Designing Better Accountability Mechanisms for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

By Molly Elgin-Cossart and Rahul Chandran

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Introduction and summary

U.N. member states have said that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development—the historic agreement to end poverty and promote shared economic prosperity, social development, and environmental protection—will most effectively be achieved with the aid of well-designed accountability mechanisms and "a robust, voluntary, effective, participatory, transparent and integrated follow-up and review framework … operating at the national, regional and global levels."[1]

Using accountability mechanisms to support the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs, will require serious and strategic thinking. Accountability for the SDGs will and should be led by local and national mechanisms. These mechanisms will be driven by citizens, governments, and their own specific relationships. Regional and global accountability mechanisms can, however, act as so-called force multipliers for such national initiatives and will help states and cities achieve the 2030 agenda.

To do so, accountability mechanisms and their advocates must appreciate that the greatest influence will be found in supportive and appreciative mechanisms. There is no room for punitive mechanisms at the global or regional levels. The more that global and regional tools can enhance and complement local and national accountability efforts—by enabling domestic legislative processes or citizen engagement—the greater the potential effect.

Through an examination of five existing accountability mechanisms—the Annual Ministerial Review, or AMR; the Development Cooperation Forum, or DCF; the International Monetary Fund, or IMF, Article IV consultations; the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, or OECD, peer reviews; and the African Peer Review Mechanism, or APRM—this report identifies two primary pathways for developing accountability mechanisms to influence SDG implementation:

- **Harnessing the power of inspiration.** Accountability tools should identify champions—countries and cities that demonstrate significant progress toward meeting or have achieved individual goals and targets—and facilitate the sharing of these success stories; support collective action; and use the positive power of reputation. Using political engagement for publicity forms a valuable part of how accountability can inspire better implementation.

- **Evidenced-based learning.** Mechanisms should be explicitly geared to deepen an understanding of what works and what does not; help drive adaptation; and deliver policy reforms. High-quality analysis based on robust standards can help decision makers and reform leaders to better understand possible pathways to success.

In addition, the authors find six general characteristics that accountability mechanisms should possess in order to be effective. These could provide a useful yardstick for measuring proposals that emerge in the future:

- **Clear objectives.** Mechanisms should specify what they hope to achieve and how.

- **Form linked to function.** The structure of a mechanism should reflect its objectives and be realistic regarding its limitations.

- **Robust incentives.** Critical for building effective SDG accountability mechanisms is understanding the need for incentives both to drive change and to encourage substantive participation. Too many mechanisms create too much of a burden for participants and reduce the likelihood of serious engagement. The use of cost-benefit analysis could help in this effort.

- **Better balance between substance and process.** Real, nonsanitized engagement is essential. The use of evidence helps makes mechanisms real. The current discussion needs to shift to a greater understanding of the need for substance.

- **Range of stakeholders.** The evidence suggests that member states, without civil-society engagement, tend toward nonsubstantive engagement. The inclusive process that gave rise to the SDGs should be mirrored by inclusive mechanisms for accountability.

- **Use of champions to drive learning.** The evidence from past mechanisms suggests that the role of champions and success stories may be the most effective pathway to inspire change and influence policy.

The above lessons highlight the importance of high-level inspiration and continued learning in order to deliver effective policy reforms. In light of such lessons, we recommend that member states take the following four steps:

1. **Set transitional objectives for the 2016 High-Level Political Forum, or HLPF.** This should include identifying explicit objectives for future HLPFs; driving investment aimed at building robust mechanisms; and ensuring that future HLPFs remain flexible. Member states should also articulate their strategic expectations for the United Nations.

2. **Focus HLPFs 2017–2020 on providing the building blocks for future success.** This can be achieved by leveraging the principles of robust incentives; using evidence and being inclusive; seeking to identify champions; delivering genuine learning that shapes policy; and maintaining political attention, particularly through a successful 2019 HLPF.

3. **Devolve as much as possible.** Member states should respect the principle of subsidiarity and ensure that responsibilities within accountability mechanisms are as close as possible to the level of the decisions that they seek to influence. Essentially, this means if any question or discussion could happen at a local, regional, subnational, or national level, it should.

4. **Be unafraid to be creative.** The HLPF offers an opportunity to use tested mechanisms such as prizes. For instances, member states could hold a competition for creative suggestions, with the prize being attendance at the 2019 HLPF. There should also be a move to experiment with youth involvement or perhaps the establishment of a commission on lessons to be learned, which would model bold approaches used by states and cities.

