

Transforming Transformation: Contemplating the future of the HLPF

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In danger of getting derailed

Nothing is without alternative, and sometimes the derailing is not even noticed in the first place. The example of 1992 is striking and a lesson of which we should be mindful.

In 1992, diplomats and activists returning home from the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit were full of visionary euphoria. They were proud, and rightly so, about negotiation successes like the Agenda 21. Their common fundamental ideal was the huge peace dividend the end of the Cold War was to yield. But this never quite materialized. Instead, the derailed neoliberal globalisation process kicked in. The lesson is this: the terms of politics had changed fundamentally and although this happened in full view of the public, the Rio community only rarely took notice. Can this happen again? Is there a danger of disappointing expectations and hopes? Yes, it can happen again. And it would mean a serious setback.

Geopolitics today are undergoing severe adverse turbulences. The US are no longer leading the world and guaranteeing stability – if they ever had, that is. Western leadership is a void. In many European countries, we are seeing a rise of right-wing movements. National and egoist “me-first” ideas are seemingly gaining control over major parts of the public discourse, perhaps even the political agenda. For climate change and sustainable development agendas, this may result in them fading away.

We still have work to do in order to be able to understand more clearly what we are seeing. If we succeed, I am positive any potential derailing can be avoided. The Agenda 2030 rightly acts under the pretence of ambitiously and creatively shaping progress, calling this the “great transformation”.

However, the reality is that many of us are in defence mode. Both sides of the coin are true and valid. This is why it is of utmost importance to carefully examine the idea of transformation.

Transformation – what else?

Yes, transformation – what else? It seems so obvious: one gladly chooses “transformation” as the common denominator of all political efforts relating to Agenda 2030.

- If we look more closely, we need to be very careful when using this term. It is not a simple idea and it, too, creates certain mental blinders. The same applies to the High Level Political Forum.
- “Transformation” talks often do not reflect the reality: in 2015 when the world leaders passed the Agenda 2030, environmental activists experienced the highest annual death toll on record¹. At least 185 environmental activists were killed in 2015.
- “Transformation” does not convey a sense of urgency: in Germany, the total numbers of flying insects has plunged 75% over the past 25 years². And this data was gathered from protected nature reserves, not overused agricultural landscapes, which makes the scientific evidence even more striking.
- “Transformation” is often used one-sidedly and without regard for social sustainability issues: according to WHO, the majority of the world’s population lives in countries where more people die as a result of obesity and being overweight than do of being underweight³.

The point here is this: transformation is not one-sided per definition. There is transformation for the better and transformation for the worse. A transformation for the worse is going on while we talk about transformation for the better. Transformation is here and now. It is happening as we speak. The world has not stopped transforming – and probably never will. The world as we know it today, our way of life, was foreign and inconceivable for our grandparents and even for our parents. It will be foreign to even us in just a few decades.

The Great Transformation, in our context, is often perceived as something extraordinary and so unique that it is matched only twice in history: by the Neolithic Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. In this lineup, the Great Transformation appears to be a singularity. This is false. Sustainable development is a transformation that certainly has great impact and reach, but I sincerely doubt it is a singularity.

History is full of transformations that, for the people affected, have been of dramatic scale. Think of the African nations in the era of imperialism and nowadays. Think of the fate of so many aboriginal nations, the death toll of religious wars in the 17th century, or the rise of industrial capitalism, of

¹ As reported by The Guardian, 20 June 2016:

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/jun/20/environmental-activist-murders-global-witness-report>

² Hallmann, Caspar A. et al (2017): More than 75 percent decline over 27 years in total flying insect biomass in protected areas, published 18 October 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0185809>

³ Worldwide obesity has nearly tripled since 1975. In 2016, more than 1.9 billion adults aged 18 years and older were overweight. Of these, over 650 million were obese. 39% of adults aged 18 years and over were overweight in 2016 and 13% were obese.

the rise and fall of imperial states. In his history of “collapse”⁴, Jared Diamond describes an impressive lineup of both failed and successful transitions people went through while facing disrupting and severe changes in their environment.

