Retreat on the preparation for the 2016 session of the HLPF

New York, 23 February 2016

Welcome and opening

Welcoming and opening remarks were made by H. E. Harald Braun, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Germany; H.E. Oh Joon, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Republic of Korea; and Mr. Wu Hongbu, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs. The session was moderated by Mr. Thomas Gass, the Assistant-Secretary for Policy Coordination and Inter-Agency Affairs, UNDESA. The Chair of the 77, H.E. Virachai Plasai, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Thailand, was invited to make brief remarks.

It was stated that 2015 was the year of successful negotiations: Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the 2030 Agenda, and the Paris Agreement. In turn, 2016 will be the year to begin implementation in earnest. It was stated that HLPF needs to prove its worth: and for that, it needed to be given the necessary space – political space and space for innovation. A successful HLPF could be defined as having: high-level participation, both in the 5-day and the HLS; an action-oriented declaration; cross-sectoral participation, including from different stakeholder groups; and a sizable number of countries engaged in voluntary national review, from diverse backgrounds. The HLPF needed to take its place as the engine and main platform for review, fostering international cooperation through effective review and shared learning. The HLPF needs to set the baseline, which could be done through the theme of ensuring that no one is left behind. There is a need to foster coordination in countries, among entities of the United Nations system, and among intergovernmental processes and bodies, in particular the GA, ECOSOC and HLPF.

It was emphasized that the SDGs are interlocked and indivisible – the process of review and follow-up must address this feature. Leading by example, taking ownership of the Agenda by integrating SDGs into national policies, and engaging multi-stakeholders partnerships will be integral to the pathways to achieving the SDGs.

The point was made that "we need to look back to go forward"; as part of a network the HLPF builds on existing arrangements. It was also noted that the ECOSOC discussions on the long-term positioning of the UN development system, the QCPR, and the revitalization of the GA ought to be seen together, as part and parcel of implementing the 2030 Agenda.

Expectations for the 2016 HLPF reviews

During the session it was underlined that the 2016 HLPF would focus less on measuring progress, and more on exchanging experience on the initial steps and approaches taken to implementation and architecture for follow-up and review. There is a clear need to take into account and benefit from existing processes, especially ECOSOC. Reviews should reflect the most important characteristics of the 2030 Agenda, including breaking with the silo approach, continuing multi-stakeholder engagement, leaving no one behind, and avoiding cherry-picking of issues. There was repeated emphasis on the need to break decisively from business-as-usual approaches. Transformation is not an easy task – time was needed for different government entities to come to grips with the demands of the 2030 Agenda.

It was proposed that the GSDR should be prepared once every four years, designed to inform meetings of the HLPF meeting under the auspices of the GA. These HoS/G meetings would be "moments of truth" for the HLPF and it would be crucial to ensure the success of the 2019 meeting. Other participants

suggested however that an annual GSDR also had merits even though it could be smaller in scope, supporting more narrowly the theme of HLPF, and could also go by another name (e.g. thematic issue paper).

There was considerable emphasis on data and information. The first SDG progress report will be available, and the HLPF will be an opportunity for a first discussion. The proposal to make all information submitted for the HLPF session available on a dedicated website was welcomed. Several participants highlighted the need to strengthen data sources and systems, especially in developing countries. One participant directly linked "Ensuring that no one is left behind" with robust data capacity.

The following are among the points that came to the fore during the interaction with the discussants, who noted that it was not their role to provide answers, but rather to contribute to a collective discussion.

In the discussion around key challenges, universality was identified as one of the most important challenges – in the words of one of the discussants "in the context of sustainable development we are all developing countries". Securing participation from various constituencies, also within national delegations, was highlighted. Another challenge mentioned was the utmost importance of having involvement of central parts of the government, e.g. PM's office, in order to push forward transformation. Participants also underlined the need to adapt the 2030 Agenda to national priorities, as well as embedding it in relevant plans and strategies. The importance of sharing and learning in relation to prioritization of issues was also highlighted.

