



# CHAPTER 4

**THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON  
NATIONAL INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR  
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IMPLEMENTATION**

## 4.1. Introduction

This chapter examines how the pandemic and the responses of governments to it have impacted the capacity of national institutional systems to support the delivery of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused shocks on national societies and economies of a magnitude unprecedented since the last World War. The pandemic has put stress on multiple parts of national socio-economic systems at once. As a result, societies across the world face challenges on multiple levels,

each of which is unfolding simultaneously but at different speeds: a public health emergency; an economic crisis; and the social and political impacts of the pandemic.<sup>1</sup>

As has now been abundantly documented, the crisis has negatively impacted progress on most, if not all, SDGs.<sup>2</sup> It has deeply affected governance arrangements at all levels, as reflected in SDG 16, “Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”. As shown in Table 4.1, the pandemic and responses put in place by governments have impacted most of the targets of SDG 16.

**Table 4.1**

### Examples of impacts of the pandemic on targets of Sustainable Development Goal 16

SDG 16 targets	Examples of COVID-19 impact
16.1 Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere	There has been reporting of increased violence against women, and particularly domestic violence, in several countries during the pandemic. Gender-based violence has increased. Limited access to or disruptions of health care, police, justice, social services and other services make reporting of incidents of violence more difficult, and compromise survivors' access to support services. <sup>a</sup>
16.2 End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children	There has been an increase in children's vulnerability to violence, exploitation and abuse. In some contexts, economic hardship has led to increased child labour and trafficking. <sup>b</sup> The sustained disruption of education could also cause a rise in child labour and child marriage. <sup>c</sup>
16.3 Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all	Response measures adopted by governments have disrupted the administration of justice, access to legal remedies and (formal or informal) dispute resolution mechanisms. <sup>d</sup> In many countries, emergency measures taken to respond to the pandemic have resulted in the suspension of individual liberties. <sup>e</sup> The adoption of emergency laws poses risks of long-term negative consequences for human rights. <sup>f</sup>
16.4 By 2030, significantly reduce illicit financial and arms flows, strengthen the recovery and return of stolen assets and combat all forms of organized crime	The fight against illicit arm flows could be hampered if resources are diverted to address the pandemic. <sup>g</sup> In some contexts, organized criminal groups have thrived during the pandemic. They can compromise the distribution of goods and services to vulnerable communities and engage in money laundering. <sup>h</sup>
16.5 Substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms	Health systems have proven vulnerable to COVID-19-related corruption. <sup>i</sup> Emergency measures focused on the health response and on longer-term economic recovery (e.g. economic stimulus packages) may create opportunities for integrity violations in the allocation and use of public resources, including in public procurement. <sup>j</sup>
16.6 Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels	The pandemic disrupts the functioning of governments, law enforcement, and the provision of basic services. Challenges to the regular conduct of business of institutions potentially undermines legislative oversight and law-making, limits judicial enforcement and affects citizens' access to justice. <sup>k</sup> Lack of transparency on public policies in response to the crisis and about data being shared and used for the public good can decrease public trust. <sup>l</sup>
16.7 Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels	The pandemic has challenged the conduct of business of representative institutions, especially parliaments. In many countries, innovative solutions have been found to allow parliaments to resume business using digital tools. There have been calls for preserving the civic and democratic space during the pandemic <sup>m</sup> and to ensure women's leadership and participation in response plans. <sup>n</sup> Community-based organizations and networks need to be empowered and connected into community-led response systems. <sup>o</sup>

**Table 4.1 (continued)****Examples of impacts of the pandemic on targets of Sustainable Development Goal 16**

SDG 16 targets	Examples of COVID-19 impact
16.8 Broaden and strengthen the participation of developing countries in the institutions of global governance	The impact of COVID-19 on this target is unknown.
16.9 By 2030, provide legal identity for all, including birth registration	The impact of COVID-19 on this target is unknown. Efforts to generalize legal identity where it is not yet universal may have been scaled back due to reallocation of resources due to the pandemic. <sup>p</sup>
16.10 Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements	Restrictions or suspensions of the right of access to information were noted during the pandemic. In some countries, government institutions and civil society organizations have successfully fought those limitations. <sup>q</sup>  During the pandemic, governments have been providing information on their national portals, mobile apps or through social media platforms. <sup>r</sup>
16.a Strengthen relevant national institutions, including through international cooperation, for building capacity at all levels, in particular in developing countries, to prevent violence and combat terrorism and crime	The impact of COVID-19 on this target is unknown.
16.b Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development	The COVID-19 outbreak has provoked social stigma and discriminatory behaviours against “people of certain ethnic backgrounds as well as anyone perceived to have been in contact with the virus”; <sup>s</sup> Excessive use of force by law enforcement to enforce emergency and other measures has often fallen disproportionately on minority and low income groups, marginalized communities, and homeless populations. <sup>t</sup>

Sources: Authors' elaboration.

- <sup>a</sup> Interagency Network on Women and Gender Equality, *Compendium on Integrating Gender Considerations in the Response to COVID-19: Key Messages and Actions from UN Entities*, 35, 55.
- <sup>b</sup> Biraj Swain, “Children Will Be More Vulnerable to Trafficking After COVID-19”; *The Wire*, April 13, 2020, <https://thewire.in/rights/child-rights-trafficking-covid-19>; and National Child Traumatic Stress Network, “The Impact of COVID-19 on Child Sex and Labor Trafficking”, 2020, [https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/the\\_impact\\_of\\_covid-19\\_on\\_child\\_sex\\_and\\_labor\\_trafficking.pdf](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/the_impact_of_covid-19_on_child_sex_and_labor_trafficking.pdf).
- <sup>c</sup> United Nations Sustainable Development Group, *Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity: Responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19* (New York, March 2020), 9.
- <sup>d</sup> International Development Law Organization, “A Rule of Law Based Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic”, statement by Jan Beagle, 27 March 2020, 3.
- <sup>e</sup> Aránzazu Guillán Montero and David le Blanc, *Resilient Institutions in Times of Crisis: Transparency, Accountability and Participation at the National Level Key to Effective Response to COVID-19*, UNDESA Policy Brief 74 (New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, May 2020), <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/un-desa-policy-brief-74-resilient-institutions-in-times-of-crisis-transparency-accountability-and-participation-at-the-national-level-key-to-effective-response-to-covid-19/>.
- <sup>f</sup> United Nations Sustainable Development Group, *Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity: Responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19*, 11.
- <sup>g</sup> United Nations, “Spread of 1 Billion Small Arms, Light Weapons Remains Major Threat Worldwide, High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Tells Security Council”, February 5, 2020, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14098.doc.htm>.
- <sup>h</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown and Ariel Fernando Ávila Martínez, “COVID-19 and Organized Crime: Latin American Governments Are in a State-Making Competition with Crime.” *Brookings* (blog), May 12, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/covid-19-and-organized-crime-latin-american-governments-are-in-a-state-making-competition-with-crime/>.
- <sup>i</sup> Felbab-Brown and Ávila Martínez, “COVID-19 and Organized Crime: Latin American Governments Are in a State-Making Competition with Crime.”
- <sup>j</sup> Guillán Montero and Le Blanc, *Resilient Institutions in Times of Crisis: Transparency, Accountability and Participation at the National Level Key to Effective Response to COVID-19*.
- <sup>k</sup> Guillán Montero and Le Blanc, *Resilient Institutions in Times of Crisis: Transparency, Accountability and Participation at the National Level Key to Effective Response to COVID-19*.
- <sup>l</sup> United Nations Sustainable Development Group, *Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity*, 6.
- <sup>m</sup> United Nations Sustainable Development Group, *Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity*, 18.
- <sup>n</sup> United Nations Sustainable Development Group, *Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity*, 17.
- <sup>o</sup> United Nations Sustainable Development Group, *A UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19* (New York, April 2020), 30, <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/un-framework-immediate-socio-economic-response-covid-19>.
- <sup>p</sup> <https://unstats.un.org/legal-identity-agenda/COVID-19/>.
- <sup>q</sup> Guillán Montero and Le Blanc, *Resilient Institutions in Times of Crisis: Transparency, Accountability and Participation at the National Level Key to Effective Response to COVID-19*.
- <sup>r</sup> For April: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), *COVID-19: Embracing digital government during the pandemic and beyond*, DESA Policy Brief 62 (New York, April 2020). For November: UNDESA, *Compendium of Digital Government Initiatives in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic* (New York, Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government, November 2020), 1.
- <sup>s</sup> World Health Organization, *A guide to preventing and addressing social stigma associated with COVID-19*, (Geneva, February 2020), [https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/a-guide-to-preventing-and-addressing-social-stigma-associated-with-covid-19?gclid=EALalQobChMlyfDftaag6gVx9SzCh2R2QRqEAAAYASAAEgLTJfD\\_BwE](https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/a-guide-to-preventing-and-addressing-social-stigma-associated-with-covid-19?gclid=EALalQobChMlyfDftaag6gVx9SzCh2R2QRqEAAAYASAAEgLTJfD_BwE).
- <sup>t</sup> <https://worldjusticeproject.org/world-justice-challenge-2021/fundamental-rights-and-non-discrimination>.

In order to examine how the pandemic has affected the capacity of national institutions to support and foster the delivery of the SDGs, this chapter distinguishes two levels.

The first level is that of the SDGs as a programme of action, which national governments have to steer. The pandemic has directly impacted the ability of national institutions to do so, through a variety of channels, which include: the risk of a loss of political salience of the SDGs, in the context of urgent priorities to fight the pandemic and manage its aftermath; the risk of decreased resources available to countries to implement the Goals and fund the institutional mechanisms put in place for their implementation; negative impacts of the crisis on the capacity of governments to coordinate and monitor SDG implementation; and risks of lack of alignment between the recovery packages put in place by countries and long-term actions to support the SDGs.

The second level is that of broader institutional systems. At all times, national institutions are a key enabler of governments' and other stakeholders' actions to foster progress on all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Institutions mediate the actions of governments and other stakeholders in a number of ways, including four that are particularly important in the context of the pandemic.

First, the quality of public institutions critically matters for the delivery of individual goals - for instance, health and education. Important criteria in this regard, among others, are adequate resources; committed leadership; and the competence, motivation and integrity of public servants. As importantly, cross-cutting dimensions of government action such as crisis preparedness, science-policy interfaces, communication, and the use of digital government, are important determinants of governments' capacity to manage crises.

Second, the capacity of national institutions to foster policy integration is critical to setting visions, strategies and plans that align with the 2030 Agenda, devising and implementing coherent policies, and allocating resources accordingly. Institutional arrangements for horizontal integration, for vertical integration and for engagement with non-state actors are critical to the delivery of the SDGs.

Third, the capacity of institutional systems to promote accountability, efficient and effective public spending and limit corruption, impacts the delivery of actions in support of the SDGs in a positive or negative way, depending on the context.

Fourth, at a broader level, the way institutions are set up and operate in practice influence the trust that people place in them and their ability to promote transformation at the societal level (for example, through changing social norms or fostering whole-of-society approaches), which is necessary to achieve the SDGs.

The pandemic and the responses adopted by governments have affected national institutions in all those dimensions. The pandemic has created major disruptions to the functioning of governments as a whole and of specific public functions, including policymaking, the provision of basic services, law enforcement and the justice system. It has severely tested the resources of institutions in individual sectors. Restrictions and social distancing measures have challenged the working methods and processes of institutions such as parliaments or courts, where face-to-face meetings are required, creating obstacles for the regular conduct of business and therefore, potentially undermining legislative oversight and law-making, limiting judicial enforcement or affecting citizens' access to justice, among other consequences.<sup>3</sup> Restrictions taken in response to COVID-19 have also negatively affected the possibilities for public institutions to engage with civil society, at least in the short run.