Background

On September 25, 2015, leaders representing 193 countries gathered at the United Nations and committed to put the world on a path toward sustainable and inclusive economic growth through the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This agenda is articulated through a set of 17 SDGs linked to 169 targets—a significant increase on the eight goals and 21 targets of the Millennium Development Goals, or MDGs. Given the breadth and complexity of the SDGs, it will be crucial to have mechanisms of accountability in place that support member states in the successful implementation of the goals.

This report therefore seeks to identify lessons gathered from existing accountability processes, investigating their implications, and presenting options for building accountability mechanisms that can better support the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This report focuses on the global and regional levels, with particular attention paid to the HLPF, which is the only mechanism that currently exists to review SDG progress.

There is consensus that accountability in the 2030 agenda should be led by local and national mechanisms. The nature of national accountability mechanisms will vary widely and will be driven by citizens, governments, and their own specific relationships.[2] Regional and global accountability mechanisms can, however, act as so-called force multipliers for such national initiatives and play an essential—albeit supporting—role in implementing the 2030 agenda.

For centuries, political scientists have been concerned with accountability, which we define here as a means for holding those with the power to make decisions to account when they act on behalf of a larger group.[3] Member states, referring to the 2030 agenda, have noted it will be achieved through "a robust, voluntary, effective, participatory, transparent and integrated follow-up and review framework … operating at the national, regional and global levels."[4]

Research on how to effectively support voluntary international agreements suggests that domestic politics are at the frontline of accountability and therefore must be the basis of effective mechanisms at the regional and global levels.[5] International agreements such as the SDGs may seem weak because of their lack of hard enforcement mechanisms. However, international agreements that empower domestic groups to mobilize or stimulate domestic legislative or judicial processes increase the likelihood of compliance. In most cases, as noted by Dr. Beth Simmons, a professor at Harvard, "the real politics of change is likely to occur at the domestic level,"[6] which is why the primary locus of accountability for the SDGs should also be local—specifically, between citizens and states.

Critical to any discussion of such mechanisms is the recognition that there is essentially no room for punitive regimes of global or regional accountability for the SDGs. Rather, positive reinforcement, through horizontal or social soft tools—such as peer review processes—will form the core of such mechanisms. Creating incentives will be necessary in order to ensure that these are effective. Furthermore, the more that global and regional tools can enhance and complement local and national accountability efforts—by enabling domestic legislative processes or citizen engagement—the greater effect they might have.

Identifying lessons from existing accountability mechanisms

This section examines select accountability mechanisms at the global and regional levels in order to identify their strengths and weaknesses.[7] These lessons underpin the recommendations presented in the final section of this report.

Global mechanisms

At the global level, the initial structure of accountability for the MDGs consisted of follow-up and review under the auspices of the U.N. Economic and Social Council's, or ECOSOC, Commission on Sustainable Development, or CSD. Later, the 2005 World Summit created the Annual Ministerial Review[8] and Development Cooperation Forum.[9] In addition to the AMR and the DCF, the IMF's Article IV consultations process is also examined.

The Annual Ministerial Review

The AMR was mandated to conduct a ministerial-level review of progress toward the MDGs and to evaluate and review implementation of the U.N. Development Agenda. Approximately 10 member states present their national progress, successes, and challenges in trying to achieve the MDGs each year. These yearly evaluations build on consultative country-led regional reviews. At the global level, the U.N. secretary-general presents a report examining global progress on the U.N. Development Agenda.

The AMR has been described as having a highly scripted, constrained format that lacks any independent review mechanism, thus preventing dialogue or any kind of so-called challenge function. The AMR does not include follow-up on the review and its recommendations. Moreover, the presenting state selects the three states that will review its performance and generally selects those that are favorably inclined. [10] The AMR also observes the ECOSOC's rules of procedure, which

do not allow nongovernment organizations, or NGOs, into meetings "except by exclusive invitation."[11] Finally, only developing countries present their progress. While donors are expected to be responsible for development cooperation and helping countries meet the MDGs, these components are discussed in the separate biennial DCF, which was also introduced in 2005.

