative or financial assistance or endorsement, for example by including them in the official proceedings. Abbott and Snidal (2009) differentiate between directive (more hierarchical and conditional) and facilitative (entirely indirect and non-hierarchical) orchestration. Later, however, they find that this distinction conflated regulatory governance and orchestration (Abbott & Snidal, 2013). Hale and Roger (2014, p. 64) differentiate between orchestration that is 'initiating' new or that is 'shaping' existing intermediaries. We concur with the literature that there are more and less invasive forms of orchestration. First, a softer, discreet form of orchestration would be *convening*. This comprises offering a platform or any other format to bring together actors. Second, *shaping* the activities of the intermediaries would be a more pro-active form of orchestration. Agenda-setting and guiding forms of coordination may be techniques for this (Abbott et al., 2015a). For both forms, 'support is the key tool' through which orchestrators generate the incentives

to enlist intermediaries (Abbott et al., 2020a, p. 235). This may refer to providing either material support, for example direct financial or administrative assistance, or ideational support, for example endorsement of intermediaries to increase their social authority (Abbott et al., 2015a).

For our assessment, we combine a broader analysis of the HLPF's proceedings in the first cycle (2016–2019) (Beisheim, 2018; Beisheim et al., 2022; Beisheim & Bernstein, 2020) with an in-depth study of the HLPF's 2019 review of SDG 16 (Fritzsche, 2020). We use primary data, including official documents, participatory observations from all proceedings of the forum since its creation and the official negotiations of its reform and many detailed background conversations with at least 65 contacts at the UN, with member states, and involved non-state actors, following a strategy of long-term engagement and trust-building against an understanding of anonymity. We also conducted five formal interviews on the review of SDG 16. We complement this with secondary data (existing analyses of the HLPF). For an in-depth study of how orchestration happens at the HLPF, we analyse the review of SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). That review makes an interesting 'hard case' as SDG 16 and its 12 targets had been among the most contested during the negotiations of the SDGs, mainly due to sovereignty concerns and controversial issues like good governance or securitization (McDermott et al., 2019). Due to the need to compromise, many of the targets are broad and ambiguous and, therefore, also hard to monitor (Ivanovic et al., 2018); plus, for most targets and indicators there was no pre-established monitoring system that the HLPF could build on. Hence, it is particularly difficult for the forum to deliver on its mandate.

2.1 | Assessing the HLPF's deliverables and proceedings: What does the HLPF deliver and how?

2.1.1 | Thematic week: Reviewing SDGs and cross-cutting issues

The HLPF's first thematic week consists of *thematic and SDG reviews* which start with panel presentations before an 'interactive debate'. Panels focus on cross-cutting issues related to the intergovernmentally agreed annual theme or are dedicated to in-depth reviews of the intergovernmentally pre-selected SDGs in focus. There are also panel sessions on the results of related meetings like the five Regional Sustainable Development Forums, as well as for specific country groups and one organized by the MGoS. DESA organizes these sessions, but DESA's orchestration efforts start earlier. For the in-depth reviews of focus SDGs DESA organizes preparatory events to mobilize and convene actors

from the UN system, member states, stakeholders and experts. DESA staff, in collaboration with other UN custodian agencies, drafts the programme and a concept note for these preparatory meetings.

For the *SDG 16 review in 2019*, interviewees recognized DESA as the lead actor (Interview I, 27 February 2020; Interview V, 12 March 2020). DESA together with the International Development Law Organization (IDLO) and the Italian government organized a preparatory conference (IDLO, 2019). Stakeholders perceived this as a good opportunity for mobilization (Interview I, 27 February 2020). Funding issues, however, led to a postponement of the conference, as DESA first had to fundraise (Interview II, 28 February 2020); this created scepticism whether the results would be taken forward (Interview I, 27 February 2020).

