

# The High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development: Orchestration by Default and Design

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## Abstract

The High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on sustainable development is a central element in the emerging governance architecture for sustainable development. Established at the 2012 United Nations (UN) Conference on Sustainable Development, the HLPF has a dauntingly expansive mandate – including setting the sustainable development agenda; enhancing integration, coordination and coherence across the UN system; and following up all sustainable development goals and commitments. Yet it has been granted limited authority and few material resources. In these circumstances, the HLPF must rely on the governance strategy of ‘orchestration’: working indirectly through intermediary organizations, and using soft modes of influence to support and guide their actions. The forum’s design suggests that states intended it to pursue this approach. We identify potential intermediaries and techniques of orchestration, and assess whether the HLPF can successfully act as an orchestrator.

## Policy Implications

- The High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on sustainable development has limited authority and modest resources. It must therefore employ the strategy of ‘orchestration,’ working through other organizations and utilizing soft means of influence.
- The HLPF’s unique structure, circumstances of its creation and mandate to enhance the integration and coherence of economic, social and environmental policies should provide it with legitimacy, focality and political weight, crucial attributes of successful orchestrators. Ongoing high-level participation and a focused agenda, e.g., based on the sustainable development goals (SDGs), will enhance these attributes.
- Agenda setting, endorsement, catalyzing financial support, convening, coordination and review will be the primary techniques of orchestration for the HLPF.
- United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the Chief Executives Board, and regional commissions will be important intermediaries in promoting policy coherence across the UN system, with international economic institutions and within countries.
- The HLPF can also engage, support and steer partnerships, action networks and transnational organizations, important intermediaries in implementing sustainable development goals and commitments.
- Conducting robust country reviews, providing learning opportunities for governments and nonstate organizations, and assembling and disseminating policy-relevant scientific knowledge on sustainable development will be among the HLPF’s most direct sources of influence and effectiveness.
- Threats to the HLPF’s autonomous agenda-setting capacity and to stakeholder participation, as well as North–South conflict, could jeopardize successful orchestration.

The 2012 United Nations (UN) Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) was the third global summit since 1992 to attempt to infuse an integrated vision of sustainable development into global governance. Expectations were understandably low that this iteration

would significantly narrow the persistent gap between rhetoric and practice (Bernstein, 2013a). As measured by criteria such as treaties signed or binding commitments adopted (none and none), the outcome matched expectations.

Surprisingly, however, Rio+20 initiated a unique experiment in global governance, matching modest state-based multilateralism with multiactor governance. Its three main components are: (1) an agreement to negotiate by 2015 a set of sustainable development goals (SDGs), providing specific priorities for all actors and institutions working on sustainable development; (2) voluntary commitments – some 730 at Rio, another 700 since – made by governments, international organizations (IGOs), partnerships, action networks and nonstate actors; and (3) a new high-level political forum (HLPF), mandated to provide political leadership, integrate the environmental, economic and social dimensions of sustainable development, encourage policy coherence, review progress, and promote implementation of the wide-ranging public and private commitments made since 1992 (UNGA, 2012, ¶ 85; UNGA, 2013a, ¶¶ 2, 7–8, 15, 20). While their impacts have yet to unfold, these decisions can be read as a serious attempt to move the three dimensions of sustainable development into a working governance system that balances intergovernmental leadership with the mobilization of diverse actors, public and private.

Here we focus on the HLPF. To carry out its dauntingly expansive mandate, we argue, the HLPF must by default rely on the governance strategy of ‘orchestration’: working indirectly through other actors and organizations, and using soft modes of influence to guide and support their actions (Abbott et al., 2015a). This approach is essential because the HLPF lacks authority for direct or mandatory control over states, IGOs or private actors, and lacks the material resources to provide strong incentives for desired actions. Even its most direct governance function – reviewing national implementation of sustainable development commitments – will be voluntary. While most UN entities lack authority to make binding decisions, the complex institutional space in which the HLPF operates, its limited resources and the breadth of the sustainable development agenda make it particularly dependent on other actors and organizations.

Indeed, we argue, states intended the HLPF to adopt a strategy of indirect, soft governance. We have no evidence that negotiators actually used the term ‘orchestration,’ although HLPF practitioners have subsequently done so.<sup>1</sup> We can, however, infer their intention from the HLPF’s mandate to provide high-level ‘political leadership, guidance and recommendations’ (UNGA 2013a, ¶ 2), and from the failure to provide the tools necessary to implement its mandates through hard, direct means. In short, states designed the HLPF with (just) enough authority and resources to orchestrate, but not enough for stronger modes of governance. The alternative to ‘orchestration by design’ (Viola, 2015) – that governments cynically designed the HLPF to fail – seems

unlikely given its high political profile and likely role in implementing the SDGs.

We begin by elaborating on the political context in which the HLPF was formed. We then introduce the strategy of orchestration and consider its ‘fit’ with the HLPF. Drawing from the emerging orchestration literature, we identify and assess the conditions under which the HLPF can orchestrate effectively, and the challenges it faces in doing so. While we consider the forum’s performance to date, our analysis is by necessity largely prospective: the HLPF is still new and significant aspects of its operation remain undecided.<sup>2</sup> We draw our evidence from primary documents, observations as participants in UN meetings on the design of the HLPF,<sup>3</sup> and discussions with members of the HLPF secretariat, civil society, and delegates at those meetings and at the second session of the HLPF in July 2014 (HLPF-2).