The capacity of public institutions to promote policy integration in all its dimensions has also been put to the test during the pandemic. Horizontal integration - the capacity of government departments to work together - has emerged as a critical requirement in the context of the pandemic. Vertical integration has been a key challenge in developments observed thus far, in all regions of the world. Engagement with non-state actors, another key dimension of policy integration, has also been put to the test.

As governments started to implement responses to the crisis, it has become clear that emergency responses as well as measures adopted by governments to limit the economic and social impacts of the pandemic, such as stimulus packages, can increase risks to accountability and integrity, including through greater opportunities for fraud and corruption.

Finally, in the context of the pandemic, some governments have effected broader, structural changes in the political and institutional systems (such as the adoption of emergency laws that allow to rule by decree, and the suspension of individual liberties), which, depending on how they further evolve, may have longer-term negative consequences for public institutions and human rights, particularly those of marginalized groups. In many countries, the pre-pandemic balance of powers among institutions may be durably altered, with consequences for the relations between states and their citizens, and the capacity of societies to set for themselves and pathways to achieving the SDGs.

The remainder of this chapter is built as follows. Section 4.2 examines some of the impacts of the pandemic on the SDGs seen as a programme of action. Sections 4.3 to 4.6 review four channels through which the delivery of the SDGs could be impacted: the quality of selected cross-cutting institutional mechanisms; the capacity of governments in terms of policy integration; national accountability systems; and the potential for and capacity of public institutions to promote societal change. Section 4.7 concludes.

## 4.2. Impacts of the pandemic on the SDGs as a programme of action

In September 2015, United Nations Member States committed to implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs. The initial years of the SDGs witnessed strong political impetus and ownership of the Agenda and SDGs at all levels. The massive shock created by the pandemic has however created a range of risks to the Agenda. These risks have become more apparent as the pandemic lingered beyond its initial outbreak. This section briefly reviews some of those risks.

### 4.2.1. Risks of loss of political salience of the SDGs

Not even six months after the start of the pandemic, fierce debates were occurring in the public sphere about the relevance of the SDGs as a global framework for action. The debate has been most vocal in academia. For instance, a series of articles by prominent experts in the journal *Nature* exposed three broad perspectives on what to do with the SDGs: Should countries and the international community double down on them? Should the goals be adjusted to reflect the new post-pandemic context? Or should countries focus on a more limited set of priorities?<sup>4</sup> The debate responded to the realization that most of the SDGs already were not on track before the pandemic,<sup>5</sup> and had been further negatively impacted by it – including poverty, access to food and nutrition, health, education, and economic growth.<sup>6</sup>

From the beginning, the official position of the United Nations has been that the Sustainable Development Goals provide the best possible framework to responding to the crisis and

rebuilding post pandemic.<sup>7</sup> In fact, it has been pointed that had progress on the SDGs been more advanced, the negative impacts of the crisis would have been less acute.<sup>8</sup>

The fact that such debate is taking place illustrates the difficulty of sustaining commitment and attention of governments and the international community to the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs in the face of extraordinary pressures created by the pandemic. Many governments face competing demands on their resources and equally compelling reasons to prioritize among them.

### 4.2.2. Impact of the pandemic on government capacity to manage and monitor the SDGs

The pandemic has negatively impacted the capacity of governments to implement and monitor the SDGs. For instance, social distancing measures may have slowed the functioning of institutions dedicated to SDG implementation, such as National Sustainable Development Councils. The resources available to those institutions may also have decreased during the pandemic.

Most of the countries presenting voluntary national reviews (VNRs) at the United Nations high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF) in July 2020 referred to the impacts of the pandemic on various goals and targets, as well as to efforts made by governments to respond to the pandemic.<sup>9</sup> However, the impacts of the pandemic on SDG-related institutions is not the main focus of those reports.

One aspect on which data is available concerns the impact of the pandemic on National Statistical Offices (NSOs), which play a key role in SDG monitoring (see Box 4.1).

#### Box 4.1

### Impacts of the pandemic on National Statistical Offices

By August 2020, it was clear that the crisis was disrupting routine operations throughout global statistical and data systems. A survey conducted by the United Nations and the World Bank showed that 96 per cent of National Statistical Offices had partially or fully stopped face-to-face data collection. Nine in ten national statistical offices in low – and lower-middle-income countries had experienced difficulties because of funding constraints, with more than half having had funding cuts. 61 per cent of those expressed the need for external support in addressing challenges associated with COVID-19. These challenges may have lasting effects on countries' ability to produce timely and disaggregated data for a large number of SDG indicators.

Later rounds of the survey showed that many NSOs had adapted quickly to challenges raised by COVID-19, and many of them have played a major role in governments' COVID-19 response. New partnerships have been crucial in responding to new data demands, helping NSOs introduce measures that are permanently changing the statistical production process in many countries.

Sources: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), *Impact of COVID-19 on SDG progress: a statistical perspective*, UNDESA Policy Brief 81 (New York, August 2020); and UNDESA, *COVID-19: How the data and statistical community stepped up to the new challenges*, UNDESA Policy Brief 96 (New York, March 2021).

Another aspect that was covered in VNR reports in 2020 and has also been discussed among countries preparing reviews for 2021 is the impacts of the pandemic on the VNR process itself. The majority of countries reported that COVID-19 had disrupted VNR preparations, in particular stakeholder consultations, one of the cornerstones of the VNR process. Governments have put in place innovative arrangements to mitigate the constraints caused by the pandemic. This has included, among others, relying more on virtual consultations and webinars, mobilizing existing networks in government institutions and in civil society, and open consultations where the public can provide written inputs. Governments have also reported using alternative arrangements to palliate low Internet access in remote areas, for instance interviews conducted over the phone or through local radio stations. Some countries presenting reviews in 2021 decided to undertake consultations very early in the VNR process as compared to a pre-COVID timeline. While having to rely more on digital solutions has requested changes in processes and practices from government agencies and other actors, it has also allowed institutions in charge of coordinating the VNRs to realize that they could increase their reach to multiple actors, compared to traditional solutions such as in-person workshops. In this regard, the pandemic seems to have constituted an opportunity for governments to broaden the range of outreach tools that they use in VNR preparation.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4.2.3. Risk to resources needed to implement the SDGs

The pandemic has caused a shock to national economies that is unprecedented since the last World War. Declines in gross national products in 2020 have been massive, and much larger than those witnessed during the 2008 financial crisis. Negative impacts due to decreases in economic activities have translated in losses of revenues from taxes. Especially relevant to developing countries, there is a high risk that official development assistance would decrease in coming years.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, governments have had to incur extraordinary expenditures in critical sectors such as health, education, public service delivery, social safety nets, and public administration. Other public services such as public transport, whose

continued operation is critical in any country, have generated huge deficits due to lower use during the pandemic.<sup>12</sup>

To mitigate the negative impacts of partial closures of national economies, governments have resorted to extensive fiscal support measures. Governments across the world have now put in place even larger recovery packages.

These developments have translated into large increases in public debt. The international Monetary fund estimates that between 2019 and 2020, gross government debt at the global level increased from 83.7 to 97.3 per cent of GDP.<sup>13</sup> In a sample of 7 countries in Latin America, the stock of public debt had increased by 7.7 to 20.2 percentage points of GDP between the end of 2019 to the end of 2020.<sup>14</sup> Such increases have raised alarms in developed countries and even more in developing countries, where growing public debt was a concern even before the start of the pandemic.<sup>15</sup>

Beyond questions of financial sustainability, the massive fiscal pressures observed since the beginning of the pandemic also carry high opportunity costs, as spending today decreases the fiscal and policy space that will be available to future generations. This, by itself, could put the realization of the SDGs in peril. It is therefore of utmost importance to ensure that the recovery packages that governments are putting in place are aligned with long-term actions that support the delivery of the SDGs. Among other things, ensuring government accountability on these expenditures will be critical.

Like other crises in the past, the pandemic has seen some governments implement legal and regulatory changes that could pave the way for negative outcomes on some of the SDGs in the future. This has been observed in particular in relation to environmental regulation (see Box 4.3).

#### 4.2.4. Drawing lessons from previous crises

In order to realistically assess the perspectives for recovery packages to support the realization of the SDGs, it may be useful to look at past crises. It is not the first time that a crisis is touted as the occasion to “hit the reset button”. The financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath saw calls for green

### Box 4.2

#### Some impacts of the pandemic on education

COVID-19 has substantially exacerbated educational inequality, with the pandemic causing “the largest disruption of education systems in history.” Its greatest impacts have been on children who already experience the highest levels of education inequality. At the peak of the first wave of the virus, 1.6 billion children and young people were out of school and university – over 90 per cent of the world’s total – with a four-month school closure expected to cost learners \$10 trillion in lifetime earnings. Finance is now likely to be diverted from the sector, with the World Bank predicting a “triple funding shock” as governments, households, and international donors cut expenditure.

Source: Steven and Williams, *Governance and COVID-19: A background paper for the SDG 16 Conference*.



**Box 4.3****Rollback of environmental regulation during the crisis**

During the pandemic, several countries have rolled back environmental regulation, paving the way for negative environmental outcomes in the future. For instance, in the USA, during the first month of the pandemic, federal agencies, among other measures, eased fuel-efficiency standards for new cars; froze rules for soot air pollution; proposed to drop review requirements for liquefied natural gas terminals; sought to speed up permitting for offshore fish farms; and advanced a proposal on mercury pollution from power plants that could make it easier for the government to conclude that regulations are too costly to justify their benefits. The government has also relaxed reporting rules for polluters during the pandemic.<sup>a</sup> In March 2020, the Environment Protection Agency announced that it would cease oversight of the nation's polluters during the pandemic.<sup>b</sup>

**Sources:**

<sup>a</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/may/10/trump-environmental-blitzkrieg-coronavirus>.

<sup>b</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/apr/30/public-lands-sale-trump-coronavirus-environmental-regulations>.

transformation similar to those voiced today. With several years of insight, it had become clear that business as usual had largely prevailed and more was needed in order to accelerate the transformation of the global economy to support sustainable development.<sup>16</sup>

The 2008 financial crisis triggered only short-term stimuli. It was followed by a “decade of austerity”, which saw 127 countries – home to 80 per cent of the world’s population – cut public expenditure. More than a hundred countries aimed to rationalize their social protection systems in ways that ran “a high risk of excluding large segments of vulnerable populations at a time of economic crisis and hardship.”<sup>17</sup> Social and economic exclusion, in turn, contributed to undermining political consensus. According to a multi-country study, austerity had a pronounced impact on polarization, making it harder to “build stable government coalitions and agree on sustainable policy solutions, both of which are needed to govern in times of economic insecurity.”<sup>18</sup>

On a more positive note, in response to the East Asian crisis of 1997, the region’s governments rebuilt the social contract by investing heavily in social protection systems, although groups such as informal workers remain largely excluded.<sup>19</sup> These policies were influential at a global level, as both governments and international organizations accepted “the urgency of finding new means of protecting populations from adverse events.”<sup>20</sup>

What inspiration can governments and the international community draw from this not so distant past, to really make it beyond this pandemic with more resilient, effective and accountable institutions? One lesson is that shocks like the pandemic need to be approached from a resilience perspective, and considered as potentially recurring events over the long term, rather than as exceptional events that justify postponing integrated action on longstanding

challenges of sustainable development such as poverty, growing inequalities, climate change and loss of trust in public institutions.<sup>21</sup>

### 4.3. The quality of public institutions and the impacts of the pandemic

In response to the epidemic, temporary changes in rules and processes have been implemented by governments in order to protect people at risk and ensure the delivery of critical functions. Specific institutions (such as national education systems) have had to adapt their procedures in response to the crisis at the level of whole countries, within very short time frames. Beyond specific sectors, a range of cross-cutting dimensions impact governments’ capacity to manage crises. Among other relevant dimensions, this section briefly considers the following: governments’ preparedness for the pandemic; human resources; science-policy interfaces; communication; and digital government.

