



Changes in the practices and narratives of the United Nations High-Level Political Forum during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The 2023 SDG Summit, which will take place in September during the United Nations (UN) General Assembly high-level week, aims to review the state of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. As 2023 marks the mid-point to 2030, this meeting aims to respond to the impact of multiple and interlocking crises facing the world. The COVID-19 pandemic is only one of these critical crises. The pandemic meant an enormous backlash for the implementation of most SDGs, as discussed in the UN Secretary-General's mid-term progress report "Toward a Rescue Plan for People and Planet." Therefore, it is at once an important background to the Summit and one that highlights the common overarching structural issues that underlie SDG implementation, as the pandemic not only posed a global health crisis but also led to lasting changes in policy areas concerning the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, such as health, mobility, trade, industry, finance, and sustainability. This paper engages with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the practices of the UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) and the short-term policy narratives around the SDGs. Its goal is to document some of the changes the pandemic triggered in practices of sustainability governance, based on the findings of a 4-year project that draws on qualitative analysis of participatory observations at the HLPF meetings, document analysis, and in-depth interviews.

Keywords SDGs · Sustainability governance during COVID-19 · COVID-19 pandemic · HLPF

List of Abbreviation

COPs Conferences of the Parties
CSD Commission on Sustainable Development
ECOSOC Economic and Social Council

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GNI	Gross National Income
HLPF	High-Level Political Forum
LNOB	Leave No One Behind
MVI	Multidimensional Vulnerability Index
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
UN	United Nations
WHO	World Health Organization

1 Introduction

The 2023 SDG Summit, scheduled for September during the United Nations (UN) General Assembly high-level week, serves as the mid-point assessment toward achieving the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Against the backdrop of “*multiple and interlocking crises* facing the world,” the Summit will evaluate the progress and implementation of the SDGs (UN, 2023a, emphasis added). The COVID-19 pandemic, one of the most consequential crises in recent years if not decades, warrants detailed examination in relation to sustainability governance for three key reasons. Firstly, between March 2020 and May 2023, COVID-19 claimed approximately 7 million lives, making it one of the deadliest pandemics with far-reaching political, economic, and psycho-social consequences globally. Secondly, its impact extended across various policy domains, encompassing health, finance, biodiversity, and mobility, all of which are intricately linked to the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. The theme for 2022 High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) meeting was *Building back better from the coronavirus disease while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, highlighting that COVID-19 has “amplified existing vulnerabilities, reinforced, and created new obstacles to the realization of [SDGs], widened inequalities, [...] and continues to disproportionately impact people in vulnerable situations” (UN, 2022). Moreover, the pandemic reshaped notions of state sovereignty and highlighted the enduring significance and power of nation-states in global politics (Pilipenko et al., 2022; Posocco and Watson, 2023). This necessitates a reconsideration of established assumptions within governance studies, particularly concerning the persistent implementation gap. Finally, the pandemic served as a watershed moment for international cooperation, with unprecedented and unforeseen national and international policy responses.

Against the backdrop of the World Health Organization (WHO, 2023) declaring the end of the pandemic in May 2023, this paper examines the transformations in the practices and narratives of the HLPF during the pandemic. It is part of a larger project that investigates the impact of the pandemic on global sustainability governance, that draws on participatory observations in the UN platforms, document analysis, and in-depth interviews. We seek to contribute to academic literature and discussions among practitioners and stakeholders at the upcoming SDG Summit, by illustrating the structural changes that occurred during the pandemic and extract valuable lessons from this experience. Notably, this is only the second time that the HLPF is being convened under the auspices of the General Assembly at the level of Heads of State and Government (the first time was in 2019). The resulting political declaration, negotiated and adopted at the highest level of political participation, has the potential to bring about significant transformations in the perception,

understanding, and implementation of sustainability governance, aligning with our focus on narratives and practices.

2 The backlash

The pandemic had severe repercussions for sustainable development, leading to a decline in the global Human Development Index for two consecutive years, accompanied by a shrinking global economy (UN, 2023b; Vilasanjuan, 2021). SDG implementation was significantly impeded by all accounts (e.g., Muelemann, 2021; Kempf and Hujó, 2022). As early as 2020, concerns arose regarding the potential setback of SDG progress caused by the pandemic, potentially undoing decades of advancements (UN, 2020; Muelemann, 2020). The pandemic has dealt a severe blow to SDG progress, with projections suggesting that achieving the goals may be delayed until 2045 (Zhao et al., 2022). Scholars focusing both on the local (Mestdagh et al., 2023) and global level (Chopra et al., 2022) agree that SDG implementation was negatively affected.