DESA uses the preparatory events described above also to shape the HLPF's agenda. Results are documented in background notes that shall inform panellists and other participants at the official HLPF panel sessions (Interview II, 28 February 2020). The ECOSOC President and DESA also call for and coordinate other substantive inputs from the UN system and from stakeholders. These are compiled in reports, that is, a synthesis of submissions by ECOSOC's functional commissions and other intergovernmental bodies and forums, and a note on those by MGoS. In the case of the SDG 16 review, stakeholders welcomed the call for these inputs. At the same time some interviewees questioned the effect of the background paper compiled by DESA (Interview I, 27 February 2020). All these materials are put on the HLPF's website. But they are neither well known nor well used (Beisheim, 2018).

Despite all orchestration efforts, the HLPF's thematic and SDG review panels suffer from a 'bottleneck' problem (see also Interview III, 28 February 2020). DESA's preparatory efforts, the analyses done and buzz created do not always come to fruition during the forum's meetings. For the SDG 16 review, for example, one interviewee indicated that the connection between the preparatory stage and the review panel was not clear (Interview V, 12 March 2020). It is the ECOSOC Presidency and Bureau that decide upon the programme of the annual HLPF and many seek to influence quota-driven panels. One of our respondents viewed the selection process as not transparent (Interview I, 27 February). Moreover, DESA has low control over speakers' agenda as they often cannot cover travel costs. Thus, panellists tend to pursue their own topics. Carefully compiled background papers with guiding questions are frequently ignored (Beisheim, 2018). One of the five ECOSOC Bureau members chairs these sessions and often chooses to close with a pre-written summary. In an attempt to substantiate the discussions, DESA introduced expert moderators for most sessions of the thematic week. During the review of SDG 16, the

Director General of IDLO served as moderator and the Italian Deputy Ministry of Foreign Affairs as panellist. And it was only them (and later the NGO major group) who referred to the preparatory conference. But some aspects from the preparatory stage were carried forward, albeit basic ones such as that SDG 16 is an enabling goal or that lack of data is a challenge (Interview II, 28 February 2020).

During the thematic review of SDG 16 in 2019, the majority of the 32 member states, three non-state actors and one other intergovernmental organization delivered pre-written statements. The session did not feature new commitments or other impulses for the further process of implementation. Accordingly, our interviewees characterized the session as ‘not moving the needle’ (Interview I, 27 February 2020; Interview V, 12 March 2020). Even though member states voice discontent with the format of these reviews, they tend to disagree about how to better organize them (as could be again observed during the 2020/21 negotiations on the HLPF’s reforms, see Beisheim, 2020, 2021).

We were presented with different assessments of the deliverables of the review of SDG 16 in 2019: One of our respondents questioned the contribution of the HLPF altogether (Interview I, 27 February 2020). Others were critical about the actual effects of the review panel, but still acknowledged the value of key messages (Interview V, 12 March 2020; Interview IV, 5 March 2020). And another respondent argued that the emphasis on the importance of SDG 16 by member states was an achievement in itself, considering its contentious nature (Interview II, 28 February 2020). This demonstrates that the SDG reviews do not deliver leadership or tough follow-up. But those interested in SDG 16 assess the forum as a means to continue the dialogue and keep their themes on the UN’s agenda.

3 | MINISTERIAL SEGMENT: VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS AND MINISTERIAL DECLARATION

In terms of participation, the *voluntary national reviews* (VNRs) are a success: 176 countries delivered one or more VNR, with 247 VNRs in total until including 2021. During the first cycle, however, the reports as well as their discussions were not always convincing. VNR presentations tend to be superficial, also because presenting delegations have only 10–15 minutes. Showcasing of what has been done or is planned dominates. For example, assessments of countries’ reporting practices on SDG 16 highlight that many countries acknowledge the importance of implementing SDG 16 and report on mainstreaming efforts, but only few present strategic approaches on how they (will) implement the targets (GIZ and TAP Network, 2020; Partners for

Review, 2019). Moreover, what is presented as success is most of the time not based on thorough evaluations.