#### 4.3.1. Crisis preparedness

As time elapses since the beginning of the pandemic, reports have increasingly underlined the lack of preparedness of governments to the pandemic (see Box 4.4).

In many developed countries, national risk assessments or similar procedures had warned that the risk of a major pandemic was high; in several countries, extensive simulations and role playing games had modelled the outbreak and spread of viruses such as the coronavirus, exploring impacts on government and options for response. Such warning were often not taken up at the political level or translated into preparations in public administration.<sup>22</sup> At the global level, in 2019 the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board published

## Box 4.4

### Government preparedness for the pandemic: conclusions from the French Senate and the United Kingdom's National Audit Office

In France, a report from the Senate published in December 2020 analysed the gaps in government preparedness for the pandemic. The report conclusions pointed to a lack of preparation of the public health system to the risk of an epidemic, which focused too exclusively on hospitals. Even so, the report concluded that hospitals were insufficiently prepared for the crisis. The report points to failures in communication with health professionals not working in hospitals. It recommended the reinforcement of strategic piloting of inter-ministerial coordination on health emergency preparedness and responses, in particular through the elaboration of a dedicated plan to increase the responsiveness of public administration to health emergencies. Finally, the report recommended to strengthen capacities for anticipation and evaluation in the main public agency involved (Santé publique France).<sup>a</sup>

In the United Kingdom, the National Audit Office found that pre-existing pandemic contingency planning did not include detailed plans for identifying and supporting a large population advised to shield; for employment support schemes; for financial support to local authorities, and for managing mass disruption to schooling on the scale caused by COVID-19. The report advised that more detailed planning for the key impacts of a pandemic and of other high-impact low-likelihood events can improve government's ability to respond to future emergencies, and may also bring other benefits, such as creating new relationships and improving understanding between organizations.<sup>b</sup>

#### Sources:

- <sup>a</sup> République Française, Sénat, *Rapport fait au nom de la commission d'enquête pour l'évaluation des politiques publiques face aux grandes pandémies à la lumière de la crise sanitaire de la covid-19 et de sa gestion*, No 199, Tome 1, session ordinaire de 2020-2021 (Paris, December 2020).
- <sup>b</sup> National Audit Office of the United Kingdom, *Initial learning from the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic* (London, May 2021), <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Initial-learning-from-the-governments-response-to-the-COVID-19-pandemic.pdf>.

a report that exhorted national governments and the international community to ramp up and sustain their efforts to prepare for a pandemic.<sup>23</sup>

The lack of preparedness exacerbated the difficulty of decision-making in the initial phase of the pandemic. Some countries that were supposedly well equipped to cope with a major epidemic have experienced high levels of infection and mortality,<sup>24</sup> suggesting that expectations of what preparedness looked like did not match what was needed in reality.

Lessons from COVID-19 demonstrate that public health preparedness assessments did not adequately account for the governance dimensions of response and recovery at national and international levels.<sup>25</sup> Beyond the health impacts, decision-makers had limited research and few effective case studies to draw on when dealing with the economic consequences of such a crisis.<sup>26</sup>

The pandemic has made clear that many countries in Asia were better prepared to respond to such an emergency. Among other things, this has been attributed to the recent experience of the region with SARS, the willingness of populations to follow government instructions, and cultural familiarity with masks. This list illustrates the importance of social and cultural factors in societies' preparedness, going beyond technological and administrative dimensions.

### 4.3.2. Human resources: civil servants and the pandemic

The pandemic abruptly disrupted the regular functioning of public institutions and affected key government functions and processes, undermining the effectiveness of government action. Reductions in the public administration workforce due to the imperative to limit contagion affected the capacity of public administration at all levels to deliver its functions. Restrictions and social distancing measures challenged the working methods and processes of all public institutions and the delivery of public services. Options available to implement participatory processes were drastically limited (see Box 4.5). Specific institutions of government (such as the police or the education system) were directed to adapt their procedures in response to the crisis. Beyond individual institutions, the pandemic has affected whole institutional systems and the way public institutions interact with people.

As soon as the first initial containment measures were decided, public administrations and civil servants worldwide set to adapt, leveraging and redeploying human resources (for instance to increase manpower in the health sector), devising new ways to keep delivering public services on the ground, and adapting administrative processes to allow for speed and flexibility in those extraordinary circumstances, for example for public procurement. Public administrations also quickly put in place information systems in order to manage the sanitary and other aspects of the pandemic. They used digital tools to



**Box 4.5****Initial impact of the pandemic on participatory processes: participatory planning in Ankara, Turkey**

When the first news and official explanations of the pandemic appeared on the media, the Citizens Assembly of the City of Ankara was in the process of planning thematic participatory meetings. Since the activities of the assembly relating to the city's agenda and urban issues are based on face-to-face interaction and various types of meetings such as general assemblies, focus groups, and advisory bodies, announcements about stopping such meetings for an indefinite period sent a mild shock among the Assembly's stakeholders, as well as among the civil servants and municipal administrators with whom the Assembly was working closely. The sense of being stripped of ordinary collective cultural and administrative skills later mixed with the hardships of getting the job done without spreading the virus. Nevertheless, the initial anxiety in executive and managerial ranks was quickly replaced with agile organization movements, especially in healthcare and crucial logistical sectors.

Source: Amelia Compagni, Alberto Ricci and Francesco Longo, "Italy: Experiences of Multi-Level Governance with the COVID-19 Crisis", in Joyce, Maron and Reddy, *Good Public Governance in a Global Pandemic*, 105-107.

reach out to citizens and to mobilize the energy and resources of non-state actors to co-create solutions to issues created by the pandemic.

In many countries, public servants have been quick to adapt and re-adjust the way in which services are delivered to minimize the negative impact of the pandemic on individuals and communities. For example, in many places where medical facilities have been overwhelmed by high numbers of COVID-19 patients, online tools, such as telemedicine and telehealth, were set up or enhanced to provide non-emergency medical services. In these cases and others, public servants have demonstrated versatility in service delivery that has benefitted service users amidst challenges caused by the pandemic.<sup>27</sup> Many public servants put their lives at risk in order to continue serving the public throughout the pandemic. As

of September 2020, a study put the global death toll among health workers alone at more than 7,000.<sup>28</sup>

COVID-19 responses have seen innovation in the public service flourish. From the development of drive-thru testing sites and contact tracing apps in the Republic of Korea, to the use of robots to carry out medical tasks such as temperature taking so as to minimize contact between infected patients and healthcare workers in Rwanda, public servants have leveraged innovation and creativity, often on a shoestring budget, to come up with unique and quick responses to the crisis.<sup>29</sup> Due to the society-wide impacts of the pandemic, much of this mobilization and innovation occurred from within and organically, with little guidance available. Public administrators could not rely on the traditional planning and implementation cycles that guides them in usual circumstances.

**Box 4.6****The pandemic changed the context in which managers in public administration operated: example from Italy**

In Italy, as put by an observer, *"managers became, on the ground, policymakers and strategists, having to transform overnight the capacity mix and the competence allocation within their organizations. Decisions that usually take months (or years) of analysis and discussion with internal and external stakeholders had to be taken in a very short span of time, and directly by managers, without the possibility to wait for guidance from policymakers. This provided top management teams with a high degree of discretion and managerial autonomy.... Managers also operated in a situation of financial uncertainty [...]. While normally this would have stopped them from acting, during the crisis it forced managers to take on themselves the full responsibility of resource allocation"*.

Source: Amelia Compagni, Alberto Ricci and Francesco Longo, "Italy: Experiences of Multi-Level Governance with the COVID-19 Crisis", in Joyce, Maron and Reddy, *Good Public Governance in a Global Pandemic*, 105-107.

COVID-19 has posed staffing challenges across public administrations. To support business continuity, and fluctuation and future spikes in demand for public services, governments are increasingly investing in surge capacity, as well as staff re-mapping and reassignment based on transferable skill sets in the immediate term.<sup>30</sup>

In general, the pandemic reinforced the legitimacy and the role of the state, at least initially. It has also, through myriad examples, highlighted the essential role played by civil servants, as well as their dedication and relevance. How the lessons from this experience can be capitalized by governments to promote innovation in the public service and promote society-wide transformation in support of the SDGs will be a critical issue in coming years (see section 4.6.4 below).

### 4.3.3. Science-policy interfaces

The pandemic has revealed the importance of well-functioning interface mechanisms between science and policymaking, what are commonly known as “science-policy interfaces”. It has also revealed limitations of existing science-policy interfaces in relation to the government’s management of the pandemic.

The extent to which policymaking is shaped by scientific evidence and by technological possibilities varies across governments and societies, and can be limited. There is also a wide variety of national science advisory systems across the world, including in times of national emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which can trigger the installation of ad hoc, dedicated advisory mechanisms.<sup>31</sup> The remit and powers conferred to science advisory panels also varies significantly across countries, as does their institutional setting and practical organization.<sup>32</sup>

In the context of the pandemic, science-policy interfaces have received uncommon exposure to the public eye, due to the evident material impacts of decisions related to the control of the pandemic such as lockdowns but also to the rapid changes in health, economic and social conditions, which have implied continuous operation of these mechanisms and frequent advice and reports.<sup>33</sup> Academia has also commented on the adequacy and relevance of existing science-policy interface mechanisms, almost in real time.<sup>34</sup>

Science advisory mechanisms have played a range of roles that have benefited the government and the public during the pandemic, from the analysis in real time of the accumulating scientific evidence on the coronavirus and its effects, to the production of scenarios for the spread of the pandemic under different responses, to recommendations on health policies and pandemic management such as lockdowns, to directly informing the public through reports or daily briefings. At the same time, public controversies and perceived government failures on effective health care protocols, tracing and testing policies, on closing or re-opening economies, have illustrated the limits facing science-policy interfaces, as well as the learning

curve for scientists due to the virus being novel. As put by an academic editorial early in the developments of the pandemic, *“That so many advanced countries with highly capable science advisory ecosystems had failures and were unable to act wisely and early is astounding. This outcome is especially surprising since the worldwide public health community was very much aware of the threat of pandemics coming from experience with 2003 SARS, MERS, Ebola, Avian Flu, and knowledge of pandemics throughout history”*.<sup>35</sup>

At a first level, the pandemic has been an occasion for calls for data-driven decision-making, for “following the science”, and for strengthening science-policy interfaces – in the area of health risks but not only. However, as the crisis unfolded, it has become clear that governments cannot just “follow the science”. Decisions that have to be made during the pandemic involve significant chances and trade-offs, and therefore are eminently political. Commentators have pointed to the behavior of governments that legitimize their courses of actions by referring to the recommendations of advisory panels when they support their own choices, but disregard those recommendations when not politically expedient.<sup>36</sup> In the same vein, as already mentioned, in many countries existing science advisory mechanisms had pointed to the risks linked to a pandemic, without their recommendations being implemented by governments.