During the pandemic, the HLPF meetings emphasized the need to address the pandemic's impact on the global economy, ecology, health, and wealth. However, there is a significant risk of failure in achieving the SDGs, as emphasized by the President of the UN Economic and Social Council (UN, 2023a), and the UN Secretary-General's mid-term progress report (UN, 2023b).

This study focuses on the processes and narratives of the HLPF during the pandemic. Our objective is to understand the changes that occurred in the HLPF *and their relationship to the backlash*, in order to identify potential steps for reversing these changes and determining priorities. To achieve this, we conducted thirty interviews between April 2020 and April 2023 with stakeholders involved in the HLPF, as well as those engaged in other UN processes related to the SDGs and sustainability. The interviews included the UN officials, participants in HLPF meetings, climate and biodiversity COPs, and stakeholders in the UN sustainability forums.¹ This sample offers an optimistic and constructively critical reflection on the HLPF, aiming to contribute insights for improving future SDG Summits by combining scientific research and stakeholder views. Despite recognizing existing criticism of the HLPF (Bernstein, 2013; Beisheim & Fritzsche, 2022), we contend that our approach aligns with the objectives of this Special Issue. Notably, our sample includes a significant number of NGO representatives, which may create the perception of bias. However, this is due to the representation of all major groups as NGOs in the UN sustainability platforms, encompassing various sectors such as business, civil society, youth, trade unions, and women. In addition to NGO perspectives, our analysis incorporates inputs from diplomats, media, the UN staff, and official narratives from the UN texts and news blog posts.

¹ These personal communications are cited throughout the paper as: PC/Interview Code Number/Date/Place/Reference.

3 Changes in governance practices

When it comes to practices, the pandemic has caused otherwise impossible transformations both positively and negatively. In times of crises, “the politically impossible become the politically inevitable” (Friedman, 1962: 7), and social dislocations challenge existing structures, systems of meaning, and social imaginaries, making a radically new order possible (Laclau and Mouffe, 1989).

COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly caused such a dislocation, enabling the acceptance of previously unthinkable behaviors, policies, and ideas. Measures such as social isolation, travel bans, and the banning of wet markets (McCall, 2020), which were once considered implausible, became necessary and legitimate during the pandemic, leading to unexpected positive outcomes such as reduced air pollution (EEA, 2020) and improved water quality (Brunton, 2020). However, the pandemic also triggered economic downturns and significant financial interventions (Baldwin & Di Mauro, 2020), resulting in relaxed environmental regulations by some governments (Milman and Holden, 2020) but also environmental groups advocating for conditional bailouts tied to environmental targets (Harrabin, 2020) and for a green and just recovery (cf. Remling, 2024). In this unique context, the political space for change expanded, prompting various responses from institutions. As a result, the HLPF underwent threefold changes in its practices, relating to digitalization, aisle diplomacy and transparency, and consolidation of SGD integration.

3.1 Digitalization

At the beginning of the pandemic, the UN indefinitely postponed the Conferences of the Parties (COPs) for biodiversity, oceans, and climate change, and in some UN platforms, decision-making came to a halt, as quorum and inclusion requirements could not be met. In contrast, the 2020 HLPF meeting took place as scheduled in July 2020, albeit virtually. The high level of participation was regarded as a good sign, and participants reflected on how virtual events could potentially ensure inclusion in the future.² Other practices were affected negatively by shifting the HLPF online: In 2019, there were proposals in the HLPF to use national councils for independent reviews of country’s Voluntary National Reviews, which did not materialize, in part as a result of the pandemic. Similarly, the review of the HLPF and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda beyond the SDG targets took place digitally, making it impossible to vote on a political declaration.³ As the restrictions caused by the pandemic subsided, some of these changes were reversed at the 2022 HLPF meeting, while others remained. Many of the 2022 HLPF meetings, including all side-events, were still held in virtual or hybrid forms, for instance, which enables a larger number of observers.

3.2 Mental and psychological effects and their impact on ‘aisle diplomacy’ and transparency

The significant reduction in real-life interactions was a result of not only digitalization but also of the lockdowns. This had a detrimental impact on the informal diplomacy known

² PC/01/19.7.2020/Online/Stakeholder Forum.

