

What is the high-level political forum (HLPF)?

Sustainable development was first placed on the international agenda at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (known as the Earth Summit) held in Rio de Janeiro. Subsequently, governments convened the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) for twenty annual sessions, leading up to the Rio+20 review conference in 2012.

A major outcome of the Rio+20 Conference was the renewal of international political commitment to sustainable development, and hence the decision by governments to replace the CSD with a high-level political forum that would attract and engage the interest of world leaders in keeping sustainable development high on their national agendas.

How will the forum work?

The new forum will convene Heads of State and Government every four years, under the auspices of the UN General Assembly, to promote the implementation of sustainable development and address new challenges. Their deliberations will translate into a negotiated declaration meant effectively to provide high-level policy guidance and raise the bar for action and results.

The forum will also meet annually for three days at the ministerial level, under the auspices of ECOSOC. In this way, the forum elaborates on sustainable development in the high-level decision-making spirit of the Rio+20 process. It is expected that participating ministers would carry a variety of economic, social and environmental portfolios. An additional five day meeting will allow the forum to deliver on its ambitious functions to promote and review implementation of sustainable development and respond to new and emerging trends.

The direct involvement of Heads of State and Government every four years will ensure that sustainable development continues to top the international agenda, bolstered by high-level strategic and visionary guidance for integrated and holistic policy-making. Starting in 2016, the forum will also include reviews on the implementation of sustainable development by all countries and the UN system. This should promote better accountability and focus efforts toward achieving action on the ground.

Who can be a member?

The forum will be open to all Member States of the United Nations and States members of specialized agencies. In particular, this includes the participation of the Cook Islands, Niue, the Holy See and Palestine. Many governments have welcomed this more open format. Provisions have also been made for the enhanced participation of non-state actors, such as major groups of society and other stakeholders in sustainable development.

How can NGOs participate in the HLPF

The modalities for participation will be agreed between now and the first session under the auspice of ECOSOC in summer 2014 (June to be confirmed). Participation in the 24 September 2013 inaugural event will be limited due to the inaugural character and the room size that limits how many participants can attend.

Who convenes the forum?

The forum will be convened annually by the President of ECOSOC for a period of eight days, including a three-day ministerial segment held as part of the substantive session of ECOSOC, which will replace the ECOSOC annual ministerial review starting in 2016. Every four years, the forum will be convened by the President of the General Assembly for a period of two days at the beginning of its session, as well as on other occasions determined by the General Assembly.

What are the expectations of the forum?

The forum is something completely new that ensures a place for sustainable development high in the attention of world leaders, and ultimately to stimulate timely and effective follow-up to the Rio+20 Conference. It also provides a new opportunity to ensure that all the dimensions of sustainable development—economic, social and environmental—are brought together in a coherent way.

This would be a completely new and different way of supporting the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as well as the sustainable development goals (SDGs) after they are adopted within the post-2015 development agenda.

Unlike a treaty body (such as the UNFCCC, or the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change), negotiations within the forum would focus on specific policies and actions that the world can take together. The forum would not endeavour to negotiate a new treaty on climate change, for example.

The terms "under the auspices of the General Assembly" and "under the auspices of ECOSOC" mean that the forum will have links to these two main UN organs while keeping a distinct identity from them.

Will the forum have any power to enforce outcomes?

The forum will not have any enforcement mechanism to compel States to comply with its recommendations. Given the enormous scope of the global sustainable development agenda, implementation of these recommendations depends on the commitment of each country. The forum's annual meetings convened under the auspices of ECOSOC will produce a negotiated ministerial declaration, based on consensus. The summit-level meetings every four years will produce a focused political declaration. Depending on the level of participation, these outcomes can carry important political weight. Additionally starting in 2016, the forum will conduct regular reviews of sustainable development commitments and objectives. Such reviews will be useful for engaging all governments, as well as UN system organizations, in exercising accountability and promoting implementation.

Who service the Forum?

UN DESA Division for Sustainable Development will service the Forum in collaboration with other relevant UN agencies and programmes.