### Political context

Institutional reform was one of Rio+20’s two main themes (along with ‘Green Economy’); the conference considered both environmental and sustainable development governance (Bernstein and Brunnée, 2011). The sustainable development track stemmed directly from government and stakeholder frustration with the failings of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), created in 1992 to implement the outcomes of the first Rio conference. Despite some early successes, the CSD became increasingly unable to translate discussions into action and policy impact. Analysts attribute these shortcomings to its inability to attract ministers and other high-level policy makers, especially from the economic and social sectors; its rigid, sectoral agenda, which prevented it from addressing emerging challenges; and its limited capacity for monitoring, review or follow-up (Stakeholder Forum, 2012; UN, 2013a).

A Swiss proposal to replace the CSD with a Sustainable Development Council initially gained some traction.<sup>4</sup> By winter 2012, however, governments including the US, Japan, Russia, China and Canada had dampened enthusiasm for a new, autonomous council. Similarly, Mexico and other developing countries – while accepting the need for reform – opposed creating any body outside the auspices of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

The ensuing bargaining was complex. Some governments (e.g., France, Germany, Kenya) focused on strengthening the UN Environment Program (UNEP). Others (e.g., Norway, Switzerland) favored an autonomous council. Late in the negotiations, the G-77/China proposed a ‘forum’: a state-led organization in which developing countries would have a numerical advantage. This approach attracted countries unwilling to create an autonomous institution, authorize centralized

implementation or contribute new resources (ENB, 2012a/2012b/2012c).

Negotiations reflected two additional conditions: declining multilateralism and polycentric governance (Biermann et al., 2009; Bernstein, 2013a; Ostrom, 2010). First, the creation of multilateral organizations and treaties has slowed (Pauwelyn, Wessel & Wouters, 2012), with states turning to less formal institutions (Vabulas & Snidal, 2013). Second, nonstate, private and networked forms of governance have proliferated, responding to perceived weaknesses in the multilateral system (e.g., Rayner, Buck and Katila, 2010; Abbott, 2012, 2013; Abbott & Hale, 2014). Sustainable development governance has been at the forefront of these moves, notably by promoting public–private partnerships as a primary means of implementation at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) (Bäckstrand and Kylsäter, 2014).

The final compromises over the HLPF's format, in spring 2013, produced a unique hybrid institution. The HLPF is a universal, inter-state 'forum'. It meets under the auspices of the UN General Assembly (UNGA), at head of state level, every four years. It meets under the auspices of ECOSOC, at ministerial level, annually; it is not, however, subsidiary to ECOSOC. States granted the HLPF no substantial new resources.

In hindsight, some stakeholders have expressed nostalgia for the CSD, concerned that the HLPF's hybrid structure and 'forum' status may render it even weaker than its predecessor. Critics also cite the lack of an autonomous bureau and secretariat, reduced meeting times, and potential limitations on stakeholder access under ECOSOC rules (Strandenaes, 2014; stakeholder interventions at HLPF-2).

The strategy of orchestration is crucial for the HLPF to avoid this fate. We must, therefore, carefully evaluate its ability to act as orchestrator. The CSD might have orchestrated, but failed to muster sufficient political authority or flexibility to attract broad, high-level participation or to work in a crowded governance environment. In contrast, many successful orchestrators, such as the G20, possess greater authority than the HLPF, controlling important levers of influence in powerful states. Others, such as the Global Environmental Facility (GEF), dispense significant financial resources. Where does the HLPF fall on this continuum?

### What is orchestration?

Orchestration is a mode of governance in which one actor (the orchestrator) enlists one or more intermediary actors (the intermediaries) to govern a third actor or set of actors (the targets) in line with the orchestrator's goals (Abbott et al., 2015a). While orchestration is not a new strategy,<sup>5</sup> orchestration scholarship is recent. It devel-

oped out of two streams: study of the modern state as manager of decentralized authority (Genschel & Zangl, 2014; Lobel, 2004), and study of IGOs' support for transnational governance organizations (Abbott & Snidal, 2009). Scholars have documented the use of orchestration by diverse IGOs, treaty bodies and supranational actors (Abbott et al., 2015b; Abbott & Hale, 2014; Blauburger & Rittberger, 2014; Hale & Roger, 2014; Hanrieder, 2015; Schleifer, 2014; Tallberg, 2015).

Because an orchestrator works through intermediaries rather than attempting to govern targets directly, orchestration is a strategy of *indirect* governance. It contrasts with mandatory, hierarchical regulation and with softer collaborative approaches in which governance actors directly engage their ultimate policy targets. An orchestrator lacks firm control over its intermediaries; it must therefore enlist their voluntary cooperation. Enlistment is only feasible when the policy goals of (potential) intermediaries are broadly aligned with those of the orchestrator. Orchestration is thus a strategy of *soft* governance: lacking hard control, orchestrators must deal with intermediaries through leadership, persuasion and incentives. Here orchestration contrasts with principal-agent delegation (Hawkins et al., 2006), in which governance actors retain control over actors that operate on their behalf.

