

01.03.2021 Policy paper

Reform options for effective UN sustainable development governance



German Council for
SUSTAINABLE
Development

01.03.2021 Policy paper

Reform options for effective UN sustainable development governance

- 01 Why we need a stronger UN
sustainable development governance
- 02 Reform options for more effective
UN sustainable development governance
- 03 Recommended course of action for effective
UN sustainable development governance

Authors

Marianne Beisheim (SWP)
Cornelia Füllkrug-Weitzel (RNE)
Lisi Maier (RNE)
Imme Scholz (RNE)
Silke Weinlich (DIE)
Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul (RNE)

Editing

Hannah Janetschek
Marc-Oliver Pahl

↘ [nachhaltigkeitsrat.de](https://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de)

1. Why we need a stronger UN sustainable development governance

The United Nations (UN) are the heart of multilateral cooperation. It is a forum where all member states meet on an equal footing and decision-making is based on universally applicable rules aimed at protecting the weaker states from the arbitrariness of the stronger states. Together, the universality and the global norms and rules of the UN are intended to enable effective governance of global sustainability challenges: all necessary decision-makers are meant to sit at the table and agree on a common approach. This aims to guarantee reliability of expectations, create a level playing field and mutual support, as well as set the course for national development pathways and addressing global problems. However, the reality draws a different picture. Decision-making in the UN is always based on compromise and therefore takes time and often results in the lowest common denominator. Unfortunately, for problem areas that require global cooperation – climate change, biodiversity, pandemics – we are witnessing accelerating negative trends that need to be halted. With the 2030 Agenda, the UN has created a common agenda for the future. However, the slow implementation of the 2030 Agenda illustrates that reforms are needed for faster, solution-oriented action and decision-making in the next decade.

This paper¹ presents reform options for UN governance mechanisms to ambitiously support national efforts for sustainable development in the remaining nine years until 2030. In order to realise these options, UN member states must understand that more international cooperation is needed in order to not only promote their own good, but rather the global common good as well.

In our globalised world, both problems themselves as well as their causes and solutions are intertwined across borders and across policy fields. It is more urgent than ever that not only multilateral but also national policy decisions be based on maintaining the global common good: human well-being can no longer be secured within a national or European framework of action, but rather requires global cooperation that focuses on global threats and untapped potential for cooperation (Messner and Scholz 2018). The pandemic reveals global interconnectedness and globally shared responsibility for

¹ This policy paper is the result of a reflection process within the German Council for Sustainable Development, namely the members of its working group on European and international matters (Cornelia Füllkrug-Weitzel, former president of Bread for the World, Lisi Maier, president of the German Federal Youth Council, (DBJR), Imme Scholz, deputy director of the German Development Institute (DIE), and Heidemarie Wiczorek-Zeul, former German Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development), Hannah Janetschek, coordinator for European and international affairs at the RNE office and Marc-Oliver Pahl, RNE secretary general). The RNE especially thanks Marianne Beisheim, senior associate at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) and Silke Weinlich, senior researcher at the German Development Institute (DIE) for their contributions to this work.

problem-solving pathways. We will only successfully overcome the pandemic if we join forces to fight it effectively in all countries of the world. At the same time, the pandemic's direct and indirect impacts are exacerbating inequality both between countries and within societies.

In the following, we provide an assessment of some shortcomings of the UN's sustainable development governance and the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) as the central platform for follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs, thereby highlighting functions in which the UN is weak. In the spirit of "form follows function", we present reform proposals to achieve improvements in the four areas outlined below. Adequate and reliable funding would also be needed for each of these reforms.

1.1 Mobilise political will, take decisions and follow up on these decisions

Policymakers must prioritise global problems in order to effectively tackle them. Following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, the UN's High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) has become a platform used by member states and stakeholders to share experiences in implementing the SDGs, particularly in the context of the voluntary national reviews (VNRs). The increasing involvement of many stakeholders in preparing or commenting on national reports has resulted in increased public attention and mobilises political will. However, countries continue to primarily share success stories and hardly report on shortfalls or strategies on how best to address these. To improve mutual learning and build political momentum, both would be needed.

In the current multilateral system, there is no international body that sets binding rules and addresses violations with effective instruments. The HLPF is based on consensual decision-making. Aiming for high ambitions is almost impossible when the respective interests are fundamentally divergent. Even if the ministerial declaration of the annual HLPF is ambitious in content, it is nearly without effect in the absence of binding and institutionalised follow-up processes.