In 2014–2016, when member states were discussing the VNRs’ format, the aversion of many to opening themselves up to international oversight became apparent. Many feared ‘finger pointing’ and that reviews could be too ‘prescriptive’ (Beisheim, 2015, 2021). Hence, one would expect that this restrains DESA in its orchestration activities. In fact, background conversations confirm that this is a balancing act. Nevertheless much convening and shaping orchestration is possible. DESA frames all its activities in a positive, encouraging way and avoids criticism. But DESA also supports expert discussants and the MGoS to participate in the interactive discussion of the VNRs and their contributions tend to be critical. DESA regularly invites member states, experts, and stakeholders to further develop the ‘voluntary common reporting guidelines’ for the VNRs. Moreover, DESA convenes up to three global workshops for so-called ‘focal point’ delegates from VNR countries, including a session with experts and stakeholders (DESA, 2021b). Their annual Handbook and a database outline good practices. And, indeed, the quality of written VNR reports has improved over time (De Oliveira & Kindornay, 2021; Partners for Review, 2019).

The literature, however, finds that the VNRs are only a soft peer-learning mechanism (Beisheim, 2018; Bexell & Jönsson, 2019; Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2019; Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al., 2018; Qerimi, 2022). As such, nevertheless, they foster dialogue and knowledge exchange and also contribute to the overall review of implementation. Some of DESA’s orchestration work comes to fruition here. But when it comes to successful ‘shaping’ there is room for improvement. The VNR guidelines are often not followed (cf. Committee for Development Policy, 2021). For example, countries reporting for the second or third time rarely reflect upon feedback received in the previous round(s). And the VNRs’ overall findings do neither inform the outcome document nor global policy making.

The HLPF’s outcome document is a non-binding *declaration* that is negotiated in advance and supposed to be adopted by consensus at the end of the HLPF’s ministerial segment (UNGA, 2013). The UN missions in New York run these negotiations and, thus, exert a high level of control. Non-state actors can be involved only if the two co-facilitators (two UN ambassadors who organize the negotiations at the invitation of the President of the UNGA) support this and no member state objects. Nevertheless, DESA orchestrates by inviting MGoS to provide input in advance which they then compile into a report. DESA also assists the co-facilitators with their expertise on relevant data and the inputs gathered and synthesized from intergovernmental bodies.

In the last few years, rising levels of politicization made the HLPF’s mandate to find consensus on the

annual declaration difficult. Negotiations are deeply entrenched in UN group dynamics around wording on politically contentious issues, including the right to self-determination of peoples living under colonial and foreign occupation, human rights, gender, sexual and reproductive health and rights, climate change, financing, and general sovereignty concerns (Beisheim, 2021). As a result, between 2016 and 2019, member states could not find consensus. The ECOSOC Presidents decided to put paragraphs and, in 2018 and 2019, the whole declaration to a majority vote (IISD, 2018). In 2020, the declaration could not be adopted at all because countries could not agree to use online voting (Earth Negotiations Bulletin, 2020). Due to these conflicts, the declarations often fall back on already agreed language with compromise wording. Moreover, since the declarations are pre-negotiated in May/June, they cannot feature insights from the work during the HLPF. As a result, the declarations do not convey strong and innovative political guidance for the further implementation of the SDGs. NGOs and experts lament this and demand more actionable outcomes (Forus, 2019; Hege et al., 2020; Women's Major Group, 2021). A stakeholder survey finds that 83 per cent of 234 respondents think that the ministerial declaration should provide more political guidance and recommendations, only 38 per cent view this aspect of the HLPF's mandate as fulfilled (DESA, 2019a). It also remains unclear how the document adds value for the actual implementation of the 2030 Agenda or the work of the UNGA's second committee or the UN development system. The same applies to the 2019 political declaration, in which member states committed to a ten-point action plan (UNGA, 2019). Due to political compromising, the action points are vague and there is neither concrete policy guidance, nor new commitments for means of implementation, or a clear mechanism as to how the UN or member states will work on these action points.