On another level, the scrutiny of existing science advisory mechanisms in different countries has led to comments on their legitimacy and adequacy, and pointed to potential improvements for the future.<sup>37</sup> Some of the scientific panels were criticized for featuring experts from a limited range of disciplines, whereas the cross-cutting impacts of the pandemic and the corresponding trade-offs warrant a broad range of expertise. Others were criticized for their lack of independence from the governments, or their limited remit. In several countries, lack of transparency of the government on the science advice they received has also been a source of concerns.<sup>38</sup>

### 4.3.4. Communication

Communication has proven critical during the crisis, not the least as a key mediator of trust between governments and citizens. For citizens to trust institutional responses to the COVID-19 crisis, they must know what governments are doing and have access to reliable information, including: the facts about the virus; the main figures in relation to the propagation of the epidemic and its impacts, and the public policies in response to the crisis as well as the assumptions and scenarios on which they are based.<sup>39</sup>

During the pandemic, most governments have been providing information on their national portals, mobile apps or through social media platforms. According to global surveys done by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs,

86 per cent of government portals had COVID-19 information in April 2020, and 97 per cent did so in November 2020.<sup>40</sup>

Governments have put in place direct communication channels dedicated to the COVID-19 situation. In the Republic of Korea, for example, the government provided two daily briefings to explain the evolution of the epidemic and government's responses.<sup>41</sup> In that country, one of the lessons of the MERS experience was that risk communication was a determining factor. In the current crisis, political interference in risk communication has been minimized, and this seems to have contributed to enhancing public trust in government.<sup>42</sup> In Indonesia, the governor of the state of Central Java has used social media to communicate personally with the public during the pandemic, including delivering messages on infection rates and prevention measures.<sup>43</sup>

In many countries, websites are providing real-time, localized information on the evolution of the epidemic. Depending on the country, these websites can be managed by the government, academia, or civil society; many result from collaboration among different actors, including the private sector.<sup>44</sup> In countries like Bulgaria, Indonesia, Mongolia and South Africa, governments have developed online resource portals to enhance transparency by providing a single entry point to information and resources on COVID-19.<sup>45</sup>

Communication from governments to their citizens around the pandemic has not been without hiccups. Criticism of government communication efforts has pointed to the desire of governments to control the narrative about the pandemic and government response, which resulted in one-way, top-down communication that failed to reflect a plurality of perspectives. Depending on the country, this may have gone from incorrect or inconsistent messages regarding the state of preparedness of the government and recommended health measures, to frequent U-turns and incoherent communication across the government on strategy and policies. In some contexts, it has been argued that some governments were initially reluctant to communicate broadly about the risks of the pandemic during the initial months of the spread of the virus, in spite of increasing attention from the media. In some countries, Government communication was criticized for holding back information seen as crucial for local governments to effectively fight the pandemic, such as occurrence of cases broken down by regions and localities. The content and tone of government communication have also been criticized.<sup>46</sup>

From the beginning of the pandemic, a challenge for government and other actors has been to counter the "infodemic": incorrect and potentially damaging information on the virus and the government response to the pandemic that is disseminated widely through various media platforms and social networks. Recent months have seen a surge in misinformation and disinformation campaigns around the pandemic, hampering an effective response to COVID-19.<sup>47</sup>

Disinformation campaigns increasingly reach cross borders and can only be tackled through collective action.<sup>48</sup> Social media platforms can counter these through active flagging and removal, while also promoting accurate, validated information based on trusted sources such as the World Health Organization's (WHO) myth busters.<sup>49</sup> Prominent public figures have an especially important role, as their posts generate far greater social media engagement. Such efforts will continue to be urgent during recovery in both the immediate and medium term, including in dealing with attitudes against the acceptance of vaccines in many countries.

#### 4.3.5. The promises and limits of digital government in pandemic response and recovery

The pandemic has increased demand for virtual service delivery and public sector operations, with digitalization moving from a nice-to-have to a must-have. Examples include widespread remote working, agile tools to reallocate the workforce, financial management and procurement, and streamlined and technology-enhanced people management processes such as recruitment and training.<sup>50</sup>

In the months following the start of the pandemic, digital government has been hailed as a key solution to addressing the pandemic. Digital applications were put in place to manage contact tracing. Digital procedures were adopted by public institutions such as parliaments to continue to function during the pandemic. Telecommuting was encouraged in the public and private sectors. Many public sector organizations around the world have digitalized services to enable them to keep functioning during lockdowns, while strengthening their internal systems to allow for teleworking. Whole education systems were abruptly shifted from in-person to remote learning.<sup>51</sup>

Governments, often in collaboration with non-state actors, have deployed an impressive range of digital solutions in response to the pandemic. For instance, through a call to governments in mid-2020, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs received more than 500 examples of digital initiatives set up in the context of the pandemic, covering the domains of information sharing, e-participation, e-health, e-business, contact tracing, social distancing and virus tracking, working and learning from home, digital policy, and partnerships.<sup>52</sup>

Beyond sector-specific, ad hoc initiatives, the pandemic spurred many governments to accelerate the push for the digitization of administrative processes and public services. It also inspired governments to use innovative methods of engagement with non-state actors, such as crowdsourcing, open calls, challenges and hackatons, in order to solve problems caused by the pandemic.<sup>53</sup>

However, the enthusiasm around digital government as a solution to many problems created by the pandemic has

been dampened by the realization that many barriers and constraints are at play. First, the reality of digital divides, in developing but also in developed countries, has meant that digital solutions are not equally accessible or beneficial to all in society. Lack of digital access and proficiency and the lack of an option to work remotely are correlated with poverty and other deprivation measures (see Figure 4.1 for an illustration on education). Hence, the use of digital solutions has in many cases aggravated inequalities.

Second, rapid moves to digital solutions across whole institutional systems may face capacity constraints and other barriers. For instance, the pandemic has accelerated the shift towards the use of digital technologies in education. However, the least privileged students are least likely to benefit from online learning. Remote learning has also created governance challenges for public education systems. Public sector education systems have struggled to implement these systems effectively, with “few (if any) education systems, even the most high performing ... well equipped to offer online learning for all students at scale, quickly.”<sup>54</sup> The limits of digital approaches have become important concerns, in this sector as in others.

Governments have been cognizant of these risks, and many have put in place measures to limit the negative impacts of digital solutions adopted during the pandemic on inequality. For example, a number of countries have supported the switch to online learning, through providing schools with online

resources and guidance, providing computers and tablets to students, and ensuring that Internet access is available in education facilities for students who do not have easy access from their home. The government of Costa Rica is providing hard copies of learning materials to students who do not have internet access.<sup>55</sup>

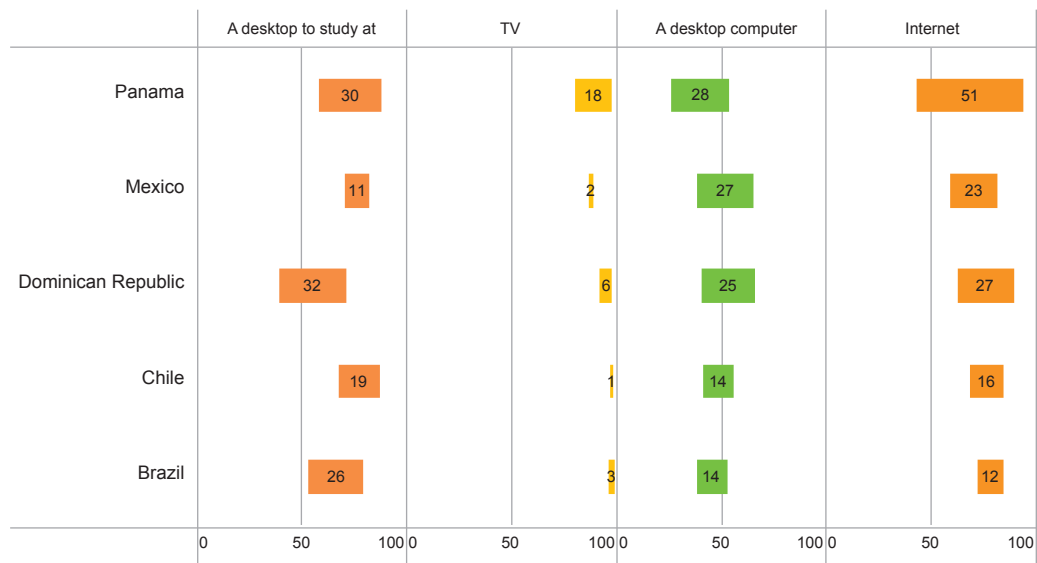
As the pandemic is brought under control, it will be important to ensure that digitalization does exacerbate inequality by making it harder for vulnerable groups to access services. Efforts will be needed to narrow existing digital divides, including by increasing digital literacy and digital skills.<sup>56</sup> Other concerns, such as those relating to security and surveillance by governments and private companies, will have to be addressed.

Potential negative impacts of digitalization, however, go beyond immediate gaps in access, digital skills, and outcomes. Whole models of socialization through education and work, which are bedrocks of modern societies, have been abruptly challenged by the pandemic. The consequences in terms of domestic violence, mental health issues, and polarization of societies have started to be documented, but will only become evident over the long term.

In the longer term, it will also be crucial to address worrying trends noted before the pandemic in relation to digital government and inclusion, for example in terms of discrimination stemming from the use of artificial intelligence in various

**Figure 4.1**

**Percentage gap in access to different study devices between the poorest and richest students in selected countries of Latin America**



Source: Luis Felipe Lopez-Calva, “Hey teachers, (don’t) leave the kids alone! Connectivity and education disparities in times of COVID19”, Blog “Graph For Thought” (April 27, 2020), <https://www.latinamerica.undp.org/content/rblac/en/home/presscenter/director-s-graph-for-thought/hey-teachers--dont-leave-the-kids-alone--connectivity-and-educ.html>.

administrative and commercial systems, and as regards the “digital welfare state”. The potential for such systems to infringe on human rights and stigmatize vulnerable population has been forcefully noted, for instance in reports from the United Nations Special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights.<sup>57</sup>

In a sense, because of the pandemic, the year 2020 has witnessed a social experiment on a global scale, through which a large portion of the global population has had to accommodate accelerated digitalization. Care will be needed by governments and other actors to avoid negative long-term changes that this could bring, including amplified income and class inequality and alienation of people from their families, fellow citizens and their governments. Lessons from the past decades in the areas of digital inclusion, e-participation, protection of individual rights, and e-government more generally can be useful in this regard.

#### 4.4. The crucial importance of policy integration during and after the pandemic

Policy integration is one of the fundamental tenets of sustainable development.<sup>58</sup> The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have put considerations of policy integration and policy coherence on a new level, by emphasizing indivisibility and interdependence among the goals and targets. Integration is about effectively addressing tensions and trade-offs that exist across policy areas, as well as exploiting synergies among those. It can be analysed through multiple lenses. Three dimensions are particularly useful in this regard: horizontal integration, which refers to the capacity of government departments to work together; vertical integration, which refers to the consistency, coordination and collaboration of actors operating at different jurisdictional levels; and engagement of governments with non-state actors.

##### 4.4.1. Horizontal integration

Horizontal integration – the capacity of government departments to work together – has emerged as a critical requirement in the context of the pandemic. Managing the spread of the epidemic, implementing the measures adopted to combat it and their progressive lifting requires coordinating policies and actions across policy areas as diverse as health, policing, public transport, education, economic policy, and a range of social safety nets. In addition to national governments, local governments have played critical roles in addressing the pandemic and its impacts through policy integration, by bundling sectoral policies, shifting resources between task areas and addressing the crisis from a holistic territorial perspective.<sup>59</sup>

By putting stress on multiple parts of national socio-economic systems at the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed new tensions and trade-offs among policy areas, and exacerbated already existing tensions. Such tensions have been observed both in developing and in developed countries, and are all the more visible in country that have suffered heavily from the pandemic. Challenges to policy integration are present at all levels of government.

In order to illustrate the challenges caused by the pandemic in terms of horizontal integration, this section focuses on three dilemmas: managing the trade-off between containing the virus and keeping economies open; limiting and counteracting the impacts of the pandemic and policy responses to it on inequality; and inter-generational equity.

