

»» First lessons learnt from the High-Level Political Forum on implementing the SDGs

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Author: Dr Julia Sattelberger
Editor: Simone Sieler

The first High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) took place in New York from 11 to 20 July 2016. The meeting aims to serve as a platform for reviewing and monitoring the SDGs. Expectations were high. As it is early days yet, the forum was mainly about states' concrete implementation strategies than first results. However, it already offered an important platform to share experiences and innovative approaches, and acknowledged first efforts of some states.

At this year's HLPF, 22 countries volunteered to report on how they intend to put the demanding agenda into practice. The reports and presentations held by the countries indicate some key lessons learnt that help with the ambitious task of implementing the agenda; amongst them:

- Political leadership and coherence
- Generating broad support among national populations
- Giving the initiatives concrete form and integrating them into national policy documents
- Independent monitoring of implementation results.

Political leadership is key!

Key to a successful implementation of the agenda is that the goals are not only delegated to individual government departments as a special task, but accepted and formalised at the highest political level, ideally as binding for the whole of government's activities. This holistic approach requires a clear political will on part of the highest political leaders. It also may require new mechanisms of pan-departmental coordination to ensure policy coherence. The President of Colombia, for instance, placed the implementation of the SDGs right in the centre of the national development strategy, which all government de-

partments will now have to follow.

2030 Agenda needs to be embedded within society

While the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted by the international community at policy level, in many countries it has thus far remained an 'expert topic'. Its implementation not only requires setting the political course, however, but also a change in thinking and behaviour in society as a whole. Without this level of acceptance, it will be difficult to find a parliamentary majority for tough political decisions. This will only be successfully achieved if the Agenda is not used for party-political image development and power struggles, but turns into a transformation process that is carried by society as a whole.

Political leadership is key to initiate this process. But it is equally important, to bring these topics into the broader social discourse and create a consensus between people, private sector and political sphere that outlasts the next election period. Many countries such as Peru, Denmark or Ghana are planning to promote more strongly a dialogue with civil society and the private sector or have already established these structures in various forms.

National specification and integration of goals into key policy documents

In order to ensure that the 2030 Agenda is not only generally accepted in a wider sense, but also actively implemented in governments' action, it is recommended to integrate country-specific targets into key national strategy documents, ideally systematically into all key national policy documents and not as separate SDG document. These documents should include a formulation of priority fields for future action reflecting the respective country context. Ideally, they should also

define quantitative targets to measure progress. Bangladesh and Sweden, for example, have already started to implement the SDGs in their national planning documents.

Independent monitoring of SDG implementation

Moreover, it will be important to set up effective national monitoring mechanisms that allow to directly monitor the national implementation status of the SDGs and introduce corrective measures if there are any deviations from the targets. Some countries have designed national action plans, the implementation of which is reviewed on a regular basis.

Other countries have set up autonomous commissions (e.g. sustainability councils, expert panels) to accompany the implementation process and provide the government with constructive recommendations for corrective measures. A broad social representation in these mechanisms strengthens the confidence in their function as constructive corrective measures, ensures transparency and helps address long-term challenges instead of opportunistic considerations in everyday politics and electoral cycles. Germany and Mexico, for example, have created political bodies at the highest political level to advise on the implementation process.

HLPF is an important instrument for joint learning

Before the forum took place, the HLPF had been criticised for its non-binding nature. However, if the HLPF is not primarily regarded as an instrument to enforce SDG implementation, but rather as a joint learning instrument, this HLPF managed to meet a surprising range of expectations. ■