Without hard control, orchestrators' most important tool of influence is support for intermediaries (Abbott et al., 2015a). Support is a pathway for leadership and persuasion, promoting adoption and implementation of desired goals, norms and programs. It provides incentives, giving the orchestrator some ability to steer intermediary conduct, as by attaching conditions to support or directing it to specific activities; and support enables intermediaries to pursue their (aligned) goals more effectively. Some orchestrators can provide financial or other material support. Importantly, though, support is often ideational, e.g., information, cognitive or normative guidance, or endorsement. Similarly, orchestrators can use their convening authority – derived from their institutional position and legitimacy – to catalyze formation of new intermediaries and to coordinate the activities of multiple intermediaries, increasing their impact.

International organizations often orchestrate to influence private targets (e.g., to encourage businesses to disclose their environmental impacts) or to provide nonstate actors with benefits (e.g., to deliver humanitarian assistance). In these cases the intermediaries too are frequently nonstate, including NGOs, business associations and public–private partnerships (van der Lugt & Dingwerth, 2015). In other cases, IGOs seek to influence states (e.g., by monitoring compliance with commitments) or to provide them with benefits (e.g., financial assistance). Even here intermediaries may be nonstate (e.g., NGOs that monitor state compliance), but they are

often governmental (e.g., networks of national regulators, or other IGOs) (Blauberger & Rittberger, 2015; Graham & Thompson, 2015).

Orchestration is widely used in sustainable development governance (Abbott & Hale, 2014). Abbott et al. (2015a), for example, highlight how the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species relies on TRAFFIC, a network of environmental NGOs, as an intermediary monitoring compliance; how UNEP and the UN Global Compact orchestrated formation of the Principles for Responsible Investment to set standards for private investment firms; and how the World Health Organization facilitated the creation of public–private partnerships such as Roll Back Malaria and Stop TB, as intermediaries implementing operational programs. These generally positive experiences make orchestration particularly salient for the HLPF.

### A viable but challenging strategy

The key condition that leads IGOs and other governance actors to orchestrate is the combination of ‘ambitious governance goals but moderate governance capacity’ (Abbott et al., 2015a, p. 3). In these circumstances, intermediaries can provide complementary capacities, strengthening governance overall.

The HLPF has undoubtedly been assigned ambitious governance goals. These include providing political leadership for action on sustainable development; setting the sustainable development agenda, including emerging issues; enhancing integration, coordination and coherence across the UN system and at all levels of governance; following up on progress in implementing all sustainable development goals and commitments; providing a platform for partnerships; enhancing participation of the ‘major groups’ and other stakeholders in decision making and implementation; and enhancing evidence-based decision making at all levels. It would be difficult for any institution to fulfill all of these demands on its own.

At the same time, the HLPF has been granted only modest authority and resources. As noted above, these are considerably more limited than those of many other orchestrators. The crucial question for the HLPF, then, is whether it has been granted (or can develop) even the levels of authority and resources necessary for orchestration.

First, as a ‘forum,’ the HLPF has a constrained and uncertain status. Its quadrennial meetings under the UN General Assembly adopt concise negotiated political declarations; its annual meetings under ECOSOC adopt negotiated ministerial declarations. However, ministerial declarations are not subject to review by the 54-member ECOSOC, because the HLPF has universal membership, but are forwarded directly to the General Assembly. Nonetheless, as with most IGOs, neither type of instru-

ment is legally binding. The HLPF is not authorized to adopt conventions, formal recommendations or other normative instruments.

In its first annual meeting, the HLPF adopted a joint ministerial declaration with ECOSOC’s high-level segment (ECOSOC, 2014). While this suggests that the priorities of ECOSOC and the HLPF are aligned, it raises questions about the HLPF’s ability to act autonomously. In addition, the G77/China tested the HLPF’s ability to take decisions by floating a proposed decision on the mandated global sustainable development report.<sup>6</sup> Divisions over substance led the proponents to withdraw this proposal, leaving inconclusive the HLPF’s decision-making capacity (ENB, 2014, p. 15).

Second, states have dedicated only modest financial resources to the HLPF. It receives basic operating funding from the regular UN budget and secretariat support from the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA). Both sources, however, are already stretched. Its only other resource is a voluntary trust fund that provides supplementary support for participation by developing countries and stakeholders.

Together, these limitations mean that the HLPF cannot adopt strong normative instruments, create powerful material incentives, or engage in significant operational activities; it has serious capability deficits. The mismatch between the forum’s broad mandate and its limited decision authority and resources strongly suggests that states intended it to work through intermediaries – even though states are among its targets, especially as to implementation and review of commitments. A major finding of orchestration research is that states often welcome and even initiate orchestration by IGOs, especially relatively weak institutions such as the G20 and GEF. This allows states to (modestly) advance their governance goals, including constraining their own behavior, without delegating substantial authority or incurring major sovereignty or material costs (Abbott et al., 2015b). The HLPF case supports and extends this finding; it may also help us identify the lower bounds of authority and resources, below which institutions cannot even orchestrate.

Two additional features suggest that states designed the HLPF to orchestrate. First, the General Assembly explicitly defined some core HLPF mandates in terms of indirect, soft governance. The forum is tasked with promoting *integration* of sustainable development throughout the UN system, within other global institutions, and at all levels of decision making. Essentially, it is to promote the ‘mainstreaming’ of sustainable development by other (intermediary) institutions, which will then implement appropriate policies and programs *vis-à-vis* the ultimate targets.