Legally, too, offences and crimes against the environment or extraterritorial effects of national actions on the sustainable development of other states cannot be sanctioned (and are not even

¹ Higgins 2015:
Eradicating Ecocide. Laws
and Governance to Prevent
the Destruction of Our Planet,
Shepherd-Walwyn Publishers,
London. See also:
↳ Stop Ecocide

effectively recorded) as yet. For some years, unsuccessful attempts have been made to have so-called “ecocide”² – extensive damage to or destruction of ecosystems – considered a criminal offense that can be prosecuted by international courts.

1.2 Drive and demand policy coherence

Despite improvements, UN sustainable development governance does not succeed in addressing policy themes in an integrated manner. Similarly, states are not yet required to account for the extent to which they are advancing the coherence of their own policies in terms of a transformation to sustainable development. The 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) has convincingly illustrated that the complex challenges of our time can be addressed more effectively through coherent and interlinked action. It identified integrated transformational pathways, with six entry points and four levers. Similarly, governments’ commitments to climate neutrality also necessitate that particularly challenging and conflicting issues be prioritised; if convincingly addressed, indirect effects on other sustainability goals can be achieved. The recently developed national COVID-19 recovery plans illustrate, however, that sustainability criteria unfortunately still do not guide policy action across sectors.

1.3 Identify effective instruments for the Decade of Action and disseminate them widely

After five years of reporting and institutional adjustments for SDG implementation at the national level, in 2019 UN member states declared a Decade of Action to advocate for accelerated implementation of the SDGs. However, international sustainable development governance so far provides too little critical reflection on effective instruments for sustainable development. Peer learning, self-commitments, and voluntary reporting are not sufficient to effectively counteract negative impacts on the global common good. Knowledge transfer is too slow, and there is not enough space for discourse of ideas and action in dealing with conflicting goals or structural change. Furthermore, there is insufficient linkage to financing issues and changes in economic and financial policy. Resources mobilised to date, including to support the efforts of least developed countries, fall substantially short of the ambitions. Moreover, the resources that member states provide to the UN secretariat are too precarious to develop appropriate and continuous analytical capacity or

dissemination activities. Similarly, there is a lack of resources and capacity to enter into effective partnerships with non-state actors for knowledge transfer and implementation. Institutionalised involvement of civil society and its implementation capacities is only observable to a limited extent but would also be important for a better integration and coherence of national and international processes.

1.4 Harnessing analysis and foresight for knowledge-based decision-making

In the Decade of Action in particular, more effective accounting for progress must be introduced. For example, there is insufficient systematic analysis of the reports from the UN system, the voluntary national reviews, let alone a comparison with the civil society shadow reports, which are increasingly being submitted. Accordingly, there is no systematic assessment of transformation areas and their trends, nor is there any global-level quantification towards target achievement (“distance-to-the-SDG-target”³). At both the national and international levels, civil society and other non-state actors contribute immensely to knowledge enhancement and transfer, thereby having an accelerating and sustaining effect. Thus, year-round institutionalised involvement of civil society would be of great importance.

³ OECD 2020:

↳ Measuring Distance to the SDG Targets 2019: An Assessment of Where OECD Countries Stand

Finally, the pandemic shows how important a scientific assessment of systemic risks and foresight would be. Although the HLPF has a mandate to address “new and emerging issues”, it has so far failed to do so convincingly. The independent group of scientists (IGS) mandated to produce the next Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) needs to be better equipped in order to use its full potential and live up to these needs. As early as 2009, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) requested that the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) establish a Panel on Systemic Risks.⁴ More recently, in the context of the pandemic, an initiative has proposed establishing an inter-governmental UN Global Resilience Council, with a mandate to identify and address global non-military threats and crises at an early stage, with scientific advice, decision-making power and enforcement tools.⁵

⁴ Messner et al. 2009:

↳ Globalisation at Crossroads, DIE Briefing Paper.

⁵ FOGGS 2020:

↳ Global Resilience Council.

