2023 High-Level Political Forum data-driven expectations
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I- What can we expect from the 2023 High-Level Political Forum (HLPF)?

This year’s High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) takes place in a global context that is more complicated than it seems. Although some encouraging elements are revealed at first glance, these are combined with a political framework in which priorities are not focused on accelerating the path towards sustainable development.

Turbulence in the economy and international trade, coupled with alarming levels of environmental degradation, especially in climate change and biodiversity loss, are the overlapping crises affecting the world today.

The war resulting from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has been ongoing for over a year, is weighty. It is even more dangerous because it showcases the failure of the Security Council, the main international mechanism for ensuring international peace and security.

As of June 2023, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that the conflict has led to the deaths of at least 9,083 civilians and injured nearly 16,000, with many more likely to follow.

The latest report issued by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees states that by the end of 2022, more than 108 million people were forced to flee their homes—an increase of 19 million (more than the entire population of Ecuador) compared to 2021. In today’s world, one in 74 people have been forced to flee their homes.

The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have not yet been overcome, which can be seen in the levels of indebtedness caused by the need to buy vaccines and extend social policies, the psychological damage experienced by young people, and the educational losses generated by school closures. The World Bank notes that due to school closures during the pandemic, today’s children could experience a loss in future earnings totaling US $21 trillion, equivalent to 17% of current global GDP.
The acceleration of new technology development, including artificial intelligence tools, is creating new global inequity gaps between those who have access to these technologies and those who do not.

The average value of the frontier technology readiness index published by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) is 0.80 points for developed economies. This value is two-thirds lower for the least developed countries, landlocked developing countries, and small island developing states (0.28 points).

The “multiple crises” surrounding the 2023 HLPF are many more than what is brought to light. Letting them drag on over time and not confronting them decisively only makes them worse.

However, it is precisely this context that gives this year’s HLPF meeting its greatest potential. If there are multiple intertwined crises, the solution must be comprehensive and holistic. There is no other option. The most efficient way to build this kind of solution is to center discussions on what the context postpones: the accelerated global progress toward sustainable development for the benefit of everyone everywhere.

Our global “GPS” for moving towards sustainable development is the 2030 Agenda, where the balance between the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of development is key. Based on this agenda, principles of action were agreed upon, such as the Leave No One Behind principle, reaching the most vulnerable first, the universality of the goals, which must be achieved for all people and social groups, and their interdependence, recognizing that every step forward and every setback for one of the SDGs impacts the others.

There are three central elements for the 2023 HLPF to accelerate the path towards the 2030 Agenda as a way to overcome today’s multiple global crises:

1. Strengthen multilateralism and the institutions that lead the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the global, regional, and national levels. This will provide the resources and capabilities to work efficiently and effectively.

2. Improve the quality of progress reporting processes so that, through identifying lessons learned, knowledge sharing, identification of concrete actions, and effective multi-stakeholder participation, they accelerate SDG achievement.

3. The political will to move towards sustainable development in an accelerated manner. In practical terms, this means moving away from exaggerated but discursive expressions to action through
concrete support in critical areas, such as contributing to improving the statistical capacities of the weakest countries, increasing financing for sustainable development, and strengthening accountability.

Pushing these three demands is the most practical way to confront the current crises, promote constructing a fairer post-pandemic world, and strengthen democracy and multilateralism. In other words, it is the way out of today’s most serious problems.

In 2023, we have a unique opportunity to follow this path.

- In September, an SDG Summit will follow the July HLPF meeting. Heads of State and Government must make the necessary decisions to accelerate progress toward the SDGs at the highest level.
- The Summit of the Future will be held in September 2024, where world leaders will discuss the nearly 100 proposals made by the UN Secretary-General in his “Our Common Agenda” report to strengthen multilateralism and have a stronger, more effective, and better-equipped United Nations to fulfill its mission.

In the time between the two summits, the UN General Assembly is due to adopt a resolution updating the HLPF’s ways of working, which will begin to be implemented at its meeting in 2024.

Halfway to the deadline, States agreed to meet the SDGs, when progress trends show progress as well as stagnation and relapses, the HLPF could be the spark that ignites a shift in thinking and doing when it comes to sustainable development.

Are the right conditions in place for this? Maybe not. The expectation is that the 2023 HLPF may act as the foundation for its construction.
II- Expectations for the Voluntary National Reviews

Having understood the context of the HLPF and its importance in 2023, it is worth noting that the progress, obstacles, and work to achieve the SDGs in each country are shared through the so-called Voluntary National Reviews (VNR). This is the global meeting where countries present their national efforts to implement the SDGs to the international community, as well as the results obtained.