Similarly, the HLPF is tasked with promoting *coherence* in sustainability governance. It must encourage other

(intermediary) institutions to adopt common normative frameworks and policies (or to manage any significant differences) – both across institutions and across the three dimensions of sustainable development. This is akin to the G20's mandate to promote coherent, mutually supportive policies across diverse global financial institutions (Viola, 2015).

Second, many of the HLPF's other mandates accord well with orchestration. For example, the forum is mandated to provide high-level political leadership (for other actors and organizations); shape the sustainable development agenda (for other actors and organizations); and review progress in implementing commitments (by other actors and organizations) from all major UN conferences relevant to sustainable development, as well as all agreed means of implementation. Leadership, agenda setting and review are all common techniques of orchestration.

### Conditions for success

While the strategy of orchestration is smartly adapted to the political context, successful orchestration requires particular conditions. Here we highlight two important organizational attributes: legitimacy and a focal institutional position (Abbott et al., 2015a, b). In the two subsequent sections, which consider the relationships and tools of orchestration, we address two other requirements: the availability of appropriate intermediaries; and sufficient resources to enlist, support and steer intermediaries.

Legitimacy in the eyes of intermediaries and targets is essential because orchestration involves governance without mandatory authority or coercive power. The HLPF should be highly legitimate. It was created at Rio+20 in the outcome document adopted by heads of state and government. It has universal membership, including high-level participation; and it is mandated to promote active participation by developing countries, the UN system and other IGOs, and major groups and other stakeholders based on CSD practices.

Similarly, the circumstances of its creation, its universal, high-level structure and its unique dual links to the General Assembly and ECOSOC should make the HLPF 'focal,' a natural leader of the sustainable development policy domain. These features should also give the HLPF greater 'political weight' than the CSD, addressing one of the latter's fundamental flaws (United Nations, 2013a). The HLPF is mandated to set the agenda for sustainable development and integrate its three dimensions; its ministerial meetings overlap ECOSOC's high-level segment and will, in future years, incorporate annual reviews. Early evidence is promising: HLPF-2 attracted ministers of finance, planning, children, housing, development and foreign affairs as well as environment.

Legitimacy, focality and political weight are especially important for leadership: the ability of the HLPF to provide a unified, independent voice for sustainable development, currently lacking within the UN system. For greatest effectiveness, this voice should reflect a focused, coherent agenda. Once adopted, the draft SDGs, while less concise than some had hoped, can make an important contribution in this regard, guiding the work of the HLPF and its intermediaries, while providing an additional source of legitimacy and a normative foundation for efforts to increase coherence (OWG, 2014).

Legitimacy, focality and political weight are also important for dealing with intermediaries. While there are important differences between the HLPF and G20, on this count their similarities are instructive: both are forums that operate at high political levels but have little independent organizational capacity; both must interact with powerful, established institutions. As Viola (2015) notes, while the G20 had no capacity to manage the 2008 financial crisis directly, the organization used its legitimacy, focality and political weight 'to limit overlap and increase synergies among international financial institutions, including the Bretton Woods institutions, Bank for International Settlements, Financial Stability Board and multilateral development banks' (Abbott et al., 2015a, pp. 15–16).

Yet institutional coordination on sustainable development will be no easy task. The HLPF enters a crowded organizational field that includes much of the UN system, regional organizations, the Bretton Woods institutions and the World Trade Organization (WTO), as well as numerous NGOs, public–private partnerships and 'action networks' such as 'Every Woman Every Child' and 'Sustainable Energy for All.' The forum must promote coherence and integration within this fragmented system, without igniting counterproductive turf wars or encouraging other organizations to compete as orchestrators (Bernstein, 2013b).

Finally, the HLPF can use orchestration to enhance its own focality and legitimacy over time (van der Lugt & Dingwerth, 2015; Abbott et al., 2015b). Successful working relationships with diverse states, IGOs and stakeholders increase procedural legitimacy and focality by broadening participation and injecting diverse information and political views into decision-making. They also increase substantive legitimacy by encouraging cooperation to successfully fulfill organizational mandates.

Conversely, isolation or poor working relationships could cause the HLPF to lose legitimacy and focality. So too could inaction or substantive failures: ultimately, governments and stakeholders will judge the success of the HLPF by its ability to catalyze real progress on sustainable development.

## The structure of HLPF orchestration

Orchestration includes two broad forms. In the first and most fundamental, all three constituent actors are central: the orchestrator identifies (or helps to create), enlists and supports intermediaries that possess the goals and capabilities necessary to address policy targets (regulating them or providing benefits). In the second, the orchestrator's primary concern is the relationships among multiple intermediaries: the orchestrator manages those relationships to promote coherence and coordination. Both forms are crucial for the HLPF.

## Identifying and enlisting intermediaries

It is essential to successful orchestration that intermediaries with aligned goals and appropriate capabilities (including influence on important targets) be available. A number of organizations within the UN system and beyond can be valuable intermediaries for the HLPF.