2. Reform options for more effective UN sustainable development governance

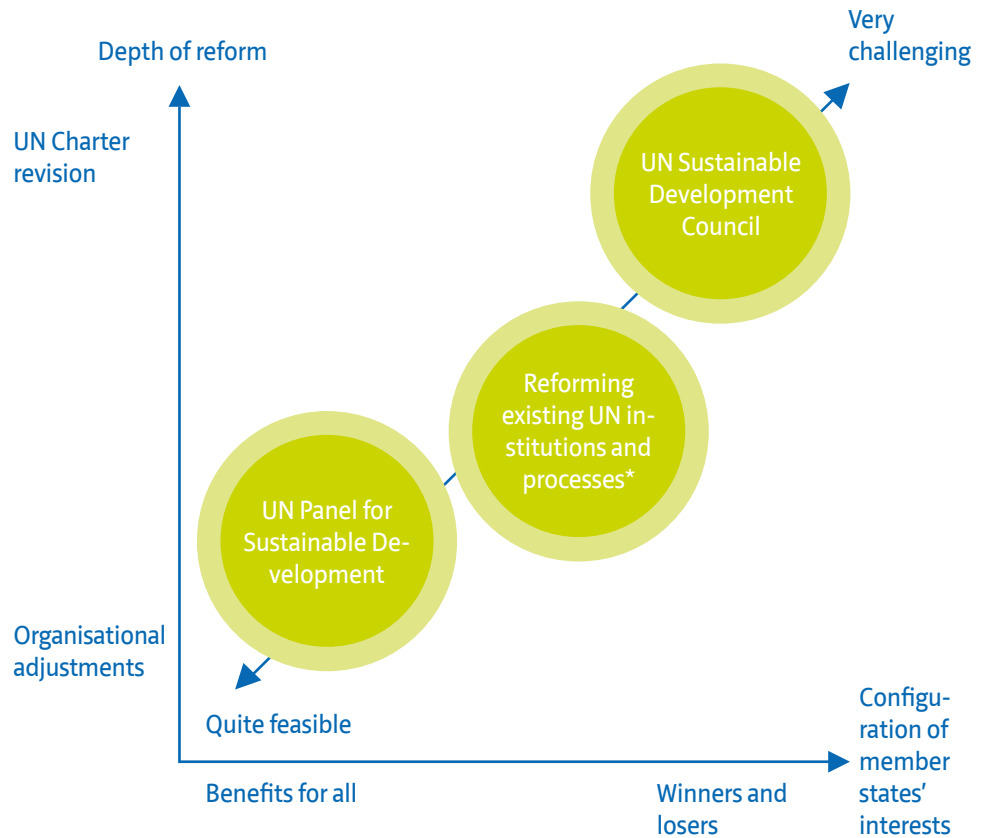
The UN is in a state of permanent reform. There are already quite a few institutions, dialogue platforms and review processes that are trying to address the deficits identified.⁶ But above all, the strong reservations of many UN member states with a view to protecting their national sovereignty slow the system down. Any adaptation of UN sustainable development governance must be supported by the vast majority of UN member states. The creation of a UN Sustainable Development Council on a par with the UN Security Council would require an amendment to the UN Charter. Two-thirds of all member states would need to approve and ratify the proposal, including the five permanent members of the Security Council (Art. 108 UN Charter). Moderate reform of existing institutions and processes would be possible without Charter amendment and could therefore be implemented faster.

The depth of the necessary reforms thus influences the general feasibility and time horizon of reform options. Their impact on the constellations of interests and the power structure of member states is another important factor (see Figure 1). Although a UN Sustainable Development Council may be in the long-term interest of all member states, developing countries may fear that another authoritative body could reinforce the dominance of the Global North and constrain their development opportunities via conditionalities. Industrialised countries, which would have to submit to majority rule on important issues, could also have reservations.

⁶See also Beisheim 2018:
UN Reforms for the 2030
Agenda, SWP Research Paper
2018/RP 09 for a description
of the existing governance
structure and their respective
mandates and functions.

Figure 17:
Ambition level and required reform depth




⁷ Source:
own adaptation based
on Weinlich/Baumann
2020:
The United Nations
Reform Debate. Unpu-
blished manuscript.






* UNGA, ECOSOC, HLPF,
GSDR, DESA

In the following, a selection of reform elements is identified and categorised into moderate, medium and high ambition levels. A moderate level of ambition requires no more than organisational and process-oriented adjustments, whereas a medium level of ambition would have to overcome systemic hurdles. A high level of ambition requires revision of the UN Charter.

Matrix: Reform options at different levels of ambition

Functions	Ambition level		
	Moderate 	Medium 	High 
Political will and decision-making competencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More stringent decision-making processes in ECOSOC, HLPF and UNGA - HLPF ministerial declaration with specific recommendations that are monitored more effectively 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Upgrading ECOSOC and reorienting all of its work to advise UNGA on sustainable development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reorganisation of ECOSOC into a UN Sustainable Development Council with decision-making power and enforcement instruments; possibly with a chamber structure that enables stakeholder participation - In crisis situations, UN Sustainable Development Council decides conflicting goals of high global importance, with access to enforcement instruments
Policy coherence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ECOSOC annually discusses proposals for early detection and avoidance of inconsistencies in the UN system - Expand the ECOSOC system towards providing integrated policy advice and evaluation of good practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Periodic evaluation of the implementation of policies and policy coherence for sustainable development, with recommendations for action as a binding UNGA agenda item 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In crisis situations, UN Sustainable Development Council decides conflicting goals of high global importance, with access to enforcement instruments