Language-wise, the T-word is an odd and awkward term. While it is common jargon within our community, it is seldom used outside of it and in the broader public. This is important because, in that respect, language is politics. So, in brief:

- The T-word lacks a clear subject. In a revolution you can be a revolutionary – in a transformation period, would you call yourself a transformer, a transformerista? Not really. The absence of a natural subject arouses the suspicion that someone in the shadows might be pursuing a hidden agenda.
- Politicians tend not to like the T-word because it is so broad. As a malleable word it can be used in so many different ways and by anyone. You do not see it used very often in state or diplomatic rhetoric.
- Ordinary people are easily scared by the T-word, in particular when the T-rhetoric exposes a dizzying grandness that corresponds with all kinds of doom and gloom, but not at all with real progress. They might go into complete lockdown. Or it might trigger ignorance and “me-first” behaviour.
- The T-jargon places transformation in the future, meaning: you call for it, you challenge others to make a move, you want to see it rolled out, transformation is required, without alternative. This suggests that the great transformation lies ahead of us and is something yet to begin, something to hope and work for. As pointed out earlier, that is a wrong perception. We must not wait for a “planetary diplomacy” to arise that would sort out the impact of “planetary boundaries”.

On the other hand, the SDG community loves the T-word, to an almost euphoric level. This may alienate us from the broader society. I would say we are already in an echo chamber.

That is why we have to transform the understanding and connotation of the T-word. And we have to start right where we are standing, with the one marketplace we all share collectively: the HLPP.

Social processes are not triggered by words. However, words are still important. They are not triggered by causality and scientific evidence either, though these are of high importance. From what I have seen, for social processes, at least those associated with sustainable development, interaction is the trigger. Interaction like debating controversies, awarding best practice, voting processes, comparing and benchmarking activities, rating and ranking, creating social marketplaces, creating spaces where people meet who would not meet otherwise. Those things have the power to trigger social and political processes if they are performed and staged professionally, and in a credible and trustworthy way.

⁴ Diamond, Jared (2011). Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive, London: Penguin Books Ltd.

On the bright side

Against all odds – and against the dull atmosphere and dire work process in New York – in my opinion, the HLPF is currently an effective format. The presentation of the voluntary national reviews (VNR) is both interesting and informative. In New York this year we often heard the standard criticism calling voluntary reporting “hot-air reports” due to their weak performance. I do not find this criticism convincing.

The HLPF has transformational momentum. The number of states that have presented their national application of the SDGs is striking. The dissemination of the SDG narrative is faster than expected. The HLPF 2017 offered presentations of highly diverse content and the processes used to prepare reports. As a marketplace for ideas it facilitates the exchange of what is reported about the national implementation of Agenda 2030 and the experiences made. The HLPF does not prevent anyone from finding his or her own takeaways, but neither does it enforce or specifically promote mutual learning.

In the overall picture, the HLPF builds on significant progress outside of the HLPF:

- Civil society with funding from national departments has built up impressive structures to monitor implementation of SDGs. Dozens of interesting institutions and frameworks have been set up and allow for sharing of experiences and campaigning. The first gathering of the Open SDGclub.Berlin⁵ with more than 80 participants from more than 30 countries put on display the dedication and added value provided by intermediary bodies such as the Councils for Sustainable Development and similar organisations.
- Supreme Audit Institutions are working out how to assess governments’ action and state budgets against the sustainable development goals⁶.
- The private sector is kicking in. Institutional investors, in great numbers, are divesting or asking for sustainable assets to invest in. The French BNP Paribas Bank predicts investments in environmental, social and good governance will double over the next two years⁷. Green bonds are expected to grow by over 200 billion euros this year, though this is still only a small fraction of the overall bond market. First impact investors are using the SDG as a framework for developing their impact process and analysis. Already a good fourth of the world’s top 300 businesses have published commitments to the SDGs and therefore qualify for positive SDG impact investment, according to UNGSII⁸.
- The VNRs from the around 40 countries vary somewhat in terms of quality; overall, however, the positive outweighs the negative. In the face of the earlier resistance to quantifiable requirements and rules, the status quo reached thus far is impressive. Numerous countries gave reviews, and Agenda 2030 has been affirmed and intensified. The presentation of the VNRs is an important vehicle for the exchange of experiences and represents a first step towards transparency and verification of measures. The assessment often repeated in New York that the VNRs were essentially “governmental selfies” is not one

⁵ <https://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/en/events/council-events/open-sdgclub-berlin-2016/>

⁶ http://intosai.org/upload/8scm/AI5_%20INTOSAI_Strategic_Plan.pdf

⁷ <http://www.ethicalperformance.com/news/article/9346>

⁸ <https://www.ungsii.org>

I would endorse. Rather, the reviews were authentic and the instances where they veered towards being less critical and more propaganda-oriented were quickly apparent. One problem was, in my opinion, the rather deficient quality of the questions posed and statements made in the debate. In this regard, the major groups did not make use of the opportunities available. A positive development was the fact that more and more countries are allowing their civil society a voice in their presentations and thereby qualifying their self-assessment.

