

# 7<sup>th</sup> Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development 2020: Explaining this year's set-up from the perspective of modality and significance for the High-level Political Forum.

Hiroataka Koike

Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES)

February 2020

The 7<sup>th</sup> Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (7APFSD) is due to take place on 25-27 March 2020 at the UN Conference Centre in Bangkok, Thailand. One of the significant differences to preceding APFSD forums (at least from 2017) is that the APFSD7 does not have any cluster of goals under review. This reflects a decision at the global level indicating that the 2020 High-level Political Forum (HLPF) will not have any set of goals, but instead will focus on “Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development.”

This is not as friendly as some people wish, because it was common knowledge for those who do not follow procedural details of the UN meetings, that there was always a cluster of goals. **For the wider audience, this piece will answer the simple question of why there have been selected goals under review in the past but not this year.** To do so, this explanation inevitably expands to the original legal mandate of the HLPF in detail and looks at how member states decided the relationship with other conferences and meetings, including the APFSD. Also, it touches on what is likely to be the focus of this year’s APFSD in the absence of HLPF detailed focus points and aims to provide additional background information. By so doing, this piece intends to inform the general audience of how and why the APFSD is framed, in the way it is, and how much weight the HLPF carries in setting the global sustainability agenda. For those who are experienced but did not pay much attention to APFSD in the past, this piece aims to indicate why it is worth paying attention to it so as to predict the framework for the HLPF.

## 1. Modality of APFSD and HLPF

### 1.1 Relationship between APFSD and HLPF

As I noted earlier, APFSD reflects the theme and focus of the HLPF, as APFSD is considered a regional meeting feeding into the global process. Therefore, understanding APFSD and predicting its political direction and areas of focus require a great deal of knowledge on the HLPF. A quick comparison, shown in the table below, demonstrates just that.

	APFSD (2014 was the inauguration)	HLPF
2013	N/A	Building the future we want: from Rio+20 to the post-2015 development agenda
2014	Achieving the Millennium Development Goals and charting the way for an ambitious post-2015 development agenda, including the Sustainable Development Goals	Achieving the MDGs and charting the way for an ambitious post-2015 development agenda, including the SDGs
2015	Strengthening integration, implementation and review for Sustainable Development in Asia and	Strengthening integration, implementation and review - the HLPF after 2015

	the Pacific.	
<b>2016</b>	Regional priorities for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific.	Ensuring that no one is left behind
<b>2017</b>	Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing Asia-Pacific (1, 2, 3, 5, 9 and 14 and 17)	Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world
<b>2018</b>	Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies (6, 7, 11, 12, 15, 17)	Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies
<b>2019</b>	Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality (4, 8, 10, 13, 16, 17)	Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality
<b>2020</b>	Accelerating action for and delivery of the 2030 Agenda in Asia and the Pacific (No goals. Six entry points identified in the Global Sustainable Development Report 2019)	Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realising the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development

Source: the author produced from information collected through the HLPF website <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf> and the APFSD website <https://www.unescap.org/apfsd/7/previousSession.html>.

Therefore, this piece starts with an introduction to the HLPF itself.

## 1.2 Historical origin and modality of the HLPF

The establishment of the HLPF originates from the Rio+20 outcome document “The Future We Want”. This document stipulates the establishment of a universal intergovernmental high-level political forum to be in charge of “follow[ing] up on the implementation of sustainable development” (paragraph 84). The follow-up was made to give a set of concrete mandates to the HLPF in General-Assembly Resolution (GA Res) 67/290 (in 2013), which is the foundational document of the HLPF. However, GA Res 67/290 does not include any themes for each year, as the member states decided its format and modality in 2013, before the adoption of the 2030 Agenda. The commonly-known themes and sets of clustered goals were set in GA Res 70/299 “Follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the global level” adopted on 29 July 2016<sup>1</sup>.