Other points made during the interactive discussion included:

- The robust and transparent participation of stakeholders was emphasized. In gauging baselines, we need to consider reaching the furthest behind first and how to collect data for this.
- There is a need for comparability between voluntary national reviews; providing uniform guiding questions could help achieve this.
- The importance of the regional level was underlined – countries in similar circumstances could learn from one another. There would need to be sufficient space in the HLPF for lessons learned through regional consultations. Regional Commissions could play an important role, including the provision of data and analysis.
- The importance of connecting the Agenda with local government and stakeholders.

Thematic Reviews

During this it was underlined that the point of review and follow-up is to advance implementation. Identifying gaps and challenges is therefore important, and thematic debates should enable the identification of challenges and possible ways to address them. There was a strong reminder that HLPF is not acting alone, that it needs to build on the existing fora that provide inputs. But a key question here related to which inputs and in what format they were to be delivered. It needed to be considered whether only reports were at issue, or also how the meetings/reviews themselves were organized.

Other points made in the course of the discussion included:

- The value of lessons learnt from other processes, such as the national voluntary presentations (NVPs) on progress in implementing the MDGs. These had many positive features, but one shortcoming was the lack of follow-up.
- The need to connect the HLPF – at the apex of the pyramid - with outcomes of other intergovernmental meetings, such as functional commissions' reports, regional commissions'

reports as well as reports and conclusions of other intergovernmental bodies of UN system agencies.

- The need to improve coordination across processes, including in relation to the QCPR negotiations.
- The possibility that ECOSOC could play a programmatic role and identify messages relevant to the HLPF and identify emerging challenges. This would help to prepare a structured HLPF, and to encourage recommendations and partnerships to be addressed at the HLPF.
- The need for the HLPF to achieve a merger of the technical level (evidence-based) with the political level; ECOSOC could prepare the way for the political discussion.
- The necessity of identifying inputs from the regional level that are relevant for the global level
- The need to avoid the "talk show" approach for discussions at HLPF, which have dominated in previous years. The SDGs have created a lot of excitement, need to reflect that dynamism and not just make presentations about individual experiences that may not have much relevance for other Member States.
- The importance of minimizing report proliferation; all inputs should be made available on an online portal, possibly with a short summary.

With respect to the selection of themes, it was stated that thematic review could act as a lens to view the agenda. In this connection, mention was made of proposals in questionnaire responses, e.g. SCP and job creation, as way of avoiding silos. It was proposed that the HLPF agenda ought to be structured so that it delivers for women and girls; in this regard the Commission on the Status of Women was flagged as a resource for the HLPF, as well as national preparations. It was noted that the HLPF is not the place for in-depth discussion on goals; instead, the Forum needs to build on discussions held elsewhere and develop an integrated perspective. Reviewing all goals every year could lead to a lack of focus; looking at groups of goals may re-create silos, ignoring linkages with the broader set of goals. There is need to discuss other options that address both of these challenges. While it could be said that in-depth review could detract from inter-linkages, the point was also made such reviews would also promote more detailed discussion and garner interest from sectoral ministries, who otherwise might not participate in the HLPF.

The interactive discussion revealed several approaches to understanding what is meant by ensuring that no one is left behind:

- dealing with inequality, recognizing the multi-dimensional nature of poverty, and tackling structural inequality;
- addressing poverty in a more comprehensive manner and getting away from averages;
- examining thematic dimensions of the Agenda, geographic regions, as well as sub-groups of the population (youth, women, etc.);
- non-discrimination and the various reporting mechanisms under human rights treaties;
- boosting information systems and reporting at national level; and
- guaranteeing participation of the most marginalized.

Voluntary National Reviews, Working Group I

The hour-long discussion in the Working Group I focused on a number of guiding questions: What would be standard features in preparing HLPF voluntary national reviews this year within the countries? What

could ambitious approaches be? How can countries support each other in preparing these reviews at national levels?

A general consensus in the room was that the first year of voluntary national review would be primarily about how countries are preparing for and managing their transition towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The voluntary national review should focus on sharing lessons learned and challenges identified, creating a peer-learning experience rather than a naming-and-shaming one. Delegates touched upon both the substance and the relevant processes that could be the standard features in preparing for voluntary national reviews within countries.