In terms of other output, there is a procedural report on the HLPF that is adopted by member states. Furthermore, since 2015, the ECOSOC President has decided to produce an informal summary of the HLPF's sessions. This summary is drafted by DESA and approved by the President. It is an informal paper; only in 2019, when the HLPF's political declaration did not cover the individual SDG reviews of that year, was the summary issued as an official document. As it draws out general lessons and showcases selected results, it may impact the narrative even without formal standing. The 2019 HLPF summary by the ECOSOC President, for example, discusses SDG 16 as an enabling goal (ECOSOC, 2019). But it cannot contain any new commitments, thus its policy relevance is limited.

4 | INFORMAL PARALLEL EVENTS: SIDE EVENTS, SPECIAL EVENTS, VNR LABS

Over the years, ever more side events, special events, fairs or exhibitions, and other informal events on the margins of the HLPF have come to serve as additional platforms for dialogue and learning. DESA coordinates these events and also co-convenes many of them. In 2019, more than 150 side events took place and about 75 discussed aspects related to SDG 16 (DESA, 2019b). Our respondents find many of these parallel events more worthwhile because of the concrete examples or innovative pilot projects presented plus the more frank and in-depth discussions (for the SDG 16 review: Interview I, 27 February 2020). The SDG 16 stakeholder community, for example, prepares their own reports and tools which are often launched during the side events (e.g. TAP Network, 2021). But our contacts criticize that these formats are not connected to the official proceedings (respondent for the SDG 16 review: Interview V, 12 March 2020).

The *VNR labs* that DESA started in 2018 offer an informal platform in the margins of the HLPF for UN member states, actors from the UN system and other international organizations and stakeholders to share experiences and reflect on the VNRs and cross-cutting issues. These labs have become a popular and useful space for more honest and interactive peer-to-peer conversations (Interview III, 28 February 2020). This is similar with the side events around the so-called shadow or spotlight reports by civil society actors that – compared to the official VNR reports – expose more gaps and challenges (GIZ and TAP Network, 2020).

To provide a platform for partnerships, DESA in collaboration with the United Nations Office for Partnerships (UNOP) and the UN Global Compact convened a one-day Partnership Exchange in parallel to the HLPF (from 2019 the annual ECOSOC Partnership Forum took over) and (re)developed an online platform for self-registering partnerships (Beisheim & Ellersiek, 2017). However, self-reporting has been weak and effectiveness questionable (Bäckstrand et al., 2022). This discreet approach so far, fails to leverage the transformative partnerships needed (Horan, 2019). In an attempt to mitigate these problems and revamp to more shaping orchestration, DESA co-launched the Partnership Accelerator in connection to an enhanced online platform for self-registering partnerships (UN, 2021). In 2019, for example, some new initiatives on SDG 16 were launched, framed by the UN as 'acceleration actions' (Interview II, 28 February 2020; cf. DESA, 2021a). But this happened because political will was high in the run-up to the SDG Summit in 2019, while follow-up remains unclear (Interview III, 28 February 2020; cf.

DESA, 2021a). Generally, multi-stakeholder partnerships are another area marked by conflicts between member states (Beisheim & Simon, 2018) and, accordingly, DESA's orchestration efforts face difficulties.

Altogether, the uptake of insights or recommendations generated in these informal proceedings is totally up to the discretion of the individual participants. Accordingly, while we observe peer learning and sharing of knowledge, the impact on decision- and policy-making remains unclear.

5 | THE 2020/21 NEGOTIATIONS ON THE HLPF REVIEW: CONFLICTS AMONG MEMBER STATES

Member states had decided to review the HLPF's 'format and organizational aspects' after the end of the first four-year cycle (UNGA, 2013, para. 29). From the early discussions at the Rio+20 conference in 2012, UN member states had divergent views as to whether the HLPF should be a strong 'apex body' that takes relevant decisions in its formal plenary sessions or whether it is (and should remain) 'just a forum' under ECOSOC for general knowledge exchange among countries (see also Interview III, 28 February 2021). Consequently, while the review under the UNGA was explicitly intended to be 'ambitious' and for 'strengthening' the HLPF (UNGA, 2019, para j), member states could not agree to significantly enhance the HLPF's format (Beisheim, 2021).

