

**NOTES FOR FRIENDS ON
THE UN HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM
NEW YORK, 9-19 JULY 2019**

This is a note for friends about what I took away from the recently concluded High-level Political Forum (HLPF) at the United Nations in New York. Although I attended many meetings over those two weeks, I actually attended only one plenary session of the HLPF per se, which was on Monday 15 July on sustainable development goal 17 (“Financing the SDGs”), and whose substantive documentation was the [2019 report of the Inter Agency Task Force on Financing for Development](#), a [snapshot of international financial and trade data](#) by the UN Statistics Division, and a presentation of new financing trends and estimated gaps in delivering the SDGs by [Homi Karas](#) (Brookings, ex-World Bank). I saw nothing new in the speaker and panel presentations (although the Chinese banker whose firm bought Standard Bank in South Africa was notable). Neither were the 22 comments by Member States and civil society from the floor anything but usual; however, the number of people interested in the discussion was special. The meeting was held in Conference Room 4 in the UN basement, but the UN opened both the Trusteeship and Economic and Social Council Chambers as overflow rooms. I do not know if that happened on other days. My focus was on attending what looked to be interesting discussions, many of which were outside the UN building itself.

I think there is a growing appreciation that the SDGs, if not yet the 2030 Agenda writ large, are less than they are made out to be. Nevertheless, they embody the only international discussion on development and remain politically embraced by international development organizations, governments and much of civil society. The following draws from comments made in different meetings.

SDGs

Roberto Bissio (Social Watch) compared monitoring the SDGs to the Olympics, when each country’s goal is to accumulate as many gold medals as possible. Katja Hujo (UNRISD) said 17 goals of supposedly equal weight diffuse the issues. Another person said that together the SDGs cover too much ground to mobilize civil society around; you need to be selective, especially at grass roots level. Nevertheless, the SDGs (or selected ones) are a handle for development advocacy. Indeed, an entire side event took up “How can the SDGs thrive in adverse political contexts?” and heard presentations on Argentina, Brazil, Philippines and the UK.

Several speakers showed no love for the central UN catchphrase, “Leave no one behind,” which could mean only raising the poorest toward the average, without necessarily raising the average. It also says nothing about reducing inequality within countries (SDG 10). Several participants noted that the goals, targets and indicators do not make up a coherent whole (should not be surprising as they resulted from lobbying by particular interests to get their issues included and from foreign ministry negotiators who only wanted to get to a consensus document). Many official speakers referred to the need to take action—or reported on action taken—to “align” policies with the SDGs, which it was noted was not the same as devising an integrated and coherent development policy (Abigail Ruane, Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom).

Indeed, a multi-year project of [Southern Voice](#), a network of Southern think tanks supported by the Club of Madrid and the UN Foundation, is seeking to identify linkages among the goals and “how to avoid trade-offs where synergies are expected” (quoted from meeting agenda). Six country studies were presented at an all-day meeting at Ford Foundation, whose main value seemed to me to be rediscovering old truths about development policy. For example, [Sri Lankan](#) policy makers understood early on that

they needed significant training programs to be able to go up market quickly in textiles and clothing and not make T-shirts forever (linking education, jobs and industrialization SDGs before there were SDGs), although its policy makers have been challenged recently by the rate of technological evolution and automation in the “fast fashion” industry and the resulting decreasing job opportunities for the less skilled workers. Another example, linking health and sustainable consumption SDGs, discussed how traditional cooking with biofuels made rural [Ghanaian](#) women sicker than urban women, as well as inordinately add to carbon emissions; however, policies to help them needed to actually consult the women to better appreciate what they needed and why they rejected innovative cook stoves that have been embraced in other parts of Africa.