Because of HLPF’s nature and being considered a centre of gravity in the follow-up and review

<sup>1</sup> This is after the 2016 HLPF.

of all the sustainable development commitments, many other fora are also aligned to its theme. For example, member states have decided that the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), one of the principal organs of the UN, and the HLPF should align their annual theme with each other. Many other regional HLPFs also tend to adopt the HLPF theme of the year as their overarching theme. Therefore, deciding the focus of the ECOSOC and HLPF is not merely about setting the theme of one UN meeting happening in July, but about deciding the centre of gravity in globally addressing sustainable development.

GA Res 70/299 sets out a “cycle” of the review process. The resolution has a direction on themes only until 2019. As elaborated above, the theme has a significant impact on different fora taking place on different occasions and at different times<sup>2</sup>; it was seen as a subject needing an early decision by the member states. Because the same 70/299 resolution calls for the review of the first cycle to be conducted in the 74<sup>th</sup> session (Sep 2019 – Sep 2020)<sup>3</sup>, there was a need to have something else to guide the 2019-2020 process.

To answer this question, the member states in 2018 adopted GA Res 72/305 which in paragraph 4 stated “(t)he General Assembly shall adopt one main theme for the high-level political forum on sustainable development and the Economic and Social Council, bearing in mind the provisions of resolution 70/299 of 29 July 2016. The themes of the segments of the Council shall focus on a particular aspect of the one main theme, bearing in mind their respective functions. ....” This means that the member states will adopt a theme only for the HLPF 2020 and ECOSOC (as mentioned above, they are aligned).

Based on this mandate from GA Res 72/305, the 74th President of General Assembly Tijiani Muhammad-Bande (Nigeria), on 11 October 2019, appointed Craig John Hawke, the Permanent Representative of New Zealand, as facilitator for the process to identify the 2019-2020 theme. The final draft proposed by NZ was agreed through the silence procedure<sup>4</sup> on 14 November 2019. The agreed theme is “***Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development.***”

If you are familiar with the HLPF, some readers might be wondering “then what are we going to do in the thematic review, if there is no set of goals?”. That is a pertinent question. As the images below show, the first week of the HLPF was dedicated to goals under review since 2017. There is no clear indication in terms of what would replace them. However, that is why understanding the APFSD might help readers guess and prepare for possible options to come. The next section touches on this subject.

---

<sup>2</sup> For example, the first sub-regional forum, as a preparatory process for the 2019 Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (that is a regional HLPF for Asia-Pacific), took place in August 2018. Hence, the theme of the year after has to be decided long time before the HLPF.

<sup>3</sup> Paragraph 21 reads “Decides to review progress in implementing the present resolution and resolution 67/290 on the format and organizational aspects of the high-level political forum at its seventy-fourth session, in order to benefit from lessons learned in the first cycle of the forum as well as from other processes under the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council related to the follow-up and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.”

<sup>4</sup> A legal term in Latin is “qui tacet consentire videtur” - “he who is silent is taken to agree.” In the UN, it is a way to adopt the text. If this method is taken, then the person in charge (facilitator, co-chair, etc) usually circulate the final draft (often after several rounds of negotiations) and goes into the silence procedure. It gives a final opportunity to the participating countries to propose changes, amendments and/or deletion. If no country breaks the silence procedure by the deadline, then the text is considered adopted.