When it comes to establishing an effective mechanism, two key lessons emerge from the experience and shortcomings of the AMR, specifically, that a mechanism should be:

- **Linked to clear objectives.** It was never clear what the AMR was meant to achieve. Was it meant to be a forum for member states to share real success stories? If so, why were there no support structures to scale positive stories to other countries? Or was it an opportunity to explore ideas that were not working and share cautionary tales? This might have been an effective outcome, given the lack of outside participation, but what incentives were in place to encourage such disclosure? Specificity on what the outcomes should be, as well as what decisions should change and how will help ensure that any SDG mechanisms have a chance of achieving their goals.

- **Linked to clear incentives.** The flip side is that the lack of incentives for serious participation reduces the likelihood of a mechanism achieving its potential. The AMR does not trigger additional resources, provide clear learning opportunities, or showcase achievements in a way that either boosts reputational effects or provides an incentive to openly explore challenges. As a result, presentations up to 2014 focused solely on the positive rather than on both successes and challenges, which lessened the potential for learning and made it more about member states blowing their own trumpets.[12]

The Development Cooperation Forum
The DCF, a biennial high-level forum of member states:

> … *reviews trends in international development cooperation, promotes greater coherence among the development activities of different development partners and helps to promote policy integration and to strengthen the normative and operational link in the work of the United Nations.*[13]

While not explicitly a review procedure, a key focus area for the DCF in recent years has been global accountability in development cooperation.[14] DCF membership, like that of the AMR, is closed to nonstate actors. While its preparatory process ostensibly gives voice to a wide range of stakeholders, it largely remains shut to meaningful input from civil society.[15]

While the DCF, as a forum that encompasses all member states as equal members—unlike other forums, such as the OECD Development Assistance Committee—is seen to have universal legitimacy,[16] that legitimacy is undermined by its ineffectiveness. It does not have wide political buy-in, and many key development actors have shown a limited willingness to engage with the DCF.[17] Moreover, the DCF does not create a platform for genuine feedback or engagement about the limits of progress toward partnership or provide an opportunity for learning from and coordinating with a range of actors in order to strengthen partnership.

The experience of the DCF reinforces the lessons from the AMR—in particular, the idea that in order to be effective, mechanisms must be genuine. Mechanisms that allow member states to only present sanitized versions of information do not produce engagement or serious outcomes. It is telling that both the DCF and the AMR are substantively closed to civil society in this regard.

IMF Article IV consultations

Since the 1970s, the IMF has conducted surveillance of its member economies in accordance with Article IV of its Articles of Agreement. These consultations are meant to ensure that countries pursue policies conducive to macroeconomic stability.[18] According to the IMF, country surveillance is carried out through a country visit to collect economic and financial information, including consultations with national authorities on recent economic developments and their monetary, fiscal, and relevant structural policies. The report is then submitted to IMF management and then to its executive board for discussion. The country is represented at the IMF board meeting, and if the individual representing the reviewed country at the board meeting agrees, the full Article IV consultation report is released to the public.[19]

The Article IV process is stricter than a normal peer review process. The term surveillance emphasizes the IMF's role in supervision and compliance. In wealthier countries that do not require IMF resources, Article IV consultations have less power to promote policy change. In poorer countries, however, where IMF

resources are important to economic management and alternatives are scarce, the consultations are much more influential. The key criticism, however, is that the IMF as a whole is G7 dominated and therefore represents the interests of these countries rather than providing a wider and more balanced perspective.[20]

The Article IV consultations demonstrate the value of high-quality analysis and of the link to resources. At the same time, they demonstrate the risks posed by noninclusive governance to any process that seeks to have a global reach.

Regional mechanisms

At the regional level, peer review has evolved into a primary mechanism for countries to engage with one another, as well as with multilateral institutions. This section explores the peer review mechanisms of the OECD and the African Union.

OECD peer reviews

Peer review has been used at the OECD for more than 50 years.[21] The OECD defines peer review as "an examination of one state's performance or practices in a particular area by other states."22 The objective is "to help the state under review improve its policymaking, adopt best practices and comply with established standards and principles." OECD peer review processes have evolved over time to include more involvement from civil society, business, and labor organizations. [23]

Analysis of the OECD peer review process suggests that the key factors governing their success are the technical competence and independence of the OECD secretariat and examiners. In addition, the position of these reviews within a wider ecosystem of policy dialogue and debate creates room for competing voices, which are key in safeguarding the credibility of the reviews.[24]