INFFs

The collection of SDGs may be analytically weak, but “sustainable development” with its three pillars (economic, social and environmental) can be forged into a coherent strategy and policy. One way toward actually getting there was the topic of a supposed training session on Integrated National Financing Frameworks (INFFs). It was actually a standard panel discussion, but a good one. While Stefano Prato (Society for International Development) worried that INFFs should not become the new structural adjustment programs, Shari Spiegel (UN/DESA) said they could become a useful tool for identifying bottlenecks in public and private financial systems and for identifying the need for and help shape good regulation. A speaker from the Namibian Government highlighted one such lesson that was not a secret but had not been really thought about: Namibian pension funds are mainly invested in South Africa, a holdover from when South Africa ruled Namibia. Thus, very little of the Namibian savings in these pension funds are invested in Namibia. In addition, INFFs, along with country-wide planning and government budgeting tools, can help break down policy silos in governments, as in making finance and line ministries talk to each other (David Coady, IMF). One may add that this also speaks to a problem in the SDG costing literature, which is usually produced by sector experts in sector specific silos, aggregated over countries, rather than in comprehensive development plans for individual countries.

One speaker (might have been from UNDP) said INFFs should not be a consultant’s report but a financial strategy owned by government and explained to the people. I would add that “the people” should also help shape the discussion that leads to the INFF, and that because the INFFs include private as well as public financial sources, and domestic as well as external ones, they can help the country make realistic assessments. For example, while raising tax revenues is everywhere recommended to finance more of sustainable development plans, David Coady warned that raising tax revenue by 5% of GDP over 5 years is actually very hard. I could add that INFFs invite realism about public-private partnerships and other forms of “blended” finance, which have to be drafted for specific projects. (Outside the INFF context, Canada hosted a briefing for civil society on the “[Tri Hita Karana Roadmap for Blended Finance](#),” adopted on the margins of the 2018 IMF Annual Meeting in Indonesia, in which Canada, other bilateral donors, OECD, IFC, World Economic Forum and others promoted hopeful guidelines for good blending).

VNRs

While INFFs are at an early stage of development, 2019 was the fourth year that governments have been presenting “voluntary national reviews” (VNRs) on implementing the 2030 agenda. The reports are a major feature of the HLPF. Forty seven of them were presented in brief statements with colorful slides and are posted on line. Kate Donald (Center for Economic and Social Rights) saw them as PR for FDI. However, they also can have some political importance, as signaled by the decision of the new government of Brazil to withdraw from presenting a 2019 VNR, which prompted a response (attached) from international (Civil Society Working Group for the 2030 Agenda) and Brazilian civil society (Rede ODS Brasil). Still, one needs to be concerned about the potential of these exercises to just be “SDG wash”, a term I heard first from Debrapriya (Deb) Bhattacharya, the Chair of Southern Voice.

In fact, attention is being paid to turning the VNRs into more useful documents. Thus far, the reports have

mainly described national political and bureaucratic processes for implementing the SDGs and instances of “aligning” policies with them (perhaps aligning rhetoric?), rather than measuring progress toward the goals and targets. While the Secretariat has issued “voluntary common reporting guidelines,” governments apparently do not follow them, although all of the issues recommended in the guidelines were included somewhere to some extent in 70% of the 2018 VNRs, according to a [Canadian study](#). VNRs are also selective in the data they present and their reliability. One side event at which the Vice Chair of the UN Committee on Development Policy, my New School colleague Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, presented some [results from the Committee’s research](#) was titled “National Reports on the 2030 Agenda: What They Do (Not) Tell Us”. In all, it would seem that the prospects that VNRs become reliable monitoring reports depends on the degree to which they are subjected to critical debate in domestic forums, rather than be glossy documents for donors and investors.

Where is this going?

With the 2019 HLPF now over, the UN turns its attention to a week of high-level political meetings in September, above all, at the “SDG Summit” on 24-25 September, a time at which heads of state and government traditionally come to open the General Assembly. This time, they should pledge individually to accelerate action toward achieving the 17 goals, as they have not adopted any specific acceleration in the [political declaration](#) that they will adopt there. The summit will be preceded by a one day Climate Action Summit on 23 September, convoked by the Secretary-General “to mobilize political and economic energy ...to advance climate action” and a simultaneous High-level Meeting on Universal Health Coverage. Following the SDG Summit, the Assembly will host the High-level Dialogue on Financing for Development on 26 September, a once in every four years ministerial review of implementation of the 2015 Addis Ababa Action Agenda. The Secretary-General will use that opportunity to launch an initiative called Global Investors for Sustainable Development, an alliance of 25-30 CEOs of large corporations, modeled on a Swedish investors’ alliance, who are expected to work until June 2021 to “harness their insights to incentivize greater long-term investment for sustainable development.” Finally, the week ends on 27 September when the General Assembly will convene a High-level Review of Progress on the SAMOA Pathway for Small Island Developing States (SIDS). SAMOA stands for “SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action.” Go figure. (All quotations from UN announcements.)