Unsurprisingly, there are a significant number of common national priorities. National approaches are converging at an aggregated and abstract level. If they converged at disaggregated levels, one could assume a lot more concrete partnerships and mutuality would come into being. The Agenda 2030 is formulated on a rather general level that makes it easy to say, yes, I am in favour of implementing SDGs. When it then comes to the concrete decision-making level, the implementation is much harder and quite often gets blocked. Another indication is the loose connectedness of SDG implementation: policy areas referred to in national reports quite often are only loosely connected to SDGs. The implementation process is dominated by administrative structures, as opposed to being driven by the mandated political leadership.

The HLPF buzzword is coherence. That comes as no surprise. The limitations to implementation and the distance to targets must seem incoherent policies when the implementation process is dependent on pre-Agenda 2030 departmental architectures. Thus, “integration”, coherent planning, filling of data gaps, cross-sector coordination appear the most important requirements. I doubt this is truly the case. Of course, there is no question: the world would be a different place if all those administrative wish lists were in place. But the set of wish lists would change with a changed and more transformative way of involving top-level politics, lighthouse BHAG (big hairy audacious goals) projects and social engagement via mutual interaction.

Institutionalised mechanisms at a national level are key for meaningful participation. Many reports announce the establishment of suitable councils, commissions or cross-sector bodies. The variety of approaches is enormous. Exercises in comparing institutional settings may have little merit because of the different basic structures and political cultures in the various countries. In any case, the search for applicable solutions may promise a boost in ownership and creativity, all centred on making the state performance fit for the task. The state contribution is of utmost importance, but will only yield significant results if we can change institutional logistics. How can we foster suitable cooperation across and between the state’s silos as well as those in civil society and the private sector? How can we engage different constituencies in a dialogue beyond their organisational limits? How can we encourage responsibility and accountability beyond the narrow limits of legal frameworks?

It is common knowledge that vertical alignment and private–public cooperation are the missing links. Little could be learned from the reports about this. Likewise, how to raise and allocate additional resources and how to mobilise constituencies not yet involved are the two questions of general interest, and again only little is said about these. Too little in order to draw conclusions, except for the one on white elephants and the problems activists have in describing their own shortcomings.

In conclusion, the HLPF 2017 certainly had transformative momentum, but over the next couple of years this will neither be maintained nor will it be self-perpetuating. If no other impact is made, the momentum will fade away.

The future of HLPF

In the next two to three years, new components and political impulses are sorely needed for the HLPF. This is a question of governance. We do not yet have the UN we need⁹. But neither do we have what we need from the member states. With a view to the next steps in SDG implementation, the HLPF cannot simply continue as has been the case up to now, however. It only “works” in its current form as long as the discussion revolves around goals and framework conditions. In future, however, it must deal with successes and failures and the evaluation of these. The local and regional levels will have to play a stronger role in this regard as well as in answering the question of in what way civil society is impacted by sustainability strategy and how strongly. Non-governmental bodies of experts are already discussing first ideas and requirements.

One may be tempted to ask for more comparability of reports, e.g. by introducing a general and obligatory template or other streamlining elements. I have a different view. Diversity is of great value. Diversity is an asset. It must not be pared down. Templates lead to tick-box behaviour and do not encourage learning. Standards, however, are a different issue. Using the wealth of presentations as a basis, it would be quite easy to derive basic evaluation criteria that might help to zero in on materiality and what matters most as well as generalities in procedure and overall approaches.

A better understanding of the difference between reporting and reviewing might decide the fate and future of the HLPF. Reporting and reviewing are different activities, both in content and process. But as of now, the HLPF mixes what should better be kept separate. The Agenda 2030 encourages nations in paragraph 79 to “conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels, which are country-led and country-driven”. Thus, the language of Agenda 2030 allows for the current unsystematic mix of reporting and reviewing. So far, all voluntary national reports – or VNRs – presented at the HLPF are REPORTS even though they are labelled reviews. On the other hand, the review component of the HLPF as relates to a selection of SDGs is, in my view, largely unsuitable. The review does not attain the necessary depth that absolutely has to be yielded from national implementation. Thus, in my view:

- Reports must be state-led because the state is the first “owner” of the SDGs. A report requires the state taking full responsibility. The report is drafted and accounted for by the government.
- Reviews are the more ambitious tool. Their governance differs from the one used for reports. A review must be built on third-party views and assessments by stakeholders and experts. It must be facilitated by a third party, an independent council for sustainable development or a similar institution. A review requires stakeholders or experts to take full responsibility for both content and process. Even if states invite stakeholders to act within the framework of a report, the report must remain state-led.

