

Reviews of ECOSOC and HLPF
Contribution from the Scientific and Technological Community Major Group

10 February 2021

The International Science Council (ISC) and the World Federation of Engineering Organizations (WFEO) are pleased to submit the following contribution to the review process of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) on behalf of the Scientific and Technological Community Major Group (STC MG). The ISC and WFEO represent altogether more than 40 international scientific Unions and Associations, 140 national and regional scientific organizations and 100 national engineering institutions.

The COVID-19 crisis illustrates the need for nimble and effective governance structures that foster collaboration at different levels and the importance of robust data and scientific evidence to inform decision-making on ways to respond, recover, prevent and prepare for such events. It is a very real test of our ability to address the fundamental interdependencies between development and planetary health, and craft new ways of acting together to address complex global challenges.

Both ECOSOC and the HLPF play a central role in this regard by mobilizing global cooperation, solidarity and action, and in ensuring that global responses to the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic are aligned with the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development. The timely review of ECOSOC and the HLPF must be ambitious and lead to a strengthened global institutional framework if we are to realize the aspirations of the Decade of action and deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals while recovering from the COVID-19 crisis.

To this end, we would like to share the following proposals:

- 1. The High-level Political Forum (HLPF) should contribute to sharing knowledge, providing political leadership, and catalysing coalition building to leverage co-benefits and address potential conflicts and negative spill-overs between the SDGs.** To fulfil its ambitious mandate (Res 67/290. §2¹), the HLPF should focus more on the effectiveness of policies and discuss barriers to progress, on the interrelated nature of the SDGs with their ensuing synergies and trade-offs, and on emerging issues that need greater political visibility. In particular, the HLPF can provide a Forum for countries and stakeholders to share approaches to leveraging co-benefits and discuss commonly found trade-offs and international spill-overs that require international and multi-stakeholder cooperation and multi-stakeholder cooperation.
- 2. The Global Sustainable Development Report 2019 (GSDR 2019) transformation framework provides a solid scientific basis to frame the SDGs in an integrated manner. The thematic review of the SDGs at the HLPF should be based on the GSDR's logic of identifying "entry points" and "levers" for transformation.** Based on this approach, each annual HLPF session could be organized around two of the six entry points set out in the GSDR 2019 and include an in-depth review of the SDGs that are central to the selected combination of entry points, while focusing on relevant interlinkages to all other SDGs. Criteria to decide on every year's combinations of entry points could include distance to SDG targets, alignment with other

¹ The process should strengthen the HLPF so that it can fully respond to its mandates, namely to "provide political leadership, guidance and recommendations for sustainable development"; to enhance "the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development in a holistic and cross-sectoral manner" and to promote "a focused, dynamic and action-oriented agenda".

relevant international processes, coverage of all three dimensions of sustainable development and coverage of relevant interlinkages. In addition, HLPF main sessions could also feature discussions, within the selected entry points, of the role of the four levers identified in the GSDR, i.e. governance, economy and finance, individual and collective action, and science and technology, with the aim to identify purposeful partnerships amongst relevant actors from each lever. This would ensure coordinated efforts and coherence across sectors and scales, leading to maximised impact and desired outcomes. The regional fora for sustainable development that feed into the HLPF preparatory process could be structured based on the same approach with the aim to define and deploy context-specific priorities and solutions for each entry point.

- 3. The review of the HLPF is an opportunity to evolve the Forum into a knowledge-based and action-oriented forum that is underpinned by a strong science-policy-society interface. To this end, the preparatory processes of the HLPF should be strengthened by effectively utilizing analyses and syntheses of available data and information to better frame policy-relevant discussions in the run-up and during the HLPF annual meetings.** The wealth of data and knowledge produced every year on the SDGs by the UN system, the scientific and stakeholder communities, is not sufficiently used to frame and inform the deliberations of the HLPF. The HLPF should be the culmination point of an all year long preparatory process that should draw extensively on expert knowledge and engage with stakeholders to focus on the areas where progress is lagging and where there are opportunities for transformative impact.

To this end, the **ECOSOC's Integration Segment**, aimed at processing all the input from Member States, including case studies and lessons learned, from ECOSOC's subsidiary bodies and the UN system and other relevant stakeholders on the annual theme of ECOSOC and HLPF that currently takes place the day before the start of the HLPF, should be held *earlier* in the year, possibly in conjunction with the multi-stakeholder Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation for the Sustainable Development Goals (STI Forum), to analyse data and key messages resulting from the various processes and reports, which could then be utilized to inform the negotiations of the Ministerial Declaration in June and to boost the preparatory work for more meaningful HLPF panels in July.