An interesting innovation is the mandate for a new ECOSOC coordination segment to 'give guidance on the implementation of the ministerial declaration from the previous year' (UNGA, 2021a, para. 17). At the same time, wording on the intergovernmental nature of the declaration and the VNRs was staunchly upheld by UN member states, with some even trying to weaken the modalities for participation of non-governmental actors. Attempts of the co-facilitators to acknowledge and formalize parts of the informal processes around the HLPF largely failed. Member states either feared that the intergovernmental nature of the forum would be compromised, that sessions could become too rigid or that they would face budget implications (Beisheim, 2021). Countries nevertheless welcomed side events and labs as a means to compensate for the limited time during the HLPF's official proceedings (UNGA, 2021b, para. 24).

6 | THE HLPF: AN ORCHESTRATOR – MORE OR LESS?

Six years after the HLPF started to review progress on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs, the forum still struggles to deliver on its mandates. DESA, as its secretariat, is the main *orchestrating* entity, in

close consultation with the ECOSOC Presidency and Bureau. DESA is successful in enlisting many actors. For most of the proceedings, modalities have not been put down precisely. On the one hand, this provides DESA with leeway to interpret the resolutions in an ambitious way; it helps if the ECOSOC Presidency is in support of this. DESA's convening and shaping orchestration in the preparatory processes, and in a variety of formats in parallel to the official proceedings, has produced good results, specifically in terms of stocktaking and dialogue. On the other hand, this lack of precision and of a reliable regular budget hinders more far-reaching and action-oriented orchestration. Lack of will to grant the HLPF more authority and disagreement over its role add to the problem. Neither DESA nor the HLPF are power houses that would be in a position to effectively orchestrate the UN system, let alone member states. This is in line with previous findings. Widerberg and van Laerhoven (2014) measured the autonomous influence of DESA's Division for Sustainable Development. They conclude that compared to other institutions in the arena, DESA exerts less autonomous influence (Widerberg & van Laerhoven, 2014, p. 320). We could observe that DESA's orchestration efforts for the official panel sessions and especially in the politically sensitive ministerial segment are constrained – convening is possible, shaping less so. Efforts are often ignored by intermediaries, effects at target-level unclear. Nevertheless, what is produced by the HLPF clearly profits from DESA's orchestration work; but they can only do that much.

What does that mean for the HLPF's *deliverables*? DESA does a lot to prepare and support the forum's sessions for follow-up and review, whether VNRs, thematic, or SDG reviews. While participation is high, the panel sessions and debates lack concrete recommendations and policy implications. The HLPF's outcome document, the ministerial declaration, also does not deliver much political leadership, policy guidance, or recommendations. UN member states negotiate the document before the annual forum meets. It suffers from political conflicts, presents no more but the lowest-common denominator and is not very actionable. All in all, during the first cycle (2016–19), the HLPF has been a platform for a multitude of actors that used those eight days to present and exchange on how they implement the SDGs. DESA makes the HLPF a platform for regular dialogue, stocktaking and agenda-setting by engaging third actors in preparatory activities, on panels, in side events or other informal formats. Many say that they get the most out of the informal sessions, but they lament that their relevance beyond individual learning is unclear. And indeed, beyond a multitude of anecdotes, it is hard to pin down how much the HLPF's output does support global or national policy-making (see also Beisheim et al., 2022; Biermann et al., 2022).

During the 2021 negotiations, one panellist called the HLPF a ‘spark’ in the UN calendar but that spark is yet to ignite transformative action. A formal outcome document with more guidance would definitely support the HLPF's future orchestration.