##### *Managing the trade-off between containing the virus and keeping economies open*

Perhaps the biggest question facing governments in countries heavily affected by COVID-19 is that of managing the tensions between keeping the pandemic under control and keeping national economies afloat. The example of many European countries, which reopened their economies including the tourism sector after the first wave of the pandemic, has shown how difficult it is to find a balance between the two. Many countries where the diffusion of the virus was thought to be under control by June 2020 later entered second waves, in some cases more massive than the first. This, in turn, led to partial closures of economies, eventually leading to a series of cycles of closure and reopening of national economies.

Governments have managed this tension in different ways, even among countries at similar levels of development, as documented in cases studies from developed countries such as Germany, New Zealand, Australia, and Norway. Within individual countries, the tension between the two objectives has evolved over time.<sup>60</sup> Many have, in fact, declined to acknowledge that there is a trade-off between economy and health. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has described the idea of a tradeoff between saving lives and saving livelihoods as a “false dilemma.”<sup>61</sup> Yet, the trade-off has been clearly perceived by people and the press alike. Governments have faced pressure from interest groups and individual citizens to keep economies open, while many have experienced intense debate within government over the pace and intensity of public health measures that limit economic activity.

Beyond finding effective means to durably control the spread of the virus, there are no easy solutions to resolving this tension. In societies that are not able to control the spread of the virus, cycles of contagion, lockdown, reopening of schools and economies, leading again to increased contagion, could be expected until large proportions of national populations are vaccinated.



## Box 4.7

### Managing the economy versus virus spread trade-off: the cases of Australia and New Zealand

New Zealand moved very quickly to put in place measures to protect the public from the virus entering the country as a result of international travel. In the New Zealand case, the speed of government action in terms of measures to control international travel may be seen as an indicator of the political will underpinning the priority of protecting the lives and health of New Zealanders. The toughest restrictions were later being relaxed incrementally, although external borders remained closed. In exiting the crisis, new debates have exposed tensions about the economic-health trade off and the position of people lacking social and employment support, and new uncertainties and anxieties have emerged about the possibility of a second wave and economic prospects in a recession.

In Australia, protecting the economy was a central issue from an early stage, but it did not displace the primacy given to health questions. The New Zealand approach of eliminating the virus was not followed because of its potential economic impact. The balance between health and economics has been changing with the flattening of the infection curve and the reality of recession.

Source: Joyce, Maron and Reddy, *Good Public Governance in a Global Pandemic*.

### Limiting and counteracting the impacts of the pandemic and policy responses to it on inequality<sup>62</sup>

Limiting and counteracting the impacts of the pandemic and policy responses to it on inequality is another issue that demands policy integration. In general, the pandemic has been shown to negatively impact the most vulnerable groups and individuals more, thereby tending to aggravate existing inequalities. This has been observed in developed as well as developing countries. With regard to the health impacts of the pandemic, populations that were already marginalized have been rendered especially vulnerable, due to socioeconomic disadvantage, weak access to healthcare, and systematic patterns of discrimination and disadvantage.<sup>63</sup> In both high and low-income countries, people living in poorer areas or those in minority ethnic communities have experienced more serious health impacts than others.<sup>64</sup> But what makes this a policy integration issue is that negative impacts of the pandemic affect vulnerable groups in multiple dimensions, including jobs, education, access to health, and other basic needs and rights. For instance, people occupying low-paying or informal jobs have been less able to socially isolate and to work remotely. People living in crowded conditions are less able to adopt social distancing measures. Communities with more crowded housing, lower incomes, and higher proportions of residents from minority groups have tended to become infection hotspots.<sup>65</sup> Ethnic minorities and other excluded groups have faced disproportionate health risks, while young people and women are bearing the brunt of the economic impacts. Low-income groups have lower access to the internet, and are less likely to be reached by online education systems put in place during the pandemic.<sup>66</sup>

Many countries lack the social protection systems needed to mitigate the vulnerabilities at play. In many countries, a large majority of the population has very little protection from

social or economic risk in normal times. In 2019, 55 per cent of the world's population were unprotected by a single social protection benefit,<sup>67</sup> with women less likely than men to have access to safety nets such as unemployment insurance.<sup>68</sup>

During the pandemic, many countries have implemented emergency interventions to tackle these gaps. According to the World Bank, by September 2020, more than 200 countries and territories had put in place over 1,000 social protection measures, with average expenditures per capita at levels well above levels seen during the 2008 financial crisis.<sup>69</sup> Cash transfer programmes alone were scaled up to reach 1.3 billion people, or 17 per cent of the world's population.

However, addressing the compound effects of the pandemic on multiple vulnerabilities requires integrated policies. Policy responses in many countries have fallen short of this, limiting their responses to collections of sectoral measures, which taken together may not be sufficient.

### Inter-generational equity as a policy coherence issue

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted intergenerational equity issues in an acute way. The death toll from the virus has been much higher for older persons than for middle-aged and young persons. Many public health systems were initially taken off guard as regards older persons living in nursing and retirement homes, where high mortality rates were observed and linked with lack of effective strategies to prevent the spread of the virus in those establishments and to treat infected patients. Negative impacts of the pandemic on older people have included denial of health care for conditions unrelated to COVID-19; neglect and abuse in institutions and care facilities; increases in poverty and unemployment; impacts on well-being and mental health; and the trauma of stigma and discrimination.<sup>70</sup> The loss of large numbers of older people, among other things, entails the loss of human capital

and deprives societies from the work, child care, community support and social and cultural activities provided by older people.<sup>71</sup> At a macroeconomic level, the impacts of the crisis have affected the transfer of resources between generations, including the fiscal flows upon which developed economies base the financing of their pension systems. These negative impacts are already visible in many countries.<sup>72</sup> Young people have also faced adverse impacts from the crisis, with gaps in education, more difficult entry in active life, and rises in unemployment, among others. Addressing issues of inter-generational equity in the recovery phase of the pandemic will entail delicate balancing acts, which will ideally need to be widely consulted within each country.

#### 4.4.2. Vertical integration

Vertical integration has been a key challenge in developments observed thus far, in all regions of the world. The pandemic also forced multiple levels of government to work together, with subnational authorities playing an essential role.<sup>73</sup> Coordination across levels of government was critical in order to ensure coherence in response measures, support local health systems that are at the front line, and ensure the delivery of assistance packages to local communities. Lack of vertical integration can cause disruptions in all these areas, especially when responsibilities are left unclear. This is especially the case where local governments do not have administrative autonomy or the financial means to implement functions or services that they are supposed to provide.<sup>74</sup> Completely decentralized approaches can force subnational and local governments to compete against each other for critical equipment, as observed during the first months of the pandemic in several countries. Decisions taken by the central government without consultation with lower levels of government can create confusion on the rules that apply

and the strategies to follow, sometimes creating major social issues for local governments, as observed in countries where lockdowns forced thousands of informal workers to leave cities where they could not work anymore.

The coordination of responses to the pandemic across levels of government is shaped by the frameworks that govern the relationships between local and central governments. Those vary considerably across countries, going from very centralized models to highly decentralized ones. Within countries, they are also subject to changes in cases of national emergencies (see Box 4.8).

In many countries, the balance between a perceived need for coordinated action across all levels of governments and the need for flexibility in local responses appears to have fluctuated over time. For instance, in Germany, *“the first phase of the pandemic management was marked by a rather un-coordinated and decentralized enactment of ad hoc containment measures dispersedly implemented by some Länder and local governments. In the second phase, by contrast, more vertically and horizontally coordinated actions were taken in compliance with the recommendations of the federal authority (Robert Koch Institute, RKI). The narrative of uniform action across levels with “one voice” became predominant.”*<sup>75</sup>

In some countries with highly decentralized systems, joint guidelines to be followed at different levels of government were issued as a way to bypass the impossibility for the central government to impose decisions on lower levels of governments. This solution was used in Germany.<sup>76</sup> In Norway, in late March 2020, 134 municipalities established local restrictions on movement into the municipalities or regions to avoid infections in areas with low health care

#### Box 4.8

### The variety of legal frameworks governing the relationships between the levels of government in relation to health and health emergencies

In the federal government structure of India, health is a subject that falls within the jurisdiction and authority of the provinces or states. To tackle the pandemic, the provisions of the National Disaster Management legislation were invoked and power vested to the national government to issue orders, guidelines and protocols, which the states must follow.

Spain has a highly decentralized system of distribution of competences and administration at the territorial level. The seventeen Autonomous Communities (regions) have broad political autonomy. Healthcare responsibilities (primary care and hospital management) are in the hands of the Autonomous Communities. In the days prior to the declaration of the state of alarm, the Autonomous Communities and local entities carried the weight of the fight against the pandemic, using their own regulations and powers, and in some cases approving lockdowns, closure of schools and university centres, or the closure of leisure spaces. With the declaration of the state of alarm, powers to combat the pandemic have been centralized in the central government, especially in health and police matters.

Source: See Joyce, Maron and Reddy, *Good Public Governance in a Global Pandemic*, various pages.

capacity. The national government at first did not recommend these local rules. Then national guidelines were established that had strong support from employers' and employees' organizations, but the government stopped short of making them mandatory, which meant that some municipalities stuck to their local rules.<sup>77</sup>

Subnational governments have faced financial difficulties since the pandemic began. This has resulted both from the loss of revenues from own sources and from the sharing of national taxes.<sup>78</sup> Concomitantly, many local governments have faced the need for increased expenditures in order to fight the pandemic, for instance in the health and education sectors. In some countries, the central government stepped in and provided support to local governments to compensate lost revenues.

In some cases, central government decisions made during the pandemic drew controversy among municipal leaders as local governments lost important revenue sources.<sup>79</sup> The decisions made about allocation of revenues between the central and local governments have sometimes been part of a political tension between the two, for instance in countries where large cities are governed by different political parties than the central government.<sup>80</sup>

Lack of vertical integration of responses to the virus in many countries has been linked to political tensions among the various levels of government. In some cases, heavily centralized responses stemmed from the prevailing political and administrative culture. In others, they have been linked to recent or ongoing decentralization reforms, or to states of civil unrest or post-conflict, with low levels of trust among public officers at different levels putting civil servants in the middle of political tensions that impeded collaboration among different tiers of the government. In several countries, the tensions between levels of government became part of a "blame game" to deflect the responsibility about the performance of the government in managing the response to the pandemic.<sup>81</sup>

Such situations have sometimes resulted in efforts from different levels of public administration counteracting one another.<sup>82</sup> Civil servants had to mitigate these political and administrative tensions. They also had to find innovative solutions to incompatible administrative processes. As reports by national oversight institutions on the government management of the pandemic become available, it is likely that examples of such tensions and how they impacted countries' performance in dealing with the pandemic will multiply.

The lessons from the pandemic in terms of the capacity of states to manage similar crises in the future do not seem to yield simple responses in terms of the degree of decentralization that works best. On the one hand, some experts have highlighted the difficulties inherent in coordinating responses across different levels of government. They have pointed to gaps between the organization of crisis responses as codified in national law, and what has happened during the pandemic. However, it has been pointed out that even in situations of political tensions between layers of government, the competition among them has sometimes resulted in welfare enhancing initiatives. On the other hand, examples from highly decentralized countries such as Germany and Norway have shown that a high degree of coordination on decisions affecting public health and civil liberties could be achieved through concertation.<sup>83</sup>

Going forward, national experiences from the pandemic may result in changes in the balance of powers among levels of government during crises through re-hauling of the legal frameworks governing the management of crisis situations, or even in "normal" times, through constitutional changes. It remains to be seen how this could foster a culture of concertation and cooperation across government levels, and ultimately impact the realization of sustainable development objectives post pandemic.