- 4. In the absence of an institutional mechanism for scientific advice to the HLPF, scientists and experts (including from the GSDR IGS) should play a key role in the preparatory process to distil and synthesise available knowledge, engage with member states and be available to advise them, and help facilitate discussions during the HLPF. This would contribute to building trust in science and strengthening the use of scientific evidence as called for by the UN Secretary General in the context of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.** Senior scientists and experts (potentially drawing on the GSDR Independent Group of Scientists and other international scientific organisations) could be tasked with coordinating the preparatory process and bringing relevant findings for each main panel of the HLPF to support evidence-based policy recommendations. The designated experts could play an active role in synthesising knowledge by taking up the results of the UN System's preparatory work and play a critical function of knowledge brokerage. They could serve as well-prepared moderators of panel discussions at the HLPF and also work to ensure focus on policy-relevant recommendations, as well as an action-oriented follow-up after the HLPF. Moreover, the experts as a group could provide a sounding board to UNDESA and the ECOSOC Bureau to support the planning of the HLPF program. They could also serve UN missions as a resource group, providing policy-relevant knowledge on the themes of the HLPF to support member states' preparations, synthesising relevant findings for the delegates that negotiate the Ministerial Declaration in June and enabling a dialogue on key issues and opportunities to support fit-for-purpose inputs for the HLPF's interactive debates in July.

5. **The evidence-based inputs stemming from the multi-stakeholder Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation for the Sustainable Development Goals (STI Forum) should better feed into the HLPF.** The STI Forum should be a key stage in the preparatory process for the HLPF and better serve to understand the knowledge and capacity gaps of member states and other stakeholders to support ambitious SDG implementation. One of its main foci should be on the development of STI for SDG roadmaps at subnational and national levels and become a platform for collective learning through exchange of experiences and best practices in orienting STI capabilities towards achieving the SDGs to ensure that scientific and technological innovation is effectively supporting SDG implementation. Holding the ECOSOC Integration Segment back-to-back with the STI Forum could ensure better visibility and strengthened input into the HLPF processes. An additional measure could be to review the STI roadmaps together with the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) at the HLPF, as a way of encouraging Member States to develop their own roadmaps and bolster the connection between the two fora.
6. **Improving the HLPF towards better knowledge integration, policy coherence and ambition around the SDGs cannot be achieved without a robust process at national level to support SDGs implementation, and monitoring and review. The preparations of Voluntary National Review (VNR), their presentation at the HLPF and the follow up should meet several needs: (1) reflecting on actual progress achieved drawing on robust data and scientific evidence, (2) sharing lessons learned and good practices that have transformative potential and could benefit other member states' implementation efforts, (3) sharing challenges and identifying knowledge, implementation and capacity gaps where support is needed.**

UNDESA's VNR labs are a meaningful innovation that have so far created space for identifying common challenges and exchanging anecdotal good practices. The labs could complement the individual VNR presentations with a more detailed debate of potential solutions that emerge from VNRs in that year and could follow more co-creative processes, drawing on the knowledge of external experts and diverse stakeholders.

7. **The follow-up of VNRs should be improved as modest additional investments could increase significantly the effectiveness and efficiency of the HLPF and enable cumulative impact over time. ECOSOC or the HLPF could mandate an official report on good practices identified in the VNRs or SDG reviews or a comprehensive policy document with actionable recommendations.** The UN could, for example, task an expert panel to review all the VNRs in a cycle for best practices, systemic problems that need more multilateral attention, and also emerging issues. Their assessment and recommendations could then inform the preparations of the next HLPF and, every four years, the negotiations on the Political Declaration. Countries reporting for the second time could be encouraged to follow-up lessons learned and recommendations from their previous VNR. Recommendations could also be directed at the UN system and, where appropriate, also address other follow-up processes.
8. **There should be better alignment and integration of the SDGs with other frameworks. As progress in achieving the SDGs is largely determined by the level of ambition and effective implementation of many other global agreements and frameworks, both technical and political processes for the preparation of the HLPF through to the follow up need to more effectively link with relevant intergovernmental agreements and processes on issues relevant to the SDGs.** This could be achieved through increased focus on cross-cutting issues (e.g. poverty reduction which can improve resilience and capacity for adaptation and risk reduction) that could lead to early impact in all relevant global agreements; promotion of scientific evidence and expert knowledge that can support and advance understanding on how co-benefits can be achieved through the integration of relevant global agreements; integration and alignment of monitoring and reporting requirements, as well as policy implementation processes.

Concrete actions should include:

- Better links with key international processes and agreements (e.g. the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), including better alignment between the NDCs and SDG national implementation plans to foster greater complementarity. Many climate actions highlighted in the NDCs have the potential to generate multiple benefits across the 17 SDGs, while actions defined to meet SDG targets have the potential to contribute towards achieving NDC commitment.
- Better synergies with the Financing for Development (FfD) process.
- The meaningful involvement of all relevant UN bodies with the HLPF preparation and follow up (including those with an economic mandate (e.g. IMF, WTO, UNIDO, etc.). This would serve to promote greater policy coherence in the implementation of the SDGs.
- Inviting UN agencies and programmes to work on joint action plans, starting with key cross-cutting issues such as biodiversity and its contributions to development in light of the forthcoming post-2020 global biodiversity framework. Such joint action plans should address interdependencies between sectors. In the case of biodiversity loss, the direct and indirect drivers related to land use and land use change, consumption and production, trade, urbanisation and others should be addressed.

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