Considering the HLPF's lively proceedings, the momentum generated each year and the forum's manifold output, it would be too harsh to call the HLPF an empty institution, as Dimitrov (2020) had suggested. Yet – despite the mandate for an ‘action-oriented agenda’ (UNGA, 2013, para. 2) – it is clear that intergovernmental regulatory policymaking is indeed not part of the HLPF's work. Rather, what we find confirms what the literature analyses as a turn towards more informal forms of international cooperation (Martin, 2021; Vabulas & Snidal, 2013), in some cases the co-existence of a diversity of institutional forms in ‘hybrid institutional complexes’ (Abbott & Faude, 2021). At the HLPF, however, the parallel events are neither formally linked nor loosely coupled to the formal proceedings. This is a waste as the literature outlines a particular value in the institutional interplay between formal and informal arrangements (Manulak & Snidal, 2021), whether within or around (in)formal intergovernmental institutions (Westerwinter et al., 2021).

Given the experiences with the 2021 UN negotiations on the review of the HLPF's format, it is doubtful whether member states will put the HLPF in a position to become more than a platform for voluntary and non-binding peer exchange, with DESA serving as a soft orchestrator. At least currently, there is no consensus for taking the HLPF towards ‘hierarchization’ or for transforming it into a stronger Sustainable Development Council (Qerimi, 2022). Too many UN member states are unwilling to provide the HLPF with the powers or the resources necessary for this. Member states could, however, seek to maximize the impact of DESA's orchestration efforts.

7 | OUTLOOK AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

At the 2019 SDG Summit, heads of state and government recognized the ‘urgent need to accelerate action on all levels and by all stakeholders’ and pledged to gear up for a ‘decade of action and delivery’ (UNGA, 2019, para. 24). This is even more vital now, considering the detrimental effects the COVID-19 pandemic and now Russia's war on Ukraine has on goal attainment (UN Secretary-General, 2021a). Tying high-level meetings to the nitty-gritty details of daily policymaking is a well-known challenge (see also Widerberg, 2017). For making the HLPF more action-oriented, first, it would be beneficial to actually use and work with the materials that are produced in the forum's formal and informal processes. For the 2023 SDG Summit, DESA

should be given the mandate and the resources to evaluate this material for identifying solid policies and measures for achieving the SDGs. Second, member states should mandate and support a better interplay between the HLPF's formal and informal proceedings. For example, a task force of five rapporteurs could be asked to harvest innovative ideas and report on them at the beginning of the ministerial segment. The academic literature views potential in such a ‘hierarchy plus network’ mode of governance, where high-level processes convene the activities of lower level transnational processes (Manulak & Snidal, 2021). In a similar vein, Carayannis and Weiss (2021) call for better collaboration of the intergovernmental ‘first UN’ and civil servants of the ‘second UN’ with supportive non-state actors of the ‘third UN’, especially when it comes to knowledge brokering, analysis and innovation – deliverables that we see emerging especially from the informal proceedings of the HLPF. These findings should be reflected in the follow-up of the HLPF's results. One space for this is the new ECOSOC coordination segment (UNGA, 2021a). Third, it would help the HLPF to gain recognition and authority if member states could bring themselves to at least loosely couple the forum's proceedings with relevant decision-making processes in the UN, such as those in the second committee of the UNGA or in the UN's specialized agencies. In his recent report ‘Our Common Agenda’, UN Secretary General António Guterres has called for an ‘inclusive and networked multilateralism’ (UN Secretary-General, 2021b). If used wisely, the HLPF could be a key node for a UN-led inclusive and networked multilateralism, bringing together and engaging the different parts of the UN system, countries, and stakeholders (see also Beisheim & Fritzsche, 2020).

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

For our assessment, we use a combination of primary data (documents, personal observations from negotiations on the HLPF and proceedings of the forum in the years 2013 to 2021) and secondary data (literature and other existing analyses of the HLPF). In addition, we build on an in-depth study of the HLPF's 2019 review of

SDG 16 (based on participatory observations, five formal interviews and many background conversations). The five formal interviews were anonymized based on the wishes of the interviewees. An anonymized transcript and the notes of the participatory observations are available upon request.

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