The OECD also conducts economic surveys and environmental performance reviews, or EPRs, which have relevant lessons as well. The EPR process highlights the need for indicators to be both politically and technically credible. The economic technical community does not appear to have taken its efforts seriously, and high-level officials have not supported the indicators in public. Related to this, the EPR recommendations rarely go beyond policy doctrine, which undermines their ability to inform learning or influence policy discourse in any real way.[25]

Key lessons from the OECD peer review mechanisms include the following:

- **Reviews are more successful when they include a quantitative or ranking element.** For example, the OECD Jobs Strategy—which ranks members based upon their unemployment reduction[26]—in addition to the OECD's Development Assistance Committee, or DAC, peer review mechanism, have become useful analysis and advocacy tools.[27] Indicator monitoring mechanisms—and even ranking mechanisms—can spur a race to the top. Conversely, monitoring also encourages behavioral changes by threatening reputational costs for poorly performing states and providing fodder for civil-society groups or domestic stakeholders.[28]

- **Credibility is key.** Indicators and policy recommendations, if generated, must be credible to the political community; the technical community; and wider civil society in order to generate engagement.

- **Civil-society engagement multiplies the effect of quantitative scoring when the scoring is reliable.** When civil society trusts the mechanism for generating quantitative scoring, it increases the ability of these scores to be used as an advocacy tool. This requires reliable technical competence on behalf of the scorers.

- **High-level political engagement is essential.** Where peer review fails to link to high-level engagement in any formal way, and if there is no media or civil-society engagement—as is largely true of the EPR—the effect is diminished.

African Peer Review Mechanism

The African Peer Review Mechanism was created in 2003 by the African Union as a voluntary self-monitoring mechanism in order to further share political and economic norms, as well as common development objectives within the New Partnership for Africa's Development, or NEPAD.[29] Participation is voluntary, and the organization's authority is the committee of the participating heads of state and government, or PHSG, which represents the various regions within Africa.

The APRM is innovative in its link to a mechanism for access to resources: If a country shows demonstrable will to fix its shortcomings, it will receive any available assistance. If such political will does not exist, participating states are supposed to engage leaders in dialogue and offer technical assistance. If this fails, the PHSG are meant to notify the government that they will "proceed with appropriate measures by a given date" to create incentives for action.[30] After this process, the report is lodged with regional and subregional institutions. Thus the APRM includes, in theory, both positive and negative incentives for compliance.

The ARPM is well designed—at least on paper. The decision-making authority in the APRM is at the highest political level—a forum of heads of state and government who appoint a panel of prominent political and academic leaders to manage the process. The APRM has technical and administrative support through a central secretariat. A country review team comprised of technical experts from a mix of African countries and accompanied by a member of the panel undertakes the reviews.[31] To promote transparency and social accountability, the country reviews are designed to include consultations with NGOs, community organizations, and stakeholders.[32] In addition, these reviews are supposed to be made public and submitted to relevant regional and global bodies, such as the African Union, as well as to the ECOSOC.[33]

However, the APRM has struggled. While participating members are supposed to contribute to funding the secretariat, few have been able to do so. The secretariat remains short-staffed and lacks the technical knowledge necessary to complete the reviews.[34] Moreover, the secretariat is generally over-stretched given the tremendous breadth of APRM reviews, which cover democracy, political governance, corporate governance, economic governance, as well as other areas.[35]

The reviews that emerge may therefore not be of a sufficient technical standard and contain inaccurate or outdated information, which could undermine their credibility as practical resources for policy development. Furthermore, the reviews are not always clearly linked to countries' plans of action nor are countries required to respond to the reviews.[36] The APRM experience also highlights the fact that not all civil-society engagement is equal. Analysts have argued that NGOs and community groups are either carefully selected by governments to avoid overly critical actors or are given so little information about the process that they are not able to fully engage.[37] As a result, Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta recently lamented that the APRM had become a mere bureaucratic exercise and has lost high-level political attention and buy-in.[38]

Key lessons from the APRM process include:

- **Reviews must have a clear subject and a reasonable timeframe.** The breadth of the APRM reviews made them very difficult to conduct. Narrowing the focus and reducing the frequency of these reviews could help bolster their technical quality and credibility.[39]

- **Inadequate resources undermine reviews and the underlying mechanism.** Under-resourced secretariats lead to poor reviews. Poor reviews lead to a loss of confidence in the mechanism and a loss of engagement at a senior political level.

- **Civil-society engagement requires adequate resourcing and care.** Genuine civil-society engagement adds value. Fig-leaf engagement will be exposed for what it is.