### ECOSOC: UN agencies as targets

The HLPF's relationship with ECOSOC is complex and subtle. In some respects, the forum is 'nested' beneath ECOSOC: its annual sessions are held 'under the auspices' of ECOSOC and are convened and chaired by its president; session agendas must be 'in line with' the council's thematic focus; and ministerial segments are held 'in the framework of' the council's substantive session (UNGA, 2013a, ¶ 7). In the event, however, HLPF-2 and ECOSOC's high-level segment proved highly fluid: discussions carried over between forums, and the two produced a joint declaration. ECOSOC's biennial Development Cooperation Forum immediately followed the HLPF meetings, facilitating further linkages.

Strategically, however, the HLPF must also view ECOSOC as a crucial intermediary. ECOSOC has direct organizational and/or legal linkages to virtually all relevant bodies in the UN system, including the specialized agencies and regional commissions; it is also the center for dialogue with related institutions such as the WTO. In addition, ECOSOC remains 'the central mechanism for coordination of the activities of the United Nations system' and for 'supervision of subsidiary bodies in the economic, social, environmental and related fields' (UNGA, 2013b). As a practical matter, while fluidity between the two bodies may constrain HLPF autonomy, it can also help the HLPF take advantage of ECOSOC's capabilities in pursuing its own mandates.

The HLPF can also benefit from ECOSOC's convening power. For example, the HLPF is mandated to improve coordination on sustainable development across the UN system, and to enhance learning through sharing

of experiences, lessons and best practices. In both cases, ECOSOC can help ensure active participation by relevant organizations. Similarly, while the HLPF's organizational resolution 'invites' participation from the IMF, World Bank and WTO, ECOSOC's coordinating role under the financing for development initiative can encourage such participation. The HLPF is also mandated to strengthen the 'science-policy interface,' including by preparing a global sustainable development report. ECOSOC can encourage functional and regional commissions to contribute relevant information and analyses.

Finally, ECOSOC coordinates and engages in dialogue with many of the relevant agencies, and many report to it. These actions will be important in implementing the priorities and decisions of the HLPF – both *vis-à-vis* UN agencies, and through them, as sub-intermediaries, *vis-à-vis* the targets and beneficiaries of their policies and programs.

### Inter-agency coherence processes: UN agencies as targets

The Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) brings together the 'executive heads' of UN system agencies and the 'related organizations.' It provides 'guidance, coordination and strategic direction'<sup>7</sup> for those bodies in areas under the authority of the executive heads. As with ECOSOC, then, the HLPF must view the CEB as a strategic intermediary.

The UN Secretary-General's mainstreaming report on sustainable development (UN, 2013b) further highlights the CEB's importance in promoting integration at country level. Many member agencies help governments develop and implement national strategies; they also conduct a wide range of in-country programs, utilizing expertise and operational capacities the HLPF lacks. The same is true of topical groupings such as UN-Water and the High-level Task Force on Food Security and their member agencies.

At the same time, experience suggests that focused guidance and support from a high-level organizational champion are important for successful mainstreaming across the UN system. UN Women, for example, has effectively mainstreamed gender at international and country level, but political leadership from the Commission on the Status of Women has been crucial to its success. As an orchestrator, the HLPF can likewise become a political champion for mainstreaming sustainable development. For example, it could provide leadership for the UN Environmental and Social Sustainability Framework (UN 2012), an interagency initiative to promote environmental and social safeguards that has stalled without high-level political support.

### Regional organizations: regional actors as targets

Regional organizations, including regional development banks and UN regional commissions, are important intermediaries for the HLPF, in two senses. The first reflects a 'downward' relationship. In structuring the HLPF, the General Assembly recognized the importance of the regional dimension, calling on regional commissions to contribute to the work of the forum, including through annual regional meetings involving public bodies and stakeholders (UNGA, 2013a, ¶ 13). By enlisting, supporting and steering regional organizations, the HLPF can engage their local expertise, resources and operational capacities, helping it to transmit its 'action-oriented' agenda to regional actors. The HLPF could also enlist these bodies to develop regional frameworks for follow-up and implementation of sustainable development goals and commitments.

Regional organizations are also important intermediaries in an 'upward' sense. While the General Assembly established no specific preparatory process for HLPF sessions, it did call for regional preparatory meetings (UNGA, 2013a, ¶ 7(f)), along with other forms of input. Regional commissions can help shape participation, enlist participants and structure agendas and decision processes for such input, while communicating views and recommendations.

More broadly, the HLPF must seek input from diverse public and private actors in order to address emerging issues, identify implementation problems, and learn about policy successes and failures. Here too, empowering regional commissions and organizations as intermediaries can help overcome a significant problem of the CSD: the disengagement of governments and stakeholders, due in part to limited access to information in local languages and limited participation in decision making (South Centre, 2013; Adams and Pingeot, 2013; IISD, 2014b).

### Partnerships and action networks: stakeholders as targets

Partnerships and voluntary commitments provide almost all the material resources committed at Rio+20 'to implement concrete policies, plans and programmes, projects and actions. . . .' (UNGA, 2012, ¶ 283). Many are associated in 'action networks,' such as Sustainable Energy for All, Every Woman Every Child, and Sustainable Cities. The UN cites the value of these commitments as over \$636 billion (UNDESA, 2013), although this figure includes some older commitments, and provides no assurance that commitments reflect approved sustainable development norms (UNGA, 2012).