The point of each of the meetings is apparently to focus global public attention on the matters addressed, as no new international agreements are expected. All well and good, but as we know from the HLPF, most action will take place at national level. In this regard, it is of some importance that the July session was the fourth one organized under the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The General Assembly has agreed to reflect on and set the process anew for next 4 years. That negotiation should be concluded by early 2020. The betting is on a continuation of the practice thus far, perhaps with minor tweaks.

Certainly, the HLPF in ECOSOC has become a major event in the annual cycle of international development meetings. However, it is a discussion forum and not a place to reach policy decisions, although it could be an occasion to build political momentum around specific international policies, an opportunity not grasped thus far. Rather, it is most interesting for the multitude of discussions that take place around the plenary that are sponsored by governments, international institutions and civil society, where organizers want either to show off something new or important or raise critical debates. That in itself makes the HLPF worthwhile.

The 2020 session will be a logistical challenge. I understand that as tight as the space for meetings was this year, it will be far worse next year. The Development Cooperation Forum (DCF) and other official meetings will take place simultaneously with the HLPF. This year, the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC), an OECD initiative, met over the weekend between the two weeks of the HLPF; this won’t help next year as GPEDC is not a UN body but DCF is and needs a UN forum. If you plan to come, bring suntan lotion, as some side events may need to take place in Central Park.



Networks advocating for SDGs protest against the decision of the Brazilian government to withdraw from the list of countries that would submit their VNR at HLPF 2019

The GT SC Agenda 2030 (Civil Society Working Group for 2030 Agenda) and the Rede ODS Brasil (SDG-Brazil Network) express their repudiation of the Brazilian government's decision to withdraw from presenting its VNR during the HLPF, to be held July 9-18 at the United Nations Headquarters, in New York.

The VNR presentation, agreed in 2018, would be an opportunity for Brazil to reaffirm its commitment to the 2030 Agenda, while sharing with the international community the advances and/or challenges at the national level for its implementation.

We express our concern at the growing distance from the commitment made by the Brazilian State, in 2015, together with 192 other UN Member States, to implement a prosperity-based sustainable development model that respect people and planet, oriented for peace, and made possible through inclusive multisectoral partnerships.

Such a model, detailed in the 2030 Agenda, far from being a global imposition, has a universal principle (it must be adopted by all countries) and should be treated as a national responsibility, since it aligns with dear principles of our Federal Constitution along the seventeen SDGs and 169 targets the country has committed to comply with.

In Brazil, the social gaps between rich and poor are widening, the inequality is increasing, and violence is intensifying the historical exclusion of the majority of the Brazilian population – whether for reasons of race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression (SOGIE). This makes public policies already aligned with the SDGs very relevant. Therefore, it is deeply concerning that the government of Brazil, in addition to insisting on adopting social, economic and environmental policies that contradicts the SDGs, it has withdrawn from presenting the VNR.

This decision indicates the new government uncomfortable position with several indicators in all areas of the 2030 Agenda, with which it refuses to align in principle. Such withdrawal results from the new Brazilian foreign policy that rejects multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations, and international non-binding agreements. It is also another example of the current inability to present actions for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda which, as evidence shows, is now treated as an obstacle to the approval of President Bolsonaro's main projects: easing weapon-carrying restrictions, dismantling social participation policies, reducing resources for health and education, eliminating racial and gender equality policies, promoting deforestation, pushing for regressive taxation reform, devastating the environment, including by deregulating already legally protected areas, among other atrocities.

We, therefore, repudiate this decision that will only further damage Brazil's international position, vis-à-vis those countries that used to have us as a progressive example in facing inequalities and promoting human, social, and economic rights.

Brazil, July 2nd 2019.

WG 2030 Agenda (www.gtagenda2030.org.br)

Rede ODS Brasil (SDG Brazil Network) (www.redeodsbrasil.org)

