# Overseeing Agenda 2030—How to Avoid a Repeat of the Commission on Sustainable Development

### When the idea of a Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) was first floated in the lead-up to the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, the proposal was to create a powerful body—on a par with the UN Security Council—that would defuse threats to sustainable development the way the Security Council tries to with threats to peace.

In the end, no consensus supported that level of ambition, and the CSD was placed solidly under the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the central UN platform for addressing the world's economic and social issues. This was a downgrading that virtually guaranteed its lack of effectiveness. After all, if ECOSOC did its job properly, there would be no need for CSD.

CSD nevertheless tried bravely to confront the tide, inviting ministers of finance, environment and development to seek consensus around a set of issues and, in the first years, made some progress. However, it slowly lost its wider audience, becoming essentially a meeting of environmental officials, worryingly similar to the UN Environment Programme's Governing Council. In the last years, it limped along, a general embarrassment to the sustainable development community, displaying few vital signs and certainly failing to advance anything material on the environment, much less on the sustainable development agenda. In 2012, Rio+20 finally put CSD out of its misery and created, in its stead, the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), tasked to track and facilitate the implementation of Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals. It will meet annually at the ministerial level and every four years at the level of heads of state or government.

The HLPF sounds eerily similar to the CSD—all hope that it might serve as an independent new body responding to the initial hopes of the Earth Summit were dashed early on. It is now rare to find mention of the HLPF in any official document that does not immediately add "under the auspices of ECOSOC." Certainly, the politics around the New York missions to the UN will not allow HLPF to escape the cold clutches of ECOSOC, which begs the dual questions: Isn’t ECOSOC's job now primarily to oversee the universal agenda adopted by member states for the coming 15 years? And if we need HLPF to take the lead because ECOSOC is incapable of doing so, isn't placing the HLPF solidly under ECOSOC's auspices a kiss of death?

Hard-nosed New York veterans and the master gamesmen and women in the UN missions will wryly observe that it is politically unacceptable to undermine ECOSOC by placing HLPF outside it, much less above it. Realism dictates that we must make do with the instruments that we have and not dream idly of creating new ones, especially ones that would require a change in the UN charter. How, then can we offer HLPF a chance of playing a positive role?

The answer must be to circumscribe the scope of issues it should be debating and to prepare those debates meticulously. The risk is that the flow of reporting will combine into a mighty river that will culminate in a massive flood of undigested information surging towards New York. There is a very real risk that this flood will overwhelm HLPF and ensure that its debates are confined to generalities.

Two related issues must be addressed in order to counter that risk. First, the member states have adopted a bottom-up system for reporting on the implementation of Agenda 2030. It will be essential that countries report in a format and on a schedule that allows for analysis and comparison. This will also help make it possible to aggregate the information at the regional level and to identify the key areas of progress, as well as the major lessons learned and the obstacles to progress that most urgently need lifting. If the national and regional reporting processes function properly, then what is sent to HLPF for discussion can be focused, practical and manageable.

Second, however, even if this happens, there are other streams of reporting, including UN entities that are meant to report on their implementation efforts, and various non-UN intergovernmental bodies, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the World Bank or the World Trade Organization. Then there is the thematic reporting, which may or may not be the same as the reports backing HLPF's discussion of the themes of their choice. Nor is it clear what role is to be played by the proposed [Global Sustainable Development Report](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/globalsdreport). Is it a synthesis of all reporting streams? Or only of the UN part? Or will it adopt a thematic approach?

The confusion around reporting and follow-up is, to some extent, normal. The challenges presented by the complex, comprehensive and universally applicable Agenda 2030 are enormous and it is still early days. But unless it can be sorted soon and with a view to ensuring that HLPF can genuinely serve as a forum for discussing the removal of obstacles to full implementation, all the elements are present to shove HLPF down the CSD path towards irrelevance and oblivion.

HLPF can only be as good as the process that feeds it. Top priority should be given to ensuring that this is robust, effective and as untainted by New York politics as possible.

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