The Rio+20 vision of voluntary commitments is broader than the WSSD model of partnerships overseen

by the CSD. The 'partnership' model encouraged a particular organizational form, whereas the 'commitment' model encompasses multiple forms, including commitments by individual organizations. The commitment model also focuses on substantive outcomes: the UN seeks concrete 'deliverables' for each commitment, and envisions a voluntary accountability framework based on incentives including access to HLPF processes (UNDESA, 2013, pp. 4, 31–32).

The HLPF is mandated to follow up implementation of all sustainable development commitments and to promote integration of sustainable development at all levels. It is also to provide 'a platform for partnerships' in connection with implementation reviews (UNGA, 2013a, ¶ 8 (c)). Potentially, these mandates empower the HLPF to bring greater coherence and accountability to voluntary commitments, an authority the CSD largely failed to exercise. Partnerships and action networks, which unite the individual stakeholders that must implement commitments, are both targets and crucial intermediaries in this effort.

The HLPF should adopt the lessons of over 10 years of experience with WSSD partnerships and CSD supervision. Important failings include lack of clear quantifiable goals and institutionalized review; significant underrepresentation of women, indigenous peoples, youth and children and farmers; lack of true multistakeholder character in most partnerships; and relatively few partnerships actually geared toward implementing intergovernmental commitments (Bäckstrand et al., 2012, pp. 133–141; Bäckstrand and Kylsäter, 2014; UN, 2008).

Building on these lessons, the HLPF should, first, steer voluntary commitments toward good internal governance. One priority is encouraging representation for diverse stakeholders, especially from the global South and underrepresented communities. It should also steer commitments toward implementing agreed international goals and priorities (including the SDGs), increasing coherence in the system.

Second, the HLPF should support the UN's voluntary accountability framework and otherwise strengthen monitoring and review, to measure progress and promote accountability and legitimacy. Partnerships with 'precise and binding norms that are strictly monitored and enforced' perform better (Bäckstrand et al., 2012, p. 135).

Third, the HLPF could provide support to increase the effectiveness of voluntary commitments. Its platform for partnerships should promote exchanges of good practices, networking and other learning opportunities among commitment-makers. Such exchanges would diffuse ideas generated by voluntary actions, while increasing coherence among them.

The 'Sustainable Development in Action' registry of commitments is an important first step.<sup>8</sup> Keeping it up to date, with ongoing input from stakeholders, and proac-

tively linking it to other commitments (like those made at the 2014 UN Climate Summit<sup>9</sup>) and registries are essential for effective support, monitoring, collaboration and steering (NRDC/Stakeholder Forum, 2013).

### Transnational organizations: nonstate actors as targets

The HLPF has an opportunity to increase recognition, support and guidance for transnational organizations beyond those registered as partnerships or voluntary commitments. Transnational organizations are formed by varied combinations of nonstate actors, including businesses, NGOs and sub-national governments, sometimes with IGO or national participation. They set voluntary standards of conduct for business and other targets, manage operational programs, and provide financing. They have proliferated in many areas of sustainable development governance, including forest management, human and worker rights, environmental reporting and carbon markets. Yet they are rarely integrated into international policy making (Abbott, 2012, 2013).

Like partnerships and voluntary commitments, transnational organizations are targets: the HLPF should seek to align their actions with its global agenda, and to encourage coordination and coherence among them. But transnational organizations are also valuable intermediaries, through which the HLPF can affect individual participants, targets and beneficiaries. Some transnational organizations can serve as meta-intermediaries. For example, the ISEAL Alliance sets standards for standard-setters in transnational social and environmental certification; it encourages best practices and promotes recognition of sustainable development in the marketplace (Bernstein, 2011).

As orchestrator, the HLPF could steer transnational organizations toward good internal governance, internationally approved goals and priorities, and avoidance of inappropriate trade restrictions. Meta-intermediaries are important here: groups such as ISEAL are better placed than the HLPF to ensure that transnational organizations follow best practices. The HLPF could encourage transnational organizations to participate in the UN accountability framework, promoting their effectiveness, accountability and legitimacy. It could also seek their input for its preparatory and review processes.

### Managing intermediary relationships

The second form of orchestration involves managing relationships among intermediaries, especially within dense institutional complexes. Without an orchestrator to increase coordination and synergies, institutional fragmentation can lead to overlaps, inconsistencies or conflicts among norms, rules and programs, reducing effectiveness and raising costs. Inter-institutional compe-

tion also diverts resources from substantive governance goals.

Given the HLPF's mandates to 'promote system-wide coherence and coordination', 'improve cooperation and coordination within the United Nations system' and 'enhance the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development ... at all levels' (UNGA, 2013a, ¶¶ 2,7(d)), managing relationships will be central to its work. As already suggested, the HLPF can use its relationships with ECOSOC and the CEB to promote coherence among UN agencies. It can provide political leadership to encourage coordination among governance institutions at multiple levels. This may entail promoting common normative understandings and policies (perhaps organized around the SDGs); it may also entail developing institutional mechanisms to identify gaps, overlaps and conflicts, address tensions and trade-offs and resolve conflicts.

The high-level panel on the post-2015 development agenda (2013, p. 24) presents an ambitious vision in this regard. It notes that states address sustainable development in multiple forums – from the G20 to the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation – but in fragmented fashion. The HLPF could recognize the work of these forums and diffuse their ideas, while encouraging greater coherence in their work.