	Moderate 	Medium 	High 
Instruments (policies, technology, financing, etc.) and their dissemination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More action-oriented reviews during the annual HLPF to highlight best practices and innovations, incorporating third-party evaluations as well, incl. from civil society - Transparency initiative: "Naming and Shaming" on SDG 16 and 17 - Identification and/or establishment or up-scaling of two partnerships annually (per SDG in focus in this year) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Science-based peer review / offer of independent certification of national reports - Recommendations on prioritisation and time-bound instruments - Integrate the financing for development process -(FFD) with SDG implementation: specify and monitor commitments and provide written recommendations or reminders - Call for proposals and funding for up to six partnerships per year on transformational pathways 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Council can make decisions on global economic policies (taxes, financing, and trade) where related to global public goods and economic, social and cultural rights - Independent resources (e.g. from financial transaction tax) for: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Incentives for steering a course towards sustainable development b) Compensation payments for particularly affected states and population groups c) Support for "major projects" of global relevance - Establish contingency plans that take effect if predetermined goals are not met
Analysis and foresight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adequate funding for the GSDR team - Annual synthesis report of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) - Synthesis report of existing relevant foresight, risk and scenario analyses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Upgrade the GSDR team to a permanent UN sustainable development panel. This panel analyses and evaluates reports to the HLPF and identifies options for actions and scenarios - Develop UN foresight capacity using the "swarm intelligence" of UN staff at all levels (digital platform) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Significantly upgrade GSDR team in capacity and mandate (similar to IPCC) - Establish a division in the UN Secretariat for combining scenario and forecast evidence to feed into the UN Sustainable Development Council

3. Recommended course of action for effective UN sustainable development governance

In order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, UN member states must live up to their commitments under the 2030 Agenda and implement the agreed transformation towards sustainable development. In order to be able to foster more impactful national processes, UN sustainable development governance must become a more effective powerhouse. In the medium term, a UN Sustainable Development Council – i.e. an upgraded and transformed ECOSOC – could become its centrepiece. This UN Sustainable Development Council would then have decision-making powers for effectively tackling pressing sustainability challenges, also giving clear guidance on how to handle conflicting goals of explicit global significance. It would also have access to policy instruments for enforcing its decisions.

As for its governance structure, a council with a chamber system could be an option, similar to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) or the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). In the chamber of states – based on the proposal of the High-Level Panel on System-Wide Coherence – 27 states could assume leadership responsibility on a rotating basis. Relevant stakeholders could be involved via the other chamber(s). It is important to involve those who are affected by the decisions and those with great capacities to act, such as citizens, academia, youth and other civil society, as well as sub-state and private sector actors. The UN's sustainable development governance must integrate these stakeholders on a more effective and committing basis.

In 2021, the following windows of opportunity exist to discuss and implement reform options: (1) start of the UN Decade of Action: we have nine years left in which to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. We must thus also succeed in avoiding critical global tipping points in our earth and social systems. (2) Since January 2021, member states have been reviewing the ECOSOC and the HLPF, and (3) in the declaration to mark the 75th anniversary of the United Nations, member states requested that the UN Secretary-General

present by September 2021 reform proposals for the further development of the United Nations.

In his upcoming reform report under the header “Our Common Agenda”, the UN Secretary-General should specify the necessary steps toward establishing more effective sustainable development governance. At a minimum, the United Nations should open up discursive spaces for ways of successfully addressing problems in SDG implementation, dealing with systemic risks and, in the best case, realising win-win solutions, thereby accelerating the implementation of sustainable development.

Over the short term, UN member states should address the following issues in the course of the current negotiations on the reviews of ECOSOC and HLPF:

1. Make best use of capacities of ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs and increase them where necessary, all with a view to enabling guidance and actionable recommendations in the HLPF’s ministerial declaration.
2. Ensure effectiveness and coherence of policy decisions and means of implementation through efficient and results-oriented reporting processes.
3. Systematically evaluate all reports to the HLPF, expand evaluations and foresight, and enhance resources of the GSDR team to ensure evidence-based and forward-looking advice.
4. Systematic participation and inclusion of civil society, especially Major Groups and other Stakeholders, in all UN processes relevant for implementing the 2030 Agenda.

To leave future generations a liveable planet and just and peaceful societies, we need to create effective UN sustainable development governance that is geared towards the global common good as our guiding principle.



German Council for
S U S T A I N A B L E
Development

Contact

German Council for Sustainable Development
RNE office c/o GIZ GmbH
Potsdamer Platz 10
10785 Berlin
Germany

Contact person

Dr. Hannah Janetschek
+49 30 / 33 84 24-124
hannah.janetschek@nachhaltigkeitsrat.de

↘ nachhaltigkeitsrat.de