⁹ <https://www.un.org/ecosoc/sites/www.un.org.ecosoc/files/files/en/qcpr/ita-findings-and-conclusions-16-jun-2016.pdf>

- Mixing the labels means missing the issue. Mixing reports and reviews means degrading clear responsibility and accountability.

Transformation must start at the HLPF as the very place of negotiation. The challenge for HLPF 2019 and beyond is to build a great bridge between national implementation and reporting on the one side and the thematic reviews and general status-quo assessments on the other.

- The next step should be a major crossover exercise within the HLPF by introducing a reference between the first and the second HLPF element: the section on what is now called thematic reviews should be informed by cross-reference to national reports and to how national implementation is happening in real terms on the ground.
- The state-led national reports can also be developed further. State reports should be encouraged to proceed on the basis of their clear state ownership and accountability. A modern, influential and dedicated national report can and should be cross-referenced with benchmarks. (I have attached a list of tentative benchmarks.) Those could be provided by mandating societal actors to facilitate and provide peer reviews (as defined above).

For this to become established, the HLPF process needs political involvement at highest levels in preparation for the 2019 session. It should address the role of the private sector and in particular the sustainable finance industries. Science–policy interfaces are proliferating in the various regimes of international and national sustainable development governance. Science–policy interfaces must trigger both a renewed self-understanding of science and an open-minded environment on the policy side. They can and should be made a stronger and more substantive part of development collaboration. Those impacts are also needed in order to produce new features for a meaningful participation of top-level representatives. Links to the G20 process for mutual peer learning and other multilateral and blended learning processes should be clearly established.

I thank you for your attention.

Attachment: Tentative ideas for benchmarking voluntary national reviews (VNR) taken from presentations in 2017¹⁰

- Process quality
 - Was the report based on consultation with stakeholders?
 - Are local and regional groups included (vertical integration)?
 - Does the report allow for feedback?
 - Is the report part of the “peer learning mechanism”?

¹⁰ 44 countries presented reviews: Afghanistan, Argentina, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Belarus, Belgium, Belize, Benin, Botswana, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Iran, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Maldives, Monaco, Nepal, Netherlands, Nigeria, Panama, Peru, Portugal, Qatar, Slovenia, Sweden, Tajikistan, Thailand, Togo, Uruguay, Zimbabwe

- Content
 - Does the report explain which aspects and topics are material for the country and why?
 - Are the national goals quantified and measurable?
 - Are goals and indicators specified that relate to conditions outside of the country's borders?
 - Examples
 - “through” in the sense of the three-pronged approach: footprint/handprint
 - Tax evasion
 - Supply and value chains
 - Food loss and food waste related to imports
 - Are challenges in the sense of unsolved problems discussed?
- Institutionalization
 - Have sustainability councils (or similar bodies) been institutionalized as a platform for multi-stakeholder forums and discussions?
 - Do they have an independent mandate and budget?
 - Who has the power to make decisions in the case of conflicts of interest?
- Cross-disciplinary issues
 - Are internal conflicts between goals mentioned?
 - Does it report on and present any existing differences in position (majority vs dissenting opinion), e.g., within the scope of reporting on the indicators, through inter-ministry working groups (co-design)?
 - Do budget lines receive earmarking for sustainability purposes?
 - Does the report make any statement regarding sustainability culture?
- Data monitoring
 - Is independent data monitoring carried out?
 - Is data on SDG implementation presented/suggested by the business sector?
 - Does the review mention for which SDGs no data or methods exist as of yet but for which these are desired (presentation of deficits), e.g., relating to land degradation neutrality?
- Participation
 - Are NGOs, local initiatives, youth, the scientific community, local administrations, innovative partnerships, etc., given a voice in the VNR?
 - Are elements of co-design between the government and civil society present?
 - Do non-governmental representatives have a voice when the VNR is presented?