TABLE 1

Accountability mechanisms at global and regional levels

Key mechanisms, strengths, weaknesses, and lessons

Mechanisms	Strengths	Weaknesses	Lessons
Global mechanisms			
AMRs	• High-level political engagement • Positive reputational benefits	• Participatory imbalance between developed and developing countries • Lack of incentives • Lack of learning opportunities • Lack of civil society engagement	Clear review of objectives and incentives for participation are crucial.
DCF	• Donor focused • Universal among U.N. member states • Legitimate	• Lack of incentives • Lack of civil society engagement • Lack of political buy-in • Lack of learning opportunities	Mechanisms must be inclusive and promote genuine participation.
IMF Article IV consultations	• Technical competence • Good data collection	• Lack of independence • Penalties for noncompliance	High-quality analysis should be linked to incentives.
Regional mechanisms			
OECD-country peer reviews	• Data collection and technical competence	• Lack of political buy-in • Lack of inclusiveness outside the OECD-DAC	Quantitative rankings encourage behavioral change. Political buy-in is key.
APRM	• Positive incentives • Regional mechanisms that reinforce national mechanisms • Inclusivity	• Funding and capacity shortfalls • Lack of buy-in • Bureaucratic overburdening	Adequate resourcing and strong direction enhance credibility.

Sources: Authors' analysis of accountability mechanisms using reports, reviews, and studies by the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights; the Center for Economic and Social Rights; the U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs; the German Development Institute; the IMF; the OECD; Politikon;Journal ofSustainable Development; DARA; Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); the APRM; the Nordic Africa Institute; Partnership Africa Canada; and Human Rights Quarterly.

Influencing SDG implementation through accountability mechanisms

Accountability is not an end in itself. The SDGs and the MDGs before them are part of a voluntary international framework rather than a treaty or convention with legal and regulatory power. The role of accountability mechanisms is to influence the achievement of the goals. There are two central ways in which accountability mechanisms can reinforce achievement of global goals. The pathways are neither mutually exclusive nor equally relevant across all countries and contexts.

Inspiration: collective action, champions, and the power of reputation

As voluntary commitments, the SDGs speak to a higher standard of ambition than a legally binding document would be able to secure. In doing so, the goals can act as norms that provide a rallying cry for ordinary citizens, advocates, and governments. Such a rallying cry was already evident, in part, with the MDGs, which galvanized high-level attention and a global campaign effort.[40]

Campaigning and mobilization matter, as was seen at the 2005 Gleneagles summit. There, the G8 endorsed the MDGs' underlying concepts, including its headline goal and an agreement on debt relief, which represents one of the greatest successes of the eighth MDG: "Develop a Global Partnership for Development."[41] This followed a global campaign, "Make Poverty History," which combined domestic pressure on G8 countries along with international attention and engagement, including specific pressure on the United Kingdom, which held the G8 presidency in 2005.[42] This high-level attention spurred commitments from what was then the world's pre-eminent economic forum. Domestic publics played a role—for example, civil society in the United Kingdom organized massive mobilizations ahead of Gleneagles.

This experience; the desire of member states to proclaim their successes in the AMR and the DCF despite their limited utility; and the ability of peer reviews and quantitative scoring to create an incentive for change all illustrate the power of reputation. States, like people, are proud and enjoy positive effects on their

reputation. Smart accountability mechanisms for a voluntary regime must take advantage of this in order to create as many positive effects as possible. The idea of "mutual accountability" is a useful way of thinking about this as a means to to move away from a punitive notion of sanctions linked to the policing of actions and toward co-responsibility for implementing a common agenda.[43]

Therefore, for the SDGs, a critical pathway for accountability mechanisms to matter may be through the identification of champions: countries and cities that can demonstrate significant progress or achievement toward individual goals and targets. This is reflected in our analysis of existing mechanisms, which point to the centrality of high-level political engagement in meaningful accountability mechanisms. The breadth of the SDGs will provide many opportunities for different countries to proclaim their successes through reporting mechanisms and the potential reputational benefits will provide an incentive. Ideally, success stories will provide inspiration to others.

Learning: deepening understanding, driving adaptation, and delivering policy reforms

The challenge of implementation also points to the need for learning lessons on what works, what does not, and how risks to implementation might manifest themselves. A strategic opportunity for accountability mechanisms to contribute to implementation is through using them to establish space for learning. Clearly, learning from champions is relevant—as champions can share lessons on what has worked. Conversely, another learning opportunity—one that requires careful thought—is finding space for stories of failure.