### Box 4.9

#### Tensions among government levels over education systems during the pandemic

From an institutional perspective, education is a complex sector, as its delivery often involves two, three or more layers of government, from the most local where education is delivered, to various intermediary levels of government to the national government, which interact on educational mandates, curricula, budgets, taxes and subsidies, teacher training and mobility issues, and safety issues, among many other issues. The pandemic, by forcing whole education systems to abruptly shift to remote learning, has raised issues in all these dimensions. It has also increased the costs of education, while resources available to governments were decreasing. In some countries, this has been a source of tensions between levels of governments.

Source: Marcin Matczak, "When Politics Mixes with Fighting the Virus: Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Poland", in Joyce, Maron and Reddy, *Good Public Governance in a Global Pandemic*, 349-359.

**Box 4.10****The relationships between levels of government in France during the pandemic: evaluation by the Senate**

A recent report published by the French Senate on the government's management of the pandemic has examined the issues of vertical coordination during the pandemic.

The report found that the organization of “deconcentrated” services from the central government was reactive but ill adapted to managing the crisis. It pointed to lack of fluidity in the interactions between the prefects and the regional health agencies (Agences Régionales de Santé, ARS), and to an insufficient attention to local realities by the ARS.

The report pointed to lack of consultations with local governments before decisions impacting the local level (for example, the closure of green public spaces) were taken. It highlighted the need to better involve local governments in crisis management, including by reinforcing their involvement in decision-making, by better linking with local elected officials, and by mandating local preparedness plans for pandemics.

*Source: République Française, Rapport fait au nom de la commission d'enquête pour l'évaluation des politiques publiques face aux grandes pandémies à la lumière de la crise sanitaire de la covid-19 et de sa gestion.*

**4.4.3. Stakeholder engagement<sup>84</sup>**

As governments have been challenged to respond to the coronavirus emergency risks, collaboration with civil society, experts, entrepreneurs and the private sector, as well as the engagement of citizens, have proved extremely valuable to provide innovative responses to COVID-19 and to help enhance public trust. Participatory response strategies, the development and use of new digital platforms and tools to enable engagement, engaging people in the collective development of digital tools and solutions (e.g. through crowdsourcing, hackathons) and the use of social media to connect with people are some of the approaches used in different countries.<sup>85</sup>

Civil society around the world has also mobilized and self-organized in response to the pandemic. Citizen-led community responses, including volunteer groups and associations of neighbours, businesses, clergy, teachers or other actors, online assemblies and campaigns, and social platforms and movements have helped inform the public on the risks of the pandemic and provided essential services such as food and care. For example, in countries like Italy and Spain or in the City of New York, volunteer groups have self-organized to tutor children, provide mental health services and deliver food to vulnerable groups such as older people or people with underlying illnesses.<sup>86</sup> From campaigns to disseminate hand sanitizers, masks, and information on health and rights in informal settlements, to community kitchens which have distributed millions of meals to the most vulnerable during lockdowns,<sup>87</sup> much of the response in the least affluent communities has often been led by civilians, often but not

always with support from governments. In some countries, increasing digitization of participation has seen citizens participating in COVID-19 policymaking via WhatsApp and Facebook question and answer sessions, and assisting with virtual mapping of outbreaks and food insecurity hotspots.<sup>88</sup> These responses can be leveraged by public institutions to ensure effective and inclusive responses to the pandemic.

Participation and engagement have also been key dimensions of local governments' responses to the pandemic. Collaboration with residents, community leaders, experts, entrepreneurs and the private sector have proved extremely valuable for local governments to provide innovative responses to COVID-19. Among various contributing factors, Viet Nam's focus on public engagement and awareness was key to COVID-19 response, engaging traditional and mass media, government sites, grassroots organizations, “posters at hospitals, offices, residential buildings, and markets, as well as phone and text messages”.<sup>89</sup>

In April 2020, the city of Milan published its draft strategy of adaptation to COVID-19, as a document open for the inputs and feedback of residents for one month. Three weeks after the draft was posted, several hundreds of proposals had been received from residents.<sup>90</sup> The “Decide Madrid” citizen participation web portal, which has been in use for a number of years and engages citizens on a number of issues, has been used to encourage citizens to propose solutions and to provide information on essential services.<sup>91</sup>

Going forward, societies have an important opportunity to sustain and leverage the massive engagement of citizens,

**Box 4.11****Whole-of-society approaches: the case of Singapore**

Singapore went through the onset of the pandemic without closing schools and shutting down businesses, through rigorous screening, contact tracing, isolation orders, social distancing, safe measurements. These responses earned Singapore early praise. However, cases later rose rapidly due to outbreaks in migrant workers dormitories housing the 300,000 migrant workers, leading to partial lockdown. These outbreaks not only undermined earlier efforts, they exposed how a vulnerable group had been overlooked in the pandemic response plan.

As a whole, Singapore has been successful in controlling transmissions in the community. A coordinated whole-of-government approach enabled the deployment of manpower and resources across agencies efficiently, as well as the autonomy for respective agencies to work with their stakeholders. This approach works in Singapore because of the long-time investment in time and effort to nurture inter-sectoral networks to co-design policies and provide public services, which has fostered an environment of trust between the state and society.

*Source: Celia Lee, "Responses of Singapore to COVID-19 Pandemic: The Whole-of-Government Approach", in Joyce, Maron and Reddy, *Good Public Governance in a Global Pandemic*, 205 -219.*

communities and civil society that has been witnessed during the pandemic. Finding ways to durably incorporate effective innovative practices for inclusion, public service delivery, and civic engagement explored during the crisis, should be a priority for governments in this regard.

**4.4.4. Conclusion: The even greater importance of policy integration for recovery**

Policy integration and policy coherence will be more needed than ever to realize the SDGs post-COVID. Engaging the whole of society in discussing the trade-offs and opportunities ahead and finding consensual ways to address them should be an overarching concern for governments in coming months. Preserving civic space and government accountability during and after emergency periods is a key requirement for better integrated policy responses.<sup>92</sup>

**4.5. The role of national accountability systems<sup>93</sup>**

The coronavirus pandemic has created unique challenges for transparency and accountability. National and international actors have responded fast and forcefully to these challenges. In some countries, accountability institutions, such as supreme audit institutions and access to information and privacy oversight bodies, have been monitoring and disseminating information about the impact of policies and regulations adopted by governments in response to the crisis. Civil society is playing a key monitoring role of government action and proposing innovative solutions - sometimes working collaboratively with governments - to strengthen the resilience of institutions. International organizations and networks are also playing a critical role, collecting examples of innovative

practices and supporting countries in their efforts to sustain the essential functions of public institutions through different tools, including online repositories, discussion forums, guidance and knowledge-based products.

**4.5.1. Transparency and access to information**

Transparency is critical for accountability and for public trust in government. For citizens to trust institutional responses to the COVID-19 crisis, they must know what governments are doing and have access to reliable information, including: the facts about the virus; the data in relation to the propagation of the epidemic and its impacts, and the public policies in response to the crisis as well as the assumptions and scenarios on which they are based.<sup>94</sup>

Effective transparency requires proactive communication strategies that reach vulnerable and at-risk populations with the information they need in accessible formats. The Government of Mexico, for example, has created a microsite to provide information on COVID-19 to persons with disabilities.<sup>95</sup> Citizens and civil society have provided the government with multiple recommendations to improve and enhance the website.<sup>96</sup> In other countries, non-state actors are working to make information on the coronavirus accessible. In Argentina, the Civic Association for Equality and Justice in collaboration with University Torcuato di Tella and University of Buenos Aires have launched an initiative to make legal information on COVID-19 accessible to vulnerable populations. The project has analysed regulations related to COVID-19, particularly those that affect the most vulnerable; translated such information into easily accessible language, considering the needs of specific groups (persons with disabilities, people living in slums, children and youth); and identified gaps in such regulations and advocated for government to address them.<sup>97</sup>



Transparency is also critical for accountability and for public trust in local authorities. Many cities have put in place websites that provide one-stop information points on COVID-19. For instance, the city of Rome has created the RomaAiutaRoma website, accessible from the homepage of its institutional portal, as a single access point to all information on COVID-19, ranging from real-time updates on the services provided by the city to information on transport and online schooling to psychological support.<sup>98</sup> Transparency helps building residents' trust in local governments, which can facilitate social acceptance of intrusive measures taken by the latter to halt the spread of the epidemic. Constant and relevant communications are a key part of this strategy, as has been noted in the case of Seoul Metropolitan Government.<sup>99</sup>

Transparency is also important at the international level to better coordinate global responses, share experiences and lessons learned, and support countries to tailor responses to their own circumstances. Since the epidemic began, international organizations and networks have been active in this regard. The WHO/EU Health System Response Monitor<sup>100</sup> documents responses to the crisis, including on prevention of transmission, health workforce management, resources, and governance systems, for a sample of countries with very little time lag, and facilitating comparison across countries. The UN COVID-19 Data Hub makes data relevant to COVID-19 response readily available as geospatial data web services, suitable for the production of maps and other data visualizations and analyses, and easy to download in multiple formats.<sup>101</sup> The Inter-American Development Bank has developed a dashboard on Latin American policy responses to COVID-19 and analyses their impact in the region.<sup>102</sup> The Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) also has a one-stop repository of information on impacts, country responses, and other dimensions of the epidemic.<sup>103</sup> The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has an online policy database with information on governments' economic and non-economic responses to combat the pandemic.<sup>104</sup>

In several countries, measures taken in response to the crisis have impacted the national framework that regulates the right of access to information and its enforcement. Civil society has been monitoring these changes and exceptions to transparency and access to information legislation.<sup>105</sup> Although such exceptions have in general resulted in limitations to the right of access to information, in some countries, government institutions have fought those limitations. In Argentina, after the government passed emergency decrees which suspended administrative deadlines, the Information Commissioner issued a resolution lifting or cancelling that suspension in relation to access to information and privacy.<sup>106</sup> The resolution refers to relevant international standards and notes that there are conditions for states of emergency under international law which have not been met in Argentina as justification for lifting the suspensions. It also notes that the Commissioner will take the exceptional situation into account and be reasonable in

processing appeals. In Canada, the Information Commissioner issued a message on the importance of respecting the right to information in the current circumstances, calling upon heads of federal institutions to set an example. The Commissioner further stated that "institutions ought to display leadership by proactively disclosing information that is of fundamental interest to Canadians, particularly during this time of crisis when Canadians are looking for trust and reassurance from their government without undue delays."<sup>107</sup> In the European Union, the Commission and the Council have maintained the 15-day deadline to respond to public information requests while acknowledging that delays may occur in the current circumstances.<sup>108</sup>

Guidance and materials have been developed to support public officials and citizens in the implementation and exercise of the right to access information during the emergency. Georgia's Institute for Development of Freedom of Information has published guidelines on public information that is recommended for proactive publication by government agencies during the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>109</sup> In Spain, Access-Info has developed a guidebook to help citizens understand the effects of the declaration of the state of emergency and explain how to exercise the right of access to information.<sup>110</sup>