INTEGRATION SEGMENT	HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT <i>Theme: Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality</i>					
	Week 1, 8-12 and 15 July 2019					
	Monday, 8 July	Tuesday, 9 July (CR 4)	Wednesday, 10 July (CR 4)	Thursday, 11 July (CR 4)	Friday, 12 July (CR 4)	Monday, 15 July (CR 4)
10 AM – 1 PM	<b>INTEGRATION SEGMENT</b> 10 - 10:45 AM <b>Opening</b> Dialogue with the Secretary-General on the work of the UN system Chief Executives Board 10:45 AM – 1 PM Pursuing people-centered 2030 Agenda on a healthy planet	<b>HLPF</b> 9 – 10 AM <b>Opening</b> Scene setting How far are we from the SDGs? 10 AM – 1 PM Progress, gaps and obstacles: are we on track for leaving no one behind?	<b>HLPF</b> <b>Thematic review</b> 9 – 11 AM Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality Perspective of SIDS 11 AM – 1 PM Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality Perspectives of LDCs and LLDCs	<b>HLPF</b> <b>Thematic review</b> 9 – 11 AM Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality Perspectives of society 11 AM – 1 PM Science policy interface including the briefing from the independent group of scientists on the Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR)	<b>HLPF</b> <b>Review of SDG implementation and interrelations among goals</b> 9 AM – 12 PM Discussion on SDG 13 – Climate action <b>Thematic review</b> 12 – 1 PM Report of the STI Forum	<b>HLPF</b> 9 – 11 AM Financing the SDGs: Moving from words to action 11 AM – 2:00 PM <b>Voluntary national reviews (Second timers)</b> Panel Azerbaijan, Philippines, Sierra Leone, Chile Panel Guatemala, Indonesia, Turkey
3 – 6 PM	<b>INTEGRATION SEGMENT</b> 3 – 4:30 PM Prosperous and peaceful societies in the SDG era 4:30 – 5:45 PM Partnering for people, planet and prosperity 5:45 – 6:00 PM Closing	<b>HLPF</b> <b>Review of SDG implementation and interrelations among goals</b> 3 – 6 PM Discussion on SDG 4 - Quality education	<b>HLPF</b> <b>Review of SDG implementation and interrelations among goals</b> 3 – 6 PM Discussion on SDG 8 - Decent work and economic growth	<b>HLPF</b> <b>Review of SDG implementation and interrelations among goals</b> 3 – 6 PM Discussion on SDG 10 – Reduced inequalities	<b>HLPF</b> <b>Review of SDG implementation and interrelations among goals</b> 3 – 6 PM Discussion on SDG 16 – Peace, justice and strong institutions	<b>HLPF</b> 3 – 5 PM Four years of VNRs: what have we learned on implementing the SDGs? 5 – 6 PM Wrap-up session of the first five days

Source: UNDESA, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2019#programme>

## 2. APFSD Focus in 2020

The theme of HLPF 2020 “Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development” is reflected in the theme of the APFSD – “Accelerating action for and delivery of the 2030 Agenda in Asia and the Pacific.” The programme focuses on two things: 1. Recommendations listed in the Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) and 2. the Regional Roadmap for Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific. The current programme is shown in the following table.

2020		2019	
<b>25 March</b>		<b>27 March</b>	
09:00 -	Opening of the forum	09:00 -	Opening of the forum
12:00	Session 1: Review of regional progress on SDGs five years into the implementation of the 2030 Agenda	12:00	Session 1: Panel on “Empowering people for a more inclusive and equal Asia-Pacific”
13:30 -	Session 2: Opportunities and entry points for accelerated action	13:30 -	Session 2: Progress in the Implementation of SDG17
15:00		15:00	
15:00 -	Session 3: Parallel roundtables: Exploring the entry points for	15:00 -	Session 3: Parallel Roundtables for in-depth Review of SDG 4, 8, 10, 13,
18:00		18:00	

	accelerated action		and 16
<b>26 March</b>		<b>28 March</b>	
09:00 - 12:00	Session 4: Strengthening follow up and review of the 2030 Agenda at the national level: the role of the VNRs	09:00 - 12:00	Session 4: Voluntary National Reviews
14:00 - 15:30	Session 5: Strengthening follow up and review of the 2030 Agenda at regional level	14:00 - 15:30	Session 5: Where are we on the road map?
15:30 - 17:00	Session 6: High level panel: Committing to transformative action	15:30 - 16:50	Session 6: Regional perspectives
<b>27 March</b>		<b>29 March</b>	
09:00 - 12:00	Special Session for UN Systemwide Support to regional implementation of the 2030 Agenda	09:00 - 12:00	Special Event: Asean High-Level Dialogue On Complementarities
14:00 - 15:00	Circulation of Draft report and Chairs' Summary for review by delegations	14:00 - 15:00	Circulation of Draft report and Chairs' Summary for review by delegations