Each year, a number of States volunteer to submit their VNRs during the HLPF. In 2023, these will be (the number in parentheses refers to whether it is a first, second, or third report): Bahrain (2), Barbados (2), Belgium (2), Bosnia and Herzegovina (2), Brunei Darussalam (2), Burkina Faso (2), Cambodia (2), Canada (2), Central African Republic (2), Comoros (2), Chile (3), Croatia (2), Democratic Republic of the Congo (2), Fiji (2), France (2), Guyana (2), Iceland (2), Ireland (2), Kuwait (2), Liechtenstein (2), Lithuania (2), Maldives (2), Mongolia (2), Poland (2), Portugal (2), Romania (2), Rwanda (2), Saudi Arabia (2), Singapore (2), Slovakia (2), St. Kitts and Nevis (2), Syrian Arab Republic (2), Tajikistan (2), Timor-Leste (2), Turkmenistan (2), United Republic of Tanzania (2), Uzbekistan (2), Vietnam (2), and Zambia.

In addition to these 39 presentations, the first report by an international entity, the European Union, will be presented, explaining its progress and actions to implement the SDGs.

The following is an analysis of the distribution of VNR submissions for 2023 (excluding the case of the European Union):
Ilustration 1. 2023 VNR distribution by region

- Africa: 12
- Asia: 7
- LAC: 4
- Europe: 15
- North America: 1

Ilustration 2. VNR 2023 distribution by country groups

- Least developed countries: 6
- Small island developing countries: 9
- Members of the OECD Development Assistance Committee: 8
- Landlocked countries: 8
- Other: 8

Ilustration 3. 2023 VNR distribution by income level

- High income: 19
- Lower-middle income: 9
- Upper-middle income: 6
- Low income: 5

Ilustration 4. 2023 VNR distribution by number of reports submitted

- First report: 37
- Second report: 1
- Third report: 1

Source. Cepei
This data shows that:

- This session will be particularly relevant for Asia and its contributions to sustainable development, as 38% of the presentations will come from that region.
- There is an equitable distribution among country presentations of special groups relevant to sustainable development.
- The number of high-income countries (19) is almost equal to the sum of upper-middle, lower-middle, and low-income countries (20), so this will be an opportunity to analyze the main concerns of the richer countries and what they are doing to support the sustainable development of lower-income countries.
- This forum could be called "the forum of second reports," as they make up 95% of the total number of VNRs to be presented (37 out of 39). There will only be one first and one-third national review, corresponding to LAC countries (Chile and Saint Kitts and Nevis, respectively).

By the end of the 2023 HLPF, there will only be six countries that have never submitted a VNR: the United States, Haiti, Iran, Myanmar, South Sudan, and Yemen. This means that 97% of UN members will have already submitted at least one report on their progress toward achieving the SDGs.
III-Conclusions

The combination of the current international context and the elements of the 2023 HLPF itself, from the countries reporting to its connection with the upcoming summits, leads to high but differing expectations for the Political Forum:

On the one hand, there are **expectations based on the need for change:**

- This forum should begin to unravel the web of obstacles that prevent further progress toward achieving the 2030 Agenda and even lay the groundwork for acceleration.

- Seen as the starting point of the series of summits, the forum can set the political tone for what is to come—not in detail, but in terms of a general outline.

- Considering the urgency imposed by the current global situation, it could be the space that decisively marks the transition from words to action.

- Based on the VNRs that will be presented, the possibility of a better understanding of how the wealthiest countries are considering the obligations deriving from the principle of universality embodied in the 2030 Agenda is opened up.

- The submission of a report by the European Union, the first voluntary report by an international entity, signifies an opportunity to include a new level of analysis and gain a better picture of SDG efforts occurring at all levels.

On the other hand, there is the **matching of these expectations to what is considered possible** when taking into account the weaknesses of current multilateralism, the HLPF’s ways of working, and the imposition of national policy agendas tied to the short-term to respond to urgent needs arising from the multiple crises:

- This forum could put forward a series of concrete demands for changes required by its structure to be considered by the SDG Summit and the General Assembly.

- A large number of second reports would make it possible to focus on the need to produce national reviews using process-based logic, where the different reports presented by the same country are connected in their contents.
At the halfway point of the agreed timeframe for achieving the SDGs, now is the time to increase the focus on the quality of the implementation, tracking, and review processes of the work being done around the 2030 Agenda. Only with better governance, information, and reporting on governments’ efforts to achieve the SDGs can we accelerate progress, learn lessons from what has been achieved, and share knowledge.

Cepei’s work in Latin America and the Caribbean shows that, although in quantitative terms, the national reporting system established in the 2030 Agenda can be considered a success, VNR quality still has much room for improvement, and this must change.

As is the case every year, there are differences in expectations of what is desirable and what is possible, and this will depend on world leaders’ political will and visions, whether they tend to shut down or continue to expand to the detriment of their promises.