#### 4.5.2. Accountability and anti-corruption

Strong legislatures are crucial in an emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic to balance power and ensure independent oversight, represent people's needs and demands, and pass legislation to deploy public resources to those in need. However, restrictions on large gatherings and other social distancing measures adopted to limit the spread of the epidemic have impacted the regular functioning of parliaments. Parliaments across the world have had to find innovative ways to work around this constraint. Legislatures in Albania, Colombia, the Maldives, and Mongolia have amended their plenary procedures to allow virtual discussions.<sup>111</sup> A Remote Deliberation System has enabled, through video and a secure personalized app, the continuity of debates and votes in the Brazilian Senate.<sup>112</sup> Legislators in different countries (e.g. Armenia, Indonesia) are using social media to provide updates on the pandemic and engage with their constituencies.<sup>113</sup> The Interparliamentary Union (IPU) is supporting Parliaments in their responses to the emergency, including by sharing country-by-country information on how Parliaments are responding; providing questions and answers for parliaments;<sup>114</sup> developing guidance for legislators; and technically supporting Parliaments on remote working methods.<sup>115</sup>

The members of OPeN (Open Parliament e-Network) are crowdsourcing and sharing country data on citizen participation and open parliament paths during COVID-19 times.<sup>116</sup> ParlAmericas and Legislative Directory have published a paper on legislative good practices and recommendations during COVID-19 in the Americas.<sup>117</sup>

## Box 4.12

### Challenges faced by supreme audit institutions during the pandemic

Supreme audit institutions (SAIs) have faced challenges of both internal and external nature during the pandemic, as revealed by surveys. Internally, a key operational challenge has been the lack of necessary information technology to conduct remote audits. Of the 49 SAIs who responded to an INTOSAI Donor Cooperation's survey, 47 per cent said they have insufficient number of laptops. In addition to operational impacts, some SAIs had their financial budgets reduced, thereby limiting their operational independence. The INTOSAI Development Initiative (IDI) reports indications of SAI independence coming under increasing pressure during the pandemic as it relates to their mandates, independence, access, and capacity, which may have affected the ability of some SAIs to respond. Examples of these threats include cutting funding, questioning of SAI mandates to conduct audits, declaring SAIs non-essential services, and designating emergency funds as off budget items, thereby preventing SAI audits. Despite difficult circumstances, many SAIs have continued their work to provide oversight and accountability for their citizens.

*Source: US Government Accountability Office, Coronavirus pandemic: Initial lessons learned from the international auditing community, report for external stakeholders from the International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions Policy finance and Administration committee's COVID-19 initiative (Washington, D.C., September 2020), [https://intosaicovid19.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/LESSONS\\_LEARNED\\_FINAL.pdf](https://intosaicovid19.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/LESSONS_LEARNED_FINAL.pdf).*

Supreme audit institutions (SAIs) have played a key role in providing independent oversight of government actions during the pandemic. They have adapted their methods of works in order to provide timely oversight of pandemic-related spending. In addition to a number of ongoing audits of pandemic responses, The USA's Government Accountability Office is mandated to report to the Congress on a bimonthly basis on pandemic spending.<sup>118</sup>

As part of the response to the crisis, the General Comptroller of Costa Rica has developed an online platform to enhance transparency on the government responses to the coronavirus, including on public procurement.<sup>119</sup> In June 2020 the Comptroller's Office launched the website #MonitoreoCGR, to provide updated information and analysis of public budgets and state finances.<sup>120</sup> This platform is available on the official website of the Comptroller General and provides information by year, according to the budget cycle. The reports periodically published by the Comptroller's Office are migrated to this platform. All the information on the state's finances is now centralized and available in a timely manner. Topics of interest are addressed through short and concise publications that, without sacrificing depth of analysis, seek to facilitate the reader's understanding of the issues, and offer the option to download information in various formats. The website offers the option to download information in various formats. The Brazilian Court of Accounts has launched a special programme (Coopera), including a monitoring plan to identify risks, weaknesses and deviations in the use of public resources, procurement processes, economic stimulus actions, social programmes, and actions at the centre of government to respond to COVID-19. Information, guidance, resources and an online monitoring panel are available through a dedicated

website.<sup>121</sup> In the Czech Republic, the supreme audit office has published a website that provides a detailed analysis of public funds spent in connection with the epidemiological situation in the country.<sup>122</sup>

An increasing number of SAIs have now published audits or reviews of the use of public funds in relation to the pandemic. For example, SAI Jamaica published initial findings in May 2020 on the country's temporary cash transfer programme to individuals and businesses to cushion the economic impact of COVID-19. The SAI of New Zealand is closely monitoring government spending on COVID-19, and as of July 2020, found that Cabinet decisions approving new spending were made correctly. In South Africa, the Auditor-General has published two special reports on the financial management of the government's COVID-19 initiative. The first report highlighted that the country's multi-billion relief package was introduced in an already compromised environment. The SAI has issued reports warning of inadequate financial management controls and lack of accountability, among other issues, in the government sectors tasked with implementing the emergency response.<sup>123</sup> The Comptroller General of the Republic of Costa Rica has published a number of special audit reports in relation to COVID-19.<sup>124</sup> The European Court of Auditors published two reviews of the European Union's response to the pandemic.<sup>125</sup>

As part of the 2030 Agenda commitment to building peaceful, just, and inclusive societies, SDG 16.5 promises to "substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms."<sup>126</sup> Corruption was extensive before the pandemic struck, with estimated costs as high as 5 per cent of global GDP.<sup>127</sup> The pandemic has created significant new risks.

Fundamental safeguards of government accountability can be challenged or disregarded by institutional responses to an emergency (for example, ruling by decree without legislative oversight). Emergency procurement programmes for healthcare supplies can be captured by vested interests. Moreover, economic rescue and recovery packages may create opportunities for integrity violations in public organizations, in the allocation and use of public resources, and in core government functions such as public procurement.<sup>128</sup> A survey has found that COVID-19 response plans have paid “little attention to governance- and corruption-related matters,” while anti-corruption bodies have seldom been at the heart of multisectoral action.<sup>129</sup> Emergencies and subsequent rapid responses as well as other measures focused on the longer-term economic recovery (e.g. economic stimulus packages).

These risks are compounded by the fact that health systems in many countries suffer from systemic weaknesses that make them particularly vulnerable to corruption. Relevant corruption risks in the context of COVID-19 are associated with emergency funding and procurement, opacity in workforce governance, recruitment, and management; pilfering available supplies, price gouging, resale on the grey and black markets; increase in substandard and falsified products entering the market; petty corruption at the delivery front-line; and opacity in research and development, among others.<sup>130</sup>

Legislative oversight can help mitigate the opportunities for integrity violations and maladministration. The Parliament of Kenya, for example, requested specific information to the Ministry of Health on the allocation and use of public resources to fight the epidemic, the distribution of medical resources and the procurement of medical goods and equipment, among other topics. The Ministry submitted a written brief to the Parliament in response to the legislators’ questions.<sup>131</sup> As many governments are operating under emergency powers, the oversight role of parliaments is more important than ever, and they may need additional support to cope with the speed at which policies are implemented and the difficulty of vetting policies during periods of confinement.<sup>132</sup>

Internal and external auditors play a critical role in identifying potential risks in public financial management and procurement systems, providing assurance on transactions, enhancing transparency and providing critical information and data for holding governments accountable. During the pandemic, supreme audit institutions and other accountability actors have explored innovative ways of collaborating and innovating to continue to ensure effective oversight, including on governments’ responses to the pandemic.

Oversight bodies can play a key role in monitoring and exposing cases of corruption and abuses if they are given the remit and resources to adapt to changing circumstances during and after the pandemic. In the United States, the government included additional funding for the Government

Accountability Office (the national supreme audit institution) in its economic stimulus package, to strengthen its capacity to assist Congress in overseeing government expenditure during the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>133</sup>

Leading transparency and anti-corruption organizations have called on public authorities to ensure transparency to prevent corruption and to strengthen whistleblower protection during the state of emergency caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The signatories of an open letter highlight the need for transparency so that citizens can scrutinize governments and businesses, and point to examples of wrongdoing that have already been exposed in different areas, including health system management and public procurement.<sup>134</sup> Civil society organizations, such as the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, have also developed guidelines on transparency of public procurement related to COVID-19.<sup>135</sup> In Uganda, the high Court ruled that legislators must pay back money received in their personal accounts as part of a package of 2.4 million euros approved to fight the coronavirus in their constituencies.<sup>136</sup> Similarly, leading organizations working on accountability in Liberia have called for increased transparency and oversight of resources allocated to legislators as part of an emergency and economic stimulus package as well as of foreign aid resources received to fight the pandemic.<sup>137</sup>

Openness to citizen engagement in developing policies and overseeing their implementation may make it more likely that corruption and other abuses will be exposed. The Open Government Partnership, for example, encourages governments to commit to transparency and accountability in policy implementation and citizens, civil society, and business to ensure the commitments are met.<sup>138</sup> Opening up data to public scrutiny has helped citizens to track whether the implementation of recovery packages is honest and fair. Paraguay and Ukraine introduced open contracting policies during the COVID-19 emergency, where information on tenders and contract awards is made available to the public.<sup>139</sup> Protecting rather than stifling or attacking the media has also been important in ensuring instances of abuse are exposed.<sup>140</sup>

The experience from recent health and humanitarian emergencies (e.g. Ebola outbreak, Hurricane Katrina) shows the importance of addressing corruption risks as well as integrity and accountability vulnerabilities, and provides valuable lessons for the present. In a recently published report, the INTOSAI Development Initiative (IDI) recalls lessons and examples from previous crises regarding the management of global health funds, corruption over health emergency aid, and anti-corruption approaches in the health sector.<sup>141</sup>

Successful models for responding to corruption and other abuses will be of utmost relevance in coming years as societies rebuild after the pandemic. There is potential for progress on corruption, capitalizing on pre-pandemic initiatives and political leadership at national and international levels,

including by the World Bank and the G20, that have raised the profile of anti-corruption and provided support to countries that face capacity deficits in this domain.<sup>142</sup> In the context of the pandemic, respected stakeholders from outside government, such as religious leaders or former heads of state, have also played an important leadership role in advocating for anti-corruption.<sup>143</sup>

### 4.5.3. Conclusion: the importance of transparency and accountability in recovery

Most countries are still striving to limit the spread of the epidemic, manage immediate health risks and mitigate broader economic and social impacts. As countries transition from the immediate response to the crisis to longer-term recovery efforts, it will be critically important to take stock of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected key dimensions of national institutional systems such as accountability, transparency and participation, in order to prevent reversals of progress on these critical institutional dimensions and to avert longer-term consequences on public institutions and human rights. Together with other key principles embodied in Sustainable Development Goal 16, these institutional dimensions can provide signposts for increasing the resilience of national institutions to external shocks in the future.

In this context, it will also be important to take stock of how the pandemic and the response measures taken by governments have affected the wider institutional systems of accountability, reconfiguring relations and changing dynamics among stakeholders and opening new opportunities for collaboration.

## 4.6. Trust in public institutions and the capacity of institutions to promote societal change<sup>144</sup>

### 4.6.1. State-citizen relationships and trust in public institutions

In his 2020 Nelson Mandela Lecture, the UN Secretary-General called for a new social contract to “enable young people to live in dignity... ensure women have the same prospects and opportunities as men... and protect the sick, the vulnerable, and minorities of all kinds.”<sup>145</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic, he said, was an opportunity to build more sustainable and inclusive societies that “can address inequality and the fragilities of our present world.”

The UN Development Programme (UNDP) defines the social contract as an agreement through which “everyone in a political community, either explicitly or tacitly, consents to state authority”, as people “comply with the state’s laws, rules, and practices in pursuit of broader common goals.”<sup>146</sup> This agreement is maintained through processes of governance

which allow “citizens and groups [to] articulate their interests, exercise their rights and obligations, and mediate their differences.”<sup>147</sup> Through this lens, good governance provides the foundation for inclusion and sustainability. It allows a society to support the levels of collective action that are needed to tackle complex challenges and deliver public goods, and to mediate and resolve conflicts peacefully and productively.