The quality of standards and indicators around the SDGs will also influence the potential for learning. When technical standards are robust and indicators are measurable, they become the reference point for dialogue around an issue—not just with politicians and campaigners but also with the implementers and civil servants whose engagement is necessary for success. When there is a common dialogue, it is much easier to understand what works, as well as what does not.

Finally, effective learning is also a function of robust feedback loops. Mexico, a high performer in terms of MDG progress, credits its Specialized Technical Committee of the MDGs as "essential to the evaluation process and coordination within ministries responsible for achievements of the MDGs."[44] The focus on

statistics helped to clarify responsibilities at different levels of government, as well as "help civil society to better engage… reinforc[ing] the virtuous circle of public action, transparency, assessment and accountability."[45]

Indicators and standards also create an incentive for implementation. They can empower senior officials, for example, to drive performance—as seen in the case of Mexico—and they can also be useful due to public obligations to disseminate information.[46] Many countries, for example, work with the U.N. Development Programme, or UNDP, to compile annual MDG achievement reports, which have focused domestic and international attention on targets.[47]

Civil servants' desire to improve performance on indicators or their respective country's standing can drive changes in policies and procedures. Peer review processes in particular, as explored above, illustrate how accountability mechanisms can create a space to encourage policy adaptations across member states.[48]

Findings

The principle that should underpin decisions on an accountability architecture for the SDGs is that the local should shape the international. States and cities will build relationships with their citizens around the SDGs. The international accountability architecture must remain subsidiary to the local. The implication is that early efforts to shape the accountability architecture must be adaptable. The nature and diversity of local structures will emerge over time, and the international system must respond to and engage constructively with these structures.

This does not mean that there is no role for the international architecture. As noted earlier, a key mechanism of influence for accountability mechanisms is to inspire. Notwithstanding the need to be adaptable, the more that early efforts on accountability can inspire local actors to engage, the more likely the SDGs are to have uptake. This will be difficult. Decisions on the HLPF, for example, will have to incorporate an understanding of the credibility limits of a New York-based annual intergovernmental process run from U.N. headquarters, as well as of the need to be realistic: The mechanism that emerges must be cost-effective with respect to its objectives.

The lessons learned are generally applicable. They suggest that in order to be effective in supporting the implementation of the 2030 agenda, accountability mechanisms must:

- **Clearly specify objectives.** Without an understanding of the particular role of each mechanism and its links to other levels, mechanisms will rapidly become pro forma.

- **Recognize that form must follow function.** For all levels of accountability mechanisms, it is essential that objectives are achievable at that level of forum. A high-level intergovernmental process may not be the place, for example, for cities to criticize policies of their states.

- **Incorporate incentives.** Related to this is the need for a cost-benefit analysis. Too many international mechanisms exist where the transaction cost of engagement exceeds the potential benefits, and the results are clear.

- **Strike a balance between substance and process.** The experiences above highlight the import of real, nonsanitized engagement. Processes have intrinsic value in the international system if they are fed with substance. The use of evidence and, in particular, building mechanisms that encourage the use of evidence in policymaking and decision-making will help mechanisms to have an effect.

- **Involve a range of stakeholders.** Genuine civil-society engagement adds value. The inclusive process that gave rise to the SDGs should be mirrored by equally inclusive accountability mechanisms. Moreover, a variety of accountability mechanisms reduces the risk that so-called official mechanisms become the "only game in town," ignoring the need to innovate and adapt to new developments.[49]

- **Create learning and identify champions.** Particularly in the initial phases of the 2030 agenda, finding building blocks for future efforts—through understanding what programs and policies have worked and why—will be more productive than accountability through reporting. The evidence from past mechanisms suggests that the role of champions and success stories may be the most effective pathway to do so. Ideally, pathways that also allow states and cities to identify failure will be found, as learning what does not work is equally as important as learning what does.

Linked to these lessons is the sense that there are substantial risks posed by bad mechanism design. A process that is devoid of substance, is too prescriptive, or has no understanding of its own purpose can easily help to ensure strategic failure of the 2030 agenda. In addition, the scope of the 2030 agenda will require an accountability architecture that can adapt to meet its demands. In the early years, accountability outcomes will focus on building-block questions: What measures work and do not work? What are the right entry points for engagement with an issue? What are key risks? In later years, member states will need to focus on scaling up successes from the early years of implementation and consolidating gains. Different outcomes may require different processes, and the architecture should be able to adapt.