³ PC/06/27.7.2022/Online/NGO Representative.

as "aisle diplomacy," which encompasses the informal encounters and meetings between negotiators and between negotiators and non-state actors, that facilitate trust-building, finding common ground, and overcoming obstacles in negotiations.⁴ These limitations also greatly hindered the access and meaningful participation of independent observers and civil society and, therefore, diminished the transparency of negotiations. Even after the lockdowns ended, reduced social interactions persisted at the HLPF, affecting civil society participants especially, due to concerns over health risks and the breakdown of diplomatic practices.⁵ Moreover, both official and civil participants expressed exhaustion, attributed not only to the mental toll of the pandemic but also to the large number of meetings and conferences held in 2022 and early 2023, resulting in fatigue around the HLPF.⁶ Civil society stakeholders, in particular, were more affected by this exhaustion due to their limited human and financial resources compared to corporate and state actors, as evidenced by the late-pandemic participation statistics (EU Parliament's briefing, IPOL, 2022).

3.3 Consolidation of SDG integration

Experts and stakeholders widely acknowledge that SDG implementation suffered setbacks, and global sustainability governance entered a "defensive mode", with governments less willing to compromise or even back-tracking on formerly agreed language, as evident in the length of the 2022 ministerial declaration which is longer than the 2030 Agenda itself, in some instances reversing progress made until 2015.⁷ Complaints arose regarding some countries using the pandemic as an excuse for insufficient progress on the goals, but overall, the pandemic had diverse impacts on the political momentum and optimism surrounding SDG implementation.⁸ Critically, the SDGs were instrumental in structuring the recovery efforts: By 2020, governments had already integrated the SDGs into their reporting and internal processes. During the pandemic and subsequent discussions on building back better, this integration proved beneficial as the SDGs were viewed as a framework to advance the recovery agenda (cf. Lahey and Lucks, 2023).

4 Changes in policy narratives

The pandemic spurred not only shifts in practices but also in policy narratives. Already in 2020, numerous UN institutions underwent reassessments of their plans and reframed the SDGs within the pandemic context (UN, 2020). Policy narratives, whether substantial or incremental, temporary or enduring, provide insights into potential alterations within the institutional framework of the UN. We identified the following key changes in the policy narratives of the HLPF and SDG platforms during the pandemic.

⁴ PC/17/11.1.2023/Online/Diplomat.

⁵ PC/06/27.7.2022/Online/NGO Representative.

⁶ PC/06/27.7.2022/Online/NGO Representative.

⁷ PC/24/14.02.2023/Online/NGO Representative; PC/25/15.02.2023/Online/HLPF; PC/27/10.03.2023/Online/Media.

⁸ PC/27/10.03.2023/Online/Media.

4.1 Leaving no one behind

During the pandemic, there was a notable shift in the policy narrative concerning the principle of Leave No One Behind (LNOB). Prior to the crisis, the LNOB principle had been hard-won in the HLPF: During the discussions preceding the 2030 Agenda, southern countries emphasized the need for financial support from the Global North in the form of means of implementation and SDG-17 on partnerships, to achieve sustainability. To avoid repeating past mistakes, the concept of LNOB was introduced as a means of prioritizing the most vulnerable and those in most dire need, rather than focusing mainly on supporting recipient governments (UNDP, 2018). This shift marked a departure from previous development policies within the UN, partially influenced by the trend of privatization in sustainability governance (Mert, 2015). However, the pandemic and subsequent economic crises resulted in some low-income countries challenging the LNOB principle. As a result, toward the end of the pandemic various ECOSOC and HLPF platforms consistently reaffirmed the importance of LNOB as one of the 11 principles of effective sustainability governance (UN, 2022, 2023b). This return to and insistence on the LNOB principle demonstrates a hegemonic struggle during the pandemic, and its continued affirmation will likely be a crucial challenge for the SDG Summit.

4.2 HLPF in global cooperation

Throughout the pandemic, international cooperation was pitted against national protectionism, across the globe, a tension that was clearly visible in the policies around access to vaccines. However, a more positive perspective was offered by a civil society participant to the HLPF, highlighting that aid is now acknowledged as a crucial aspect of welfare and security policies in advanced economies, seen as an investment rather than an expense.⁹ Although this viewpoint comes from a respondent that clearly has trust in the HLPF process, other respondents also noted a perceptible shift: The HLPF emerged as a key player in responding to and building back better after the pandemic.^{10 11} The current governance architecture generally “maintained its role, despite all criticism,”¹² while the HLPF manifested “as a critical forum to think together possible responses and future developments.”¹³ Similar observations were made regarding the WHO in health governance¹⁴ as the discussion shifted from the economic costs of development aid to a recognition of comprehensive global wealth policies. Collaboration between these organizations could enhance SDG implementation by leveraging their combined political influence and reach. As practices, discourses, and future visions of global sustainability governance transformed, the HLPF assumed a more central role within the UN’s sustainability governance architecture.