The G20 has developed another relevant practice: it assigns 'tasks to the multilateral economic institutions related to specific issues, with instructions to report back to the next meeting of G20 leaders' (Hillman, 2010, p. 13). The G20 cannot formally delegate to or control these intermediaries, but 'calls upon' institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to consider and address particular issues. If a strong consensus can be generated within the HLPF, it could be similarly directive.

This approach will be particularly valuable in helping the HLPF to enhance policy coherence among the UN system, Bretton Woods institutions and WTO. The HLPF should focus on promoting policies and rules supportive of sustainable development (e.g., on finance for sustainable development (including innovative financial mechanisms), technology transfer and market access for environmental goods and services). This will require joint meetings or some other *modus operandi* to create dialogue among relevant organizations.

The HLPF could also act as a problem-solving forum, helping to resolve inter-institutional impasses that constrain progress on sustainable development. For example, where organizations such as the WTO and UNEP hold conflicting visions on issues such as intellectual property and green technology diffusion, the HLPF could sponsor analytic work and exercise political leadership to forge compromise.



## Tools of orchestration

Recent scholarship identifies a range of techniques that successful orchestrators employ (Abbott et al., 2015a, b). Many are available to the HLPF, although some may be precluded by its organizational limitations and lack of resources.

## Agenda setting

Agenda setting provides cognitive and normative guidance to intermediaries. It helps enlist intermediaries with aligned goals, informs them of policy options, shapes their priorities and steers their activities in desired directions. An agenda adopted by a respected body may confer additional legitimacy on conforming organizations, encouraging external support. Agenda setting also increases organizational impacts by encouraging coordination within dense institutional complexes.

With its mandate to provide political leadership, guidance and recommendations, the HLPF should play a major role in setting the sustainability agenda and promoting its implementation. A clear agenda, such as one built around the SDGs, will increase the forum's impact while facilitating action by intermediaries. Early HLPF meetings have, however, raised questions about its agenda-setting capacity. With no independent bureau and limitations on stakeholder access, the ECOSOC leadership has largely dictated its agenda.

## Material support

Support is the primary tool for enlisting intermediaries, enhancing their effectiveness and steering their activities. Material support – whether financial or 'in kind,' such as administrative assistance or hosting – is naturally powerful. It is particularly important for implementation, monitoring and other operational activities.

The HLPF can offer intermediaries very few material resources. It can, however, use its status and position to stimulate other entities to provide material support. This mechanism will depend on the working relationships it constructs with potential donors: governments, international institutions, action networks, partnerships and private actors.

## Ideational support

Ideational support also helps orchestrators to mobilize and enlist intermediaries, strengthen them and steer them. Information and cognitive and normative guidance are doubly empowering: they help intermediaries both to pursue their goals more effectively and to distinguish themselves from competitors in the eyes of important constituencies. As with agenda setting, moreover, infor-

mation and guidance from respected authorities can enhance intermediaries' legitimacy.

HLPF activities to improve the science-policy nexus can convey particularly valuable informational support (Bernstein, 2013b). Timely dissemination of preparatory and HLPF inputs and information about UN processes, translated into local languages, can engage and guide public and private intermediaries, while empowering them for later implementation.

The HLPF's global sustainable development report will be key. It should be forward-looking and policy-oriented, not only identifying areas of progress based on information collected from other reviews, but also providing evidence-based analysis of policy gaps and shortcomings. Similarly, it should develop analyses that link drivers of (un)sustainable development to outcomes, tracing how interventions and other uncertainties interact with drivers to create (un)sustainable pathways. HLPF-2 discussed this report, but final decisions on its form await decisions on HLPF review processes.

The HLPF is also mandated to promote sharing of experiences and best practices on implementation, with the participation of the major groups and other stakeholders. By supporting robust learning opportunities, the HLPF can empower and increase the capacity of intermediaries (and targets), while enlisting them in a common enterprise.

## Review mechanisms

The HLPF is mandated to take over, as of 2016, the Annual Ministerial Review (AMR) process currently part of ECOSOC. Reviews will be state-led and voluntary, but will involve UN agencies and encourage state reporting. They will focus on implementation of sustainable development commitments and objectives, likely including the SDGs, and on means of implementation. The new review process provides an opportunity to increase participation and improve modalities, not only to more clearly measure progress, but also to facilitate learning within and among countries and across the UN system.

Many options are being considered for the review process (e.g., Halle, Najam and Wolfe, 2014; IISD, 2014a; ENB, 2014). There is growing consensus that review, monitoring and accountability must be part of a larger framework, not focused only on national presentations and reviews. Yet there are already warning signs that some developing states will resist significant strengthening of the AMR as well as deeper involvement of civil society.

The HLPF is also in a unique position to promote review, accountability and learning for action networks, partnerships and voluntary commitments. It could endorse and disseminate best practices from organizations with robust internal accountability mechanisms. It could also encourage independent third-party reviews, such as the

Natural Resources Defense Council's 'cloud of commitments' (UNDESA, 2013). Third-party processes respond not only to the HLPF's lack of administrative capacity, but also to the political challenges of conducting critical assessments. However, active encouragement, technical support and some material support will be needed to establish such processes, especially with participation by stakeholders from developing countries and more marginalized major groups.