Source: UNESCAP <https://www.unescap.org/apfsd/7/> <https://www.unescap.org/apfsd/6/>

Sessions 2 and 3 in the 2020 programme address “the entry points for accelerated action.” These are related to the GSDR, which will be elaborated below. Sessions 4 and 5 are related to reviewing the APFSD. Similar to the HLPF being under the review this year, the ESCAP has also decided to include a session which is to review the APFSD itself, while it is unclear to what extent the actual discussion at the forum will provide meaningful inputs.

The Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) is an official part of the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda, as mandated in the Rio+20 outcome, confirmed in GA Res 67/290, and given a clear instruction in the Annex of the HLPF ministerial declaration in 2016 (E/HLS/2016/1). It serves as a means to strengthen the science-policy interface and to provide evidence-based instruments. Until 2016, UNDESA has prepared the prototype of this report. The first-ever report, built on the modality stipulated in *Global Sustainable Development Report: scope, frequency, methodology and relationship with the Sustainable Development Goals progress report*, came out in 2019.

Fifteen independent scientists prepared the first edition of this report in preparation for the SDGs Summit<sup>5</sup>. The report identified **six entry points for transformation**: 1. Human wellbeing and capabilities; 2. Sustainable economies; 3. Energy decarbonisation and access; 4. Food and nutrition; 5. Urban and peri-urban development; and 6. Global commons. The

<sup>5</sup> The SDGs Summit is a name given to the HLPF under the auspices of the General Assembly.

report also sets out four levers for change across those areas: governance; economy and finance deployed “with purpose”; behaviour and collective action at both individual and societal levels; and science and technology. Combined, they offer this as a pathway. This year the APFSD takes up these entry points as a sub-set of the theme. They will guide the discussion within the forum to facilitate the focused, constructive discussion.

It is worthwhile to note that the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) are not directly mentioned on the programme, despite their importance within the HLPF. However, there is no doubt that VNRs will be included in the programme.

The reason why I mentioned above that understanding the APFSD would help us be prepared for the HLPF is that this approach, using the GSDR as discussion points, may be adopted to the HLPF. It will eventually be decided by the ECOSOC President’s office. However, people like precedents. I would recommend that readers study the GSDR and pay attention to regional fora, such as the APFSD. They can give us ideas about how regions see priorities. In short, two meetings – the APFSD and the HLPF – are connected and related. For readers wishing to understand either, it is important to keep an eye on both meetings.

In summary, this piece began with a question of why there was no set of goals under review in the programme of the APFSD. To answer the question, this piece demonstrated the linkages between themes and designs of the APFSD and of the HLPF and looked into the history and this year’s set up of the HLPF. Reflecting that a. the HLPF themes for the current cycle were set only for until 2019 and no set goals was in place for 2020, and b. the process to review the HLPF is ongoing in this GA session, ESCAP decided that the APFSD comprises of 1. the GSDR’s six entry points and 2. review of the APFSD. This might also be the case for the detailed programme of this year’s HLPF. In conclusion, it has been pointed out that for the readers to understand either the APFSD or the HLPF, they will need to look at the two as connected. Hopefully, this piece have given you an idea of what this year APFSD will look like and why.

**Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES)**

Strategic Management Office (SMO)

2108-11 Kamiyamaguchi, Hayama, Kanagawa, 240-0115, Japan

Tel: 046-826-9601 Fax: 046-855-3809 E-mail: [iges@iges.or.jp](mailto:iges@iges.or.jp)

[www.iges.or.jp](http://www.iges.or.jp)

The views expressed in this briefing note are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent IGES.

©2019 Institute for Global Environmental Strategies. All rights reserved.