Participants noted that stock-taking is s a crucial first step for national review, especially for the first year. Taking stock and mapping readiness at the national and subnational level could help identify baseline for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. One participant highlighted a number of areas the stock-taking exercise could focus on, including achievements in MDGs implementation, current institutional structure, subnational readiness, capacity etc. Another shared the outline of the SDGs Adaptation Report currently being prepared, which showed the transition from MDGs to SDGs. Switzerland pointed out that such baseline studies and gap analyses could clarify where the system needs adaptation to meet the needs of the implementation of Agenda 2030.

In national reviews, it is expected that countries share their experiences in integrating the 2030 Agenda into national development plans/strategies. A number of key challenges were highlighted:

- The comprehensive and integrated nature of the new agenda as well as the inter-linkages among goals require more effective coordination among sectoral ministries and better alignment across different levels, regional, national, subnational and local. Participants shared experiences: setting up a core group for the preparation of national review, consisting of relevant ministries, or establishing a national inter-sectoral committee for coordination. Another emphasized the importance of aligning the plans of different ministries with SDGs and setting clear responsibilities.

- Countries could be in middle of a national development plan that's already adopted before the new Agenda, making it less feasible to shift gear right away. One participant suggested that countries could highlight the main policy areas in those national strategies that are related to the SDGs.

- Countries shared concern on capacity gaps, particularly in data and analytics. IT was noted that Member States can adapt national development indicators based on the upcoming global indicators.

Recalling the people-centered and inclusive nature of the new agenda, delegates emphasized the importance of a multi-stakeholder approach, i.e. mobilizing a wide range of stakeholders, not only in the implementation of the new agenda, but also its monitoring and review processes. One participant suggested that countries could share their lessons learned and challenges identified in stakeholder mobilization, focusing on how to make participation a reality and engage local government, parliament, congress, civil society, and academia more effectively. Others emphasized the role of information and communication in ensuring inclusion in the implementation of the new agenda, and the importance of mechanisms for collecting civil society inputs. One participant suggested reviewing existing models for inclusion and participation, from which the HLPF could draw lessons. Major Groups representatives also reassured their readiness to support the national reviews.

Voluntary National Reviews, Working Group II

Working group II sought to answer the following guiding questions: How can the HLPF examination of the reviews be best prepared, organized and followed-up, so as to be most useful to all countries in the context of the principles established in the 2030 Agenda? How can national reviews lead to possible support and new partnerships to assist the reviewed countries?

The group agreed that the HLPF examination of the national reviews must strike a balance between national ownership and flexibility on one hand and coherence and comparability on the other. A certain amount of standardization could help countries learn from one another, but this cannot come at the expense of national ownership, and participants stressed the importance of flexibility. It was noted that it is also important to strike the balance between a comprehensive and informative report and one that will be accessible and short enough to keep interest and spark interactive dialogue. Especially if Ministers are expected to participate, the presentations cannot be three minutes each, nor can they be long presentations given in parallel sessions to empty rooms.

With these various challenges, the working group agreed that the HLPF must break new ground and adopt innovative approaches—the individual 15 minute intervention from the floor should not be the only option. Some suggested that the presentations could be grouped into a roundtable or panel format, so that several countries would take part in a single session. While some suggested that the groupings could be according to region, others believe that each session should strive to achieve balanced regional representation. A selection based on other parameters was also proposed. Variety in the approaches could be desirable, especially if the written reports were more standardized to allow for comparability and coherence. Participants noted that the HLPF should capitalize on the integrated nature of the 2030 Agenda. One suggested that ministers could make joint presentations—health and finance, for instance—to emphasize the multi-faceted nature of the SDGs and a country's work to advance them.