### Endorsement

Endorsement is a widely used form of ideational support. Endorsement can be embodied in material support; it can also take legal form, such as the formal adoption of private standards. But most endorsement is political. For example, when UNEP helped create the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) to adopt environmental disclosure standards, it named GRI as a collaborating center, inaugurated it at UN headquarters, and arranged for express recognition by the WSSD and UN Global Compact. Endorsement by legitimate and respected actors increases intermediaries' authority and helps them attract support from diverse constituencies.

Endorsement implies singling out particular actors for their substantive focus, internal governance, effectiveness or other attributes. The HLPF could make a significant contribution by developing mechanisms and criteria to identify public and private organizations that, e.g., pursue activities consistent with the HLPF's agenda, adopt proven strategies, apply SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, resource-based and time-bound) criteria, collaborate and meet good governance criteria. Even modest actions, such as inviting particular organizations to contribute to learning events, convey some degree of endorsement.

### Convening and coordinating

Coordinating the activities of intermediaries is both a goal and a tool of orchestration. Coordination provides ideational and normative guidance; reduces rule and policy overlaps, gaps and conflicts; lowers transactions costs; and increases effectiveness. Convening relevant actors is an important element of coordination; convening also allows orchestrators to catalyze and shape formation of new intermediaries and to establish mechanisms for dialogue, learning and review.

The HLPF should have considerable convening power, based on its legitimacy, focality and political weight; it can also work through intermediaries such as ECOSOC and the CEB. The first two HLPF meetings had notable convening success, attracting heads of governments and high-level representatives from a variety of ministries. Its

session under the UN General Assembly also attracted leaders of the IMF and World Bank. Notably, however, mostly lower-level officials from economic institutions attended HLPF-2. Convening these organizations may require stronger signals from ECOSOC that HLPF meetings are as important as its own joint meetings under the finance for development initiative.

The HLPF is also mandated to enhance 'the consultative role and participation of the major groups and other relevant stakeholders at the international level.' Its sessions should offer unusual opportunities to convene a broad range of stakeholders, providing opportunities to interact with state representatives and to sponsor side events and roundtables, and enabling the HLPF to enlist them in common efforts. Stakeholder concerns over limits on civil society involvement, if unaddressed, would militate against successful orchestration of this kind (ENB, 2014).

### Conclusions

The HLPF faces enormous institutional challenges. Its mandate is vast, but its legal authority and resources are highly constrained. In these circumstances, orchestration is the best available governance strategy. It follows that the HLPF's success should be evaluated in terms of its role as orchestrator, not in the traditional terms of rules and enforcement.

The HLPF is also an important test case for orchestration theory: can an institution with the ambiguous structure and limited authority and resources of the HLPF still use orchestration to produce significant impacts on sustainable development? The uncertainties are many. The HLPF may prove vulnerable to North-South politics, making strategic action difficult. Some potential intermediaries – notably ECOSOC and regional organizations – are well established and relatively powerful. Others – such as partnerships and action networks – are only weakly tied to the UN; they may seek HLPF ties to enhance their legitimacy, but may resist strong external accountability. It remains to be seen whether ideational tools alone will be sufficient to enlist, support and steer intermediaries. Finally, the HLPF's prospects depend greatly on the outcomes of the post-2015 development agenda processes, including final approval and governance arrangements for the SDGs.

As with any experiment, then, HLPF orchestration may fail. There are already worrisome signs, particularly around stakeholder engagement and independent agenda-setting capacity. Yet there is no real alternative. Governments have created an institution that, by default and design, must operate through others to fulfill its mandate. In these circumstances, orchestration provides proven tools for an institution with capability deficits to achieve meaningful results, and to enhance its own authority over time.

## Notes

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1. Orchestration was discussed at the 'Expert Group Meeting on the High-level Political Forum' (United Nations, New York, April 3–4 2013) among UN officials, stakeholders, experts and state representatives and at the HLPF's second meeting (ENB, 2014).
2. These include its review function and its precise relationship to the SDGs. Both issues will be influenced by the synthesis report from the UN Secretary-General (United Nations 2014) and related post – 2015 development agenda processes.
3. Bernstein participated in the 'High-Level Symposium on the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development,' Beijing, 8–9 September 2011; UN retreat on 'Sustainable Development Governance,' New Jersey, 14 February 2012; 'Expert Group Meeting on the High-level Political Forum' (United Nations, New York, 3–4 April 2013) (<http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?page=view&nr=403&type=13&menu=1556>); and two 2014 workshops sponsored by a state consortium to design the HLPF review mechanism. We also draw from Bernstein's consultant's report for the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) on the HLPF's role and functions (Bernstein, 2013b).
4. Chair's Summary: High Level Dialogue on Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development 19–21 July 2011, Solo – Indonesia. Available at: <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=13&nr=201&menu=106>. Accessed 02 February 2015.
5. For example, the World Health Organization has orchestrated since its creation (Hanrieder, 2015).
6. Proponents cited UN General Assembly resolution 67/290, ¶ 9, which provides that the HLPF operates under the same rules of procedure as functional commissions when meeting under ECO-SOC auspices.
7. <http://unsceb.org/content/about>
8. <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/>
9. <http://www.un.org/climatechange/summit/>

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