The HLPF

One critical facet of the global architecture for accountability has already been defined: the High-Level Political Forum. The HLPF is intended to serve four purposes:

1. Provide guidance and leadership on sustainable development issues
2. Provide follow-up and review of the implementation of development policies
3. Oversee and enhance the integration of economic, environmental, and social aspects of development policies and programs
4. Address emerging issues in sustainable development[50]

The HLPF will convene once a year under the auspices of ECOSOC to discuss thematic issues; receive input from NGOs and civil society; coordinate development policies among countries; and share learning experiences. Once every four years, the HLPF will use the opportunity of the U.N. General Assembly to convene heads of state and government for a period of eight days in order to promote development and discuss new challenges to development. These meetings will produce policy declarations as high-level guidance.

On paper, the HLPF promises to be innovative in that it will allow unprecedented access for NGOs and civil-society actors, which have received incrementally increasing privileges in U.N. deliberations since 1992. However, many obstacles remain for genuine participation of NGOs and civil-society actors in HLPF meetings, and it is still unclear as to what degree they will be granted access and what extent they may be able to provide meaningful input.

Many political challenges remain for how the HLPF will be conducted. Countries that have devoted significant resources to ECOSOC are hesitant to open up to all member states, as the HLPF calls for, and questions remain about whether HLPF rules will follow or supersede ECOSOC rules. This will have implications for the participation of member states and external stakeholders.

The HLPF will be one important component of an accountability ecosystem for the SDGs but should not be seen as the sole follow-up and review mechanism. It will need to work in tandem with national and regional review processes and be part of a coherent political engagement strategy led by the United Nations in order be successful. However, given that the HLPF is currently the only clearly defined portion of the accountability mechanism, a number of the recommendations in this report focus on this body.

Recommendations

Based on these lessons, member states should:

Set transitional objectives for HLPF 2016

The 2016 HLPF falls too early to report on significant progress. It therefore plays a transitional role—as both the first HLPF to be held and the first move away from the old accountability architecture. Given the above lessons, useful critical objectives for 2016 might include:

- **Identifying objectives for future HLPFs.** Rather than reporting on current achievements, HLPF 2016 will be more useful if it can specify what is expected over the next five years from both global and regional structures. In doing so, it should also:

  - Drive investment in building robust mechanisms. The tiering from local to regional to global will require resources, attention, and investment. 2016 is a good opportunity for member states to commit to ensuring that such mechanisms and their linkages are adequately resourced.
  - Build flexibility. In specifying objectives, rather than mechanisms and processes, the HLPF can set itself up to be adaptable. Finding the right way to achieve the objectives rather than adhering to process might enable some degree of flexibility in a system that gravitates toward rigidity.
  - Articulate the strategic expectations of the United Nations. Throughout 2016, from the thematic debates of the president of the General Assembly to the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review, member states will have to specify what role they want the U.N. system to play in achieving the 2030 agenda. The 2016 HLPF will provide a further opportunity to ensure consistent and strategic articulation.

Focus HLPFs 2017–2020 on providing the building blocks for success

2017 and subsequent years will need to see a robust HLPF that can play a useful and strategic role in contributing to the 2030 agenda. Humility will be key—despite being a potentially influential global process, the HLPF will also remain an intergovernmental discussion at the United Nations, with the limitations such a process begets. The 2019 HLPF, as the first head-of-state-level meeting, will require special attention. Therefore, strategic objectives for the years 2017–2020 could include:

- **Identifying champions.** Positive reinforcement is one of the ways in which a global accountability mechanism can have a positive effect. Finding and identifying champions—both countries and cities—that have been able to tackle specific challenges within the 2030 agenda will help to build confidence in the agenda itself.

- **Emphasizing learning.** The HLPF cannot and should not be the primary forum for exchanging lessons. Such conversations will be better anchored at the regional level and between regions, where there is more space for open exchanges. But linked to the idea of identifying champions will be to emphasize and share lessons of success.

- **Maintaining political attention.** Adopting the 2030 agenda was a politically challenging process. HLPFs can help to ensure that the level of member state commitment to the entire agenda remains consistent by providing political oxygen in the form of high-level engagement. Ensuring that the 2019 HLPF can deliver enough substance through the strategic use of heads of state to capture public attention is critical.