⁹ PC/24/14.02.2023/Online/NGO Representative.

¹⁰ PC/22/31.10.2022/Online/Expert (Academia).

¹¹ PC/24/14.02.2023/Online/NGO Representative.

¹² PC/22/31.10.2022/Online/Expert (Academia).

¹³ PC/24/14.02.2023/Online/NGO Representative.

¹⁴ PC/23/15.10.2022/Online/Expert (Academia).

4.3 New support for old demands

During the pandemic, certain political demands that were previously inadequately supported and prioritized within the HLPF gained traction. For example, civil society's call to address the digital divide (the differences between countries in information and communication technology capabilities) in the context of the SDGs found renewed support (ECOSOC, 2020). This is mainly because the implications of the digital divide, such as disparities in health and travel data, vaccine distribution and logistics, and environmental interlinkages, became more apparent during the pandemic.¹⁵ Another notable change was the shift in perceptions of vulnerability prompted by the pandemic.¹⁶ Regional groups, including Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and African nations, who had long advocated for a Multidimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI) to replace the Gross National Income (GNI) as the primary measurement for the allocation of concessional financing for developing countries, found an opportune moment and increased support for driving policy change. Furthermore, the perception of risk underwent a transformation in two aspects: Firstly, the recognition that failing at sustainable development was a risk for the global economy, and not only a hypothetical threat; and secondly, the pandemic compressed the timeframe for decision-making related to sustainable development, emphasizing near-term changes to be implemented before 2030.¹⁷

4.4 Participation, inclusion, and access

The shift to virtual meetings in the HLPF expanded the opportunity for increased observer participation. Initially, online meetings were hailed for their potential in fostering inclusivity. However, the absence of informal discussions and the cancellation of non-essential meetings challenged the notion of inclusive access and influence. The participation of marginalized and underrepresented groups has historically been challenging and subject to instrumentalization in the UN's sustainability governance since 1992 (Mert, 2019). Civil society participants increasingly perceive a reduced ability to engage with delegates compared to pre-pandemic times: "Back in CSD [Commission on Sustainable Development], all the doors were open [...] and you were not stopped. You are not allowed to do that anymore."¹⁸ Amidst the pandemic, virtual participants in the meetings swiftly acknowledged and contested the impediments to meaningful participation, despite the apparent rise in participant numbers: "If it's a tick-box, then, you're disempowering the stakeholders. [...] They need to co-design the [approach as well as] the solutions."¹⁹ Ensuring meaningful participation and stakeholder access to decision-making emerges as a crucial forthcoming challenge for the SDG Summit.

¹⁵ PC/24/14.02.2023/Online/NGO Representative.

¹⁶ PC/06/27.7.2022/Online/NGO Representative.

¹⁷ PC/24/14.02.2023/Online/NGO Representative.

¹⁸ PC/01/19.7.2020/Online/Stakeholder Forum.

¹⁹ PC/06/27.7.2022/Online/NGO Representative.

5 Conclusion

Our research showed that the most important challenges for SDG Summit are reiterating the commitment to LNOB, addressing the digital divide, and ensuring access and meaningful participation of civil society. To do this, re-establishing unofficial spaces of interaction and taking note of new perceptions of vulnerability, risk, cooperation, and global interconnectedness seem necessary.

Implications for the Global South included worsening of existing vulnerabilities and inequalities, making it harder for these countries to achieve the 2030 Agenda. The pandemic has also shifted policy narratives, emphasizing the need to Leave No One Behind. However, low-income countries face challenges in upholding this principle. The pandemic has highlighted the digital divide and multidimensional vulnerability, giving the Global South an opportunity to advocate for their concerns. Overall, addressing these implications requires international support and resources for equitable development. Finally, joint efforts between the WHO and HLPF can strengthen health systems in low-income countries, addressing health-care inequalities, and advancing universal health coverage. By leveraging the HLPF's convening power, the WHO can advocate for increased investment in health infrastructure and initiatives, particularly in underserved regions.

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