

HLPF 2022

Have we failed to capitalise on the momentum for the SDGs?

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Hunger, rising poverty and inequality, the climate and biodiversity crisis, mounting government debt and overstretched health systems illustrate the drastic state in which our world found itself even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Counteracting these multiple crises will require multilateral approaches. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) could serve as a roadmap to this end, and yet the Sustainable Development Report 2022 shows that the international community has seen a reversal in progress on SDG achievement for the second successive year.

The United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) and the SDG Summit are seeking to make up lost ground here. Unlike the HLPF, which gathers ministers annually, the SDG Summit brings together heads of state and government at the UN General Assembly every four years and examines implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development globally. States attending the HLPF report voluntarily on their best practices and challenges in implementing the 2030 Agenda. The



two meetings are considered key forums for global sustainability policy. However, their own shortcomings and the divergent interests of states often leave them paralysed.

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This year's ministerial declaration from the HLPF dated 7 July 2022 illustrates the above issue clearly. Once again, it is characterised by observations of the status quo and declarations of commitment to the 2030 Agenda. Political leadership, policy guidelines and innovative recommendations on making up the aforementioned lost ground are nowhere to be found. The particular interests of the individual states loom too large. Nonetheless, the arduously negotiated declaration does affirm a desire to bolster the political will at the September 2023 SDG Summit, which is being held at the half-way point on the road to implementing the 2030 Agenda. For instance, it recommends that the highest political representatives of all UN member states attend the upcoming summit and that national and regional consultations be held to review the headway made in achieving the 2030 Agenda, thus marking the beginning of a new phase of accelerated progress towards realising the SDGs. But what practical role could the forthcoming summit play?

For this next summit to be a success, the German Government needs to lead the way on implementing at national level the proposals put forward by UN Secretary-General António Guterres on establishing networked multilateralism for sustainable development. For instance, national platforms could be offered for dialogue on sustainability topics, efforts undertaken to strengthen political participation among young people, measures introduced to advance gender equality, and cooperation stepped up between ministries. Networked multilateralism is crucial to realising the SDGs, as the aforementioned issues transcend national borders. It is also necessary for as many heads of state and government as possible to attend the summit in order to generate the political momentum

required at this half-way point on the road to realising the 2030 Agenda. The Federal Chancellery should therefore begin to prepare for the upcoming summit at an early stage and work with different federal ministries to submit practical proposals for the HLPF review due in 2024 in order to drive reform processes of the Forum that are yet to get off the ground.

There was a palpable desire at the HLPF to adhere to the SDGs and use them as a compass to guide us out of the crisis. While the halls and corridors of the UN remained surprisingly empty this year, the existing substantive orientation of the SDGs was quite rightly endorsed again. It also became clear from discussions with other delegations that what is most needed right now is a common narrative for mainstreaming the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs within society at large. This first requires that the imperative for a sustainable transformation is communicated in a way that everyone can understand. Climate action alone will not suffice; we must also continue to promote biodiversity and marine conservation. In this context, it is necessary to make everyone aware of the impact that our actions will have on living conditions for future generations and people in other countries. Governments bear primary responsibility for advancing the narrative, which should be comprehensible and related to everyday issues such as food waste and refuse creation, and the links between these problems and the SDGs. For this to succeed, the Federal Chancellery should be strengthened in its role of coordinating sustainability issues, while strategic and digital structures should be expanded within the federal ministries. The younger generation, which attaches vital importance to achieving the 2030 Agenda, is more likely to be won over by practical initiatives than political proclamations. SDG influencers in Germany could draw attention on social media to the implementation of the goals. And German public service broadcasters could also devote more time to reporting on topics such as climate and biodiversity and how they relate to the SDGs.

The aforementioned proposals provide a good starting point for generating the much-talked-about political momentum for the SDGs, momentum that this year's HLPF failed to deliver. In the absence of this momentum, there is a risk that the SDGs, like the Millennium Development Goals before them, will not be achieved.