In order to implement these strategic objectives, HLPFs will need to follow three key principles:

1. **Have a clear link to incentives.** As member states design HLPFs from 2017–2020, they will need to ensure that there are concrete incentives in place for member states to engage. This means using the tools available—including money and recognition—and linking them to the HLPF in explicit ways.

2. **Use real evidence.** Nonsubstantive discussions simply will not work. The HLPFs will need to ensure that they are able to talk about real success as opposed to glowing self-reporting. Ensuring that there are credible incentives will be critical, as will ensuring external participation.

3. **Be inclusive.** The incorporation of nonstate actors has formed a crucial part of the development of the 2030 agenda. Such actors are also more likely to ensure that the discussion is substantive. An HLPF that is not inclusive is less likely to achieve strategic objectives.

Devolve as much as possible

The HLPF is a focus of this paper because it is currently the only accountability mechanism in the context of the 2030 agenda that has a name and a timeline. Member states should respect the principle of subsidiarity and ensure that responsibilities within accountability mechanisms are as close as possible to the level of the decisions that they seek to influence.

Concrete learning will happen best when it occurs between partners facing similar challenges, such as institutions in similar states of development or with recent relevant experience. This does not mitigate the potential influence of developing longer-term institutional pathways to learn from countries and cities with significant differences; rather, it highlights the need for more partnerships of equals.

In the analysis above, the OECD regional peer review mechanism emerged as one of the strongest examples of joint accountability, further highlighting that accountability works best when it is done on a manageable, measurable, and realistic scale. Incentives will need to exist at the global level but will be stronger if they are aligned at the regional level with regional priorities and progress as these pathways become more clear. Moreover, homogeneity matters. OECD countries have a relatively common starting point in terms of resources and institutional development—though with more variance in political history than is often recognized. It is critical that member states find the right groupings for exchanging information based on their own assessments of their peers and their learning needs. These may be regional; they may also transcend regions.

Be unafraid to be creative

The opportunity to set up new mechanisms means that there should be space for experimentation and innovation. This is not only a way to build better HLPFs but also a means to use the signaling power of a high-level forum to help member states be creative in their approaches to the SDGs. Three ideas are proposed here as examples of how member states could encourage creativity:

- **Establish a prize mechanism for policy innovations.** The X Prize and similar initiatives are examples of how innovation and success can emerge from unexpected quarters. Member states should specify a series of clear objectives and find a way to offer substantial prizes for new and creative ideas. Building an annual prize mechanism into the HLPF will ensure that it can attract press attention. Moreover, propagating such mechanisms to regions may ensure a deeper level of innovation.

- **Create an independent commission on lessons to be learned.** Finding a safe space for member states to report on difficult challenges is as essential as sharing successes. One challenging—but useful—option might be to create an independent commission on failure that could anonymously collate examples from member states, highlighting challenges and difficulties. These lessons could be synthesized into policy recommendations and could be issued as part of the HLPF. Civil society could play a critical role in this regard. If member states were to hold an open hearing of such a report—"Key Policy Risks for Agenda 2030: Pitfalls and Traps," perhaps—it would help make the HLPF a credible forum.

- **Involve young innovators and leaders.** The 2030 agenda seeks to benefit a generation that does not hold the levers of power. Finding a substantial way to include young people in global and regional fora is essential. A series of young innovators grants and showcases—which would provide people under the age of 30 a chance to bring forward ideas and receive funding and support to bring these to scale—could also help to keep the HLPF relevant. This would be an easy way to build engagement with social venture-capital actors and the private sector more broadly.

Conclusion

The SDGs represent a new and ambitious agenda for global development. Having well-designed accountability mechanisms is key to ensuring that countries effectively implement and track their progress on the 2030 agenda. But building a well-designed accountability system that has concrete objectives; incorporates real and substantive discussions; is linked to incentives; is adaptable; devolved; and that retains political attention is a hard task with more than its share of challenges.

SDG accountability mechanisms can greatly benefit from the experience of previous initiatives. Moreover, a dose of humility is required in order to ensure that mechanisms designed today are fit for purpose over the lifespan of the SDGs. The earlier that the international community acts, in particular by developing strong and credible accountability mechanisms, the more likely it is that the 2030 agenda will succeed in its aim to ensure that no one is left behind.

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Acknowledgements

Endnotes

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