Participants noted that the nature of the national reviews will evolve over time, as countries make more progress and have more to report. For the first few years the HLPF will provide a "snapshot," but as the years go by there will be more material, and the reviews will be able to address the Agenda more holistically. There was a rich discussion about whether the reviews should generally focus more on what had been achieved already—a look back to learn lessons—or focus on what is needed for further implementation—a look forward to make asks of the international community for partnership and implementation support. One participant suggested that countries should share their reports in advance so that others can prepare their responses to these "asks" (perhaps in the form of new commitments or partnerships). The group ultimately acknowledged that both approaches had value and that the most effective reviews would include elements of both.

The HLPF itself can encourage new bold action, the announcement of new commitments and partnerships and be an opportunity to showcase action and leadership. Participants noted that it should also be very clear that there are real benefits to the countries that have volunteered to undertake national reviews. The Secretariat should provide effective support to facilitate the Member States' preparation for the national reviews and HLPF.

All emphasized the importance of engaging a wide range of stakeholders in the preparation of the reviews. Some participants noted that it is a good practice to include a civil society representative in

their national delegation to the HLPF, but others stressed that the level of civil society participation must be determined by each Member State.

One participant noted that there are useful lessons learned from the preparation of the National Sustainable Development Strategies that fed into the Commission for Sustainable Development. In that context there were preparatory meetings organized by the countries themselves that encouraged peer exchange and review. It showed that countries can learn from others that are coming from different regions and different levels of development.

Global Reviews

Participants re-convened in plenary for a discussion guided by two questions: How can the SDG progress report and global sustainable development report be most useful to the HLPF in conducting its global and thematic reviews? What would be useful political guidance from the HLPF and how could it be developed?

It was emphasized that the two reports—both born at Rio+20— were complementary and that both should be produced with people, not institutions or systems, at their core. Both reports operate on the assumption that business as usual is not an option, and they should both address the interlinkages of the SDGs framework and avoid silos. The SDG progress reports should be relevant to people, allowing citizens to understand where they are. It was emphasized that the SDG progress report is quantitative report based on statistics and is not meant to answer the question of "why." The "why" is addressed by the GSDR, which will analyze gaps and reasons for success or failure, based on empiric evidence and the interface between science and policy. Together, the two will ground the discussion of the HLPF. The reports could focus on a set number of focus areas each year, to allow for more in depth analysis, but this approach would have to be undertaken without losing sight of the integrated nature of all 17 SDGs.

The discussion addressed the multifaceted role of the GSDR: it is an "assessment of assessments," but also intended to draw on the wisdom of the scientific community for political decision-making. The GSDR can bring emerging issues and solutions to existing problems to policymakers. This would also contribute to peer learning. The contribution of IPCC to the Paris agreement was cited as a good example of the key role of the scientific community in political decision-making.

The plenary continued the discussion begun in the opening session on the periodicity of the GSDR. It was suggested that GSDR could be seen as a science-policy interface process rather than a report, with smaller reports every year presenting scientific evidence relevant to the theme chosen for the HLPF of year under ECOSOC, and a larger report every four years feeding to the HLPF under the GA. The smaller reports could link up various research initiatives, mapping where data is thin and needs to be built up. Every four years could be a more traditional synthesis report.

On the question of guidance from the HLPF, it was highlighted that HLPF should include concrete recommendations. Delegates could come to the HLPF with the goal of strengthening the science-policy interface and with a number of key desired outcomes in mind. It was suggested that the HLPF could focus in 2016, for instance, on building data and statistics capacity in developing and developed countries. It was also suggested that development-friendly policies to achieve equality and non-discrimination should be key outcomes for the HLPF. Participants noted that peer learning will be central to creating a "political economy of change".

The HLPF should signal the importance of success in fighting poverty but should also interpret in political terms what does it mean to “leave no one behind”—this is not a technical issue and not a slogan. It is a political commitment to equality and non-discrimination.

Members of the academic, research institutes, civil society—these will be key allies, as will all Major Groups and other stakeholders. Stakeholders can provide technical expertise and concrete experiences on the ground, as well as data, including citizen-generated data. In this context it will be important to collect written and oral inputs from a wide range of stakeholders, and it will be important to make these inputs available and accessible to all. The UN could create a data base to connect organizations and regional bodies that would like to work together—a network of opportunities for collaboration.