Conversely, weak and illegitimate institutions erode the capacity of societies need to cope with internal and external stresses.<sup>148</sup> The breakdown of the social contract between state and citizens is exacerbated by grievances that develop when groups that feel excluded from access to power, public services, and security, creating threats to both peace and development.<sup>149</sup>

The 2030 Agenda places the onus on governments and institutions to trust people. Leaders underline their commitment to “common action and endeavor” to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals,<sup>150</sup> and explicitly promise to invite all sectors of society and “all people” into the Agenda’s implementation. But there is little evidence that governments have faith in their people’s capabilities. Levels of public sector trust in citizens are low and may be declining, as many governments use increasingly sophisticated tools to monitor their citizens and shift the “burden of proof” onto the public in areas such as eligibility for social assistance or responsibility for paying taxes.<sup>151</sup> As well as giving the lie to governments’ 2030 Agenda pledges, this undermines the reciprocal nature of trust.

At the national level, the pandemic has highlighted the fundamental role played by the social contract. As a complex and protracted emergency, it has stressed all sections of society, while causing disproportionate health and economic impacts for already disadvantaged groups. Public health restrictions and other government policies have led to widespread restrictions on individual freedoms, which have required the compliance of all sections of society.

Pressure on institutions to deliver comes at a time when they are often viewed with suspicion by the public. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, government is less trusted than business (which is seen as more effective than government), and than non-governmental organizations (which are seen as more ethical).<sup>152</sup>

The need for trustworthy institutions has come into sharp relief during the pandemic.<sup>153</sup> In some contexts, government responses to the pandemic have increased trust, at least in the short term.<sup>154</sup> People became highly reliant on institutions to support them during the crisis, while governments were also motivated to place their trust in citizens to comply with emergency regulations. As a result, trust became “a two-way street... for both citizens and public authorities.”<sup>155</sup>



But the pandemic also exposed and aggravated existing weaknesses in the relationship between people and their institutions.<sup>156</sup> Both public distrust of governments and government distrust of publics have made it harder to maintain consensus behind public health restrictions.<sup>157</sup> Some countries experienced an increasingly polarized response, with divisions emerging over whether to limit economic activity in the short-term in order to reduce the spread of infection.<sup>158</sup> Such polarization could undermine the social contract over the long term.<sup>159</sup> While the pandemic is still ongoing and lessons on its impacts on trust in public institutions can only be drawn *a posteriori*, some countries seem to have succeeded in keeping the level of trust in public institutions high. This supposed a delicate balancing act and navigation through the many trade-offs that the pandemic exposed (see section 4.4 above). Norway is frequently mentioned as a successful example in this context (Box 4.13).

#### 4.6.2. Political inclusion and civic space

SDG 16.7 makes a promise to “ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels.”<sup>160</sup> The 2030 Agenda also emphasizes the importance of political participation for women and girls, and identifies young people as “critical agents of change” who should use the 2030 Agenda to “channel their infinite capacities for activism into the creation of a better world.”

According to the World Bank, engagement in the political process is key to improving governance when it strengthens incentives for leaders to provide critical public goods, but has a negative impact when it promotes patronage and increases polarization.<sup>161</sup> In turn, more inclusive institutions, in which large numbers of citizens participate, promote norms that underpin collective action. Inclusive politics may also

make societies more resilient to systemic shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic hit at a time when civic space was being reduced in many countries.<sup>162</sup> During the pandemic, in many countries, the right to peaceful assembly and protest has been curtailed. Policies such as emergency powers, curbs on media freedom, and bans on political campaigning have closed the space for participation.<sup>163</sup> There have been signs, however, of civic resilience. Many protests took place during the pandemic, whether linked or not with governments’ management of the crisis. One multi-country study demonstrates how youth-led groups have met the needs of communities where governments have failed to act, while also seizing opportunities to advocate for longer-term policies needed to build more inclusive societies.<sup>164</sup>

On the other hand, some governments have encouraged participation during the pandemic. For instance, Denmark has encouraged continuing public participation during the pandemic by exempting “opinion-shaping assemblies” such as political meetings and demonstrations from the law prohibiting public gatherings.<sup>165</sup> Some countries have provided space for citizen participation by encouraging non-governmental stakeholders to propose and implement solutions, while others have used citizens’ panels and other social dialogue mechanisms to inform and reach consensus over the response to the virus (Box 4.14).<sup>166</sup>

The question is to what extent societies will institutionalize opportunities for citizens to identify longer-term priorities and to influence the design and development of policies.<sup>167</sup> Governments now have an opportunity to take a strategic approach to participation and to institutionalize models for including people in decision-making, releasing the pressure

#### Box 4.13

##### Preserving the social contract during a pandemic: the case of Norway

The alleged success of the Norwegian case is about balancing crisis management capacity and democratic legitimacy. Overall, the main decision-making style was consensual and based on a pragmatic collaborative approach combining argumentation and feedback, which reflected a common political culture. The authorities appealed to solidarity and citizens’ trust in government, which was mainly loyally followed up by the population.

There were some challenging debates about such issues as: how to balance political decisions and expert advice; the process related to the exception law; the balance between national standardized measures and leeway for local adaptation and flexibility; transparency; and the timing for lifting health regulations taken to fight the pandemic.

Overall, citizens’ trust in government increased significantly from an already high level during this crisis. Trust in government, in the health authorities, parliament and national and local politicians increased, as did trust in the prime minister. The citizens’ satisfaction with democracy had increased from 57 per cent to 72 per cent from January to April 2020, a very high rating internationally.

Source: Christensen and Lægveid, “The Norwegian Government Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic”, various pages.



## Box 4.14

### Institutionalized participation in COVID-19 policymaking

In Kenya, the senate committee responsible for overseeing the COVID-19 response invited public submissions on how the pandemic is affecting them and how they thought the response should be managed. The submissions were considered while drafting a pandemic response and management bill.<sup>a</sup>

The Netherlands consulted 30,000 citizens on the options for easing lockdown measures. Participants were informed of the likely impacts of each option and asked which recommendations they favored.<sup>b</sup>

#### Sources:

- <sup>a</sup> Senate of the Republic of Kenya, *Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Situation In Kenya: 2nd Progress Report* (Nairobi, April 14, 2020), <http://sakaja.co.ke/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID19-2nd-Progress-Report.pdf>.
- <sup>b</sup> Niek Mouter, Jose Ignacio Hernandez and Anatol Valerian Itten, "Public Participation in Crisis Policymaking. How 30,000 Dutch Citizens Advised Their Government on Relaxing COVID-19 Lockdown Measures," *MedRxiv* (November 12, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.11.09.20228718>.

felt by citizens and channeling discontent towards playing a productive part in the rebuilding process.<sup>168</sup> There are risks, however. As the economic effects of the pandemic deepen, protests many intensify. Some governments may become less tolerant of dissent and less open to engaging others, undermining the social contract and "reinforcing the perception that there is no viable alternative to violence for expressing grievances and frustration."<sup>169</sup>

#### 4.6.3. Social and economic inclusion

A central principle of the 2030 Agenda is to leave no-one behind.<sup>170</sup> In committing to the Agenda, countries committed to endeavoring to reach the furthest behind first and to promoting "the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status." Social and economic inclusion are the starting point for a social contract, providing the basis for political participation in society and giving all peoples and groups opportunities for meaningful action as they seek to exercise their rights and protect their interests.

Until now, less affluent population groups have borne the brunt of the health and economic costs of the pandemic.<sup>171</sup> If governments are to rebuild the social contract, efforts will be needed to share the burden more equitably.

Social protection systems defend people against poverty, but they also help defend both people and societies against risk. When safety nets are lacking, social cohesion is threatened at the moment when it is most needed, exacerbating impacts on vulnerable groups while also reducing incentives for political leaders to mount a robust response.<sup>172</sup>

The wave of temporary social protection measures taken by governments during the pandemic has two interrelated implications for the social contract. In some cases, it has led to significant increases in coverage for excluded groups.

Some countries have extended access to healthcare, provided income support for informal sector workers, or extended coverage to migrants or people without legal identity.<sup>173</sup> Second, it has created space for longer-term use of social protection measures to tackle inequality, reflecting awareness of increasingly compelling evidence that social protection can reduce economic, social, and political exclusion.<sup>174</sup>

At present, however, the majority of social protection measures implemented are temporary. As in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, countries face challenges regarding financial sustainability, with a financing gap of \$1.2 billion in 2020 for providing universal social protection coverage, or 3.8 per cent of developing-country GDP.<sup>175</sup> Following the precedent of the East Asian crisis, the pandemic may mark the acceleration of the push towards universal protection through the lifecycle, as countries institutionalize temporary measures, continue to expand coverage to excluded groups, and mainstream participatory mechanisms for programme design and accountability. In the best case, this will create an institutional architecture that can respond to current need and adapt to future challenges. Alternatively, many governments may limit their efforts to providing minimalist "safety nets" and stopgap measures during a period of fiscal retrenchment, leaving large gaps in protection which would undermine the social contract and reduce resilience to future crises.

A key component of social and economic inclusion strategies for governments is the fight against discrimination by public administration. The pandemic has exposed many instances of discrimination against minority groups, often continuing pre-existing patterns of discrimination. For example, use of excessive force by law enforcement to enforce emergency and other measures has often fallen disproportionately on minority and low-income groups, marginalized communities, and homeless populations. However, there are examples of governments' emphasis on the continued enforcement

of employment non-discrimination laws while ensuring consistencies with public health guidelines.<sup>176</sup> Public agencies have also issued guidance on workplace safety and preparedness to address discrimination based on disability, age, race and national origin.<sup>177</sup> Addressing discrimination in a systematic way offers an opportunity to reimagine public service, with many reforms proposed focused on enabling trust and accountability through more formal participation and partnerships between community members and public administration.

In building back better, addressing patterns of exclusion and discrimination in the public service as well, making it more inclusive and representative of the population at large at all levels of public service – including senior civil servants, legislatures, public employees, public service commissions, the justice system and the police – provides a further opportunity to reimagine public service, as diversity can foster changes in behaviour and advance change.<sup>178</sup>

#### 4.6.4. Fostering the capacity of the public service to promote societal change

The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated the relevance of the state, and vindicated the actions of civil services across the world. Not only has the power of governments to legislate and implement rapid change when the need arises been highlighted. States have confirmed their critical positions as rule-makers, and their capacity to mobilize the contributions of other parts of society.<sup>179</sup> Public administrations, their managers and staff have displayed qualities of flexibility and creativity that may have changed popular perceptions about their governments and what societies can collectively achieve under duress.

The post-pandemic period creates an opportunity to transform governments to end the current emergency, meet long-term needs, and increase resilience in the face of future shocks. Looking beyond the immediate impacts of the pandemic, the challenge for governments is to re-imagine themselves as platforms for enabling more sustainable and resilient patterns of development, promoting open and collaborative approaches that aim to be more responsive to the peoples' needs, and mobilizing the skills and energy of all the relevant stakeholders. Experiences from the pandemic in terms of engagement and innovation can be mobilized to this end. Because the pandemic has submitted national institutions and public administrations to high levels of stress, successful adaptations and innovations made during the pandemic can help identify institutional or administrative processes that need reform. They can indicate new ways to institutionalize transparency and accountability, to promote participation and stakeholder engagement, and to use digital government in a welfare-enhancing fashion. They can also provide indications of critical capacity gaps in the public service. Conversely, the trends observed during the pandemic can also be used

by all actors to identify potential risks in terms of social and economic exclusion, curtailment of individual freedoms, and corruption, which could materialize if left unchecked.

A notable feature of the pandemic has been the massive investment by many international organizations and networks in documenting its impacts, and most importantly the changes made by governments in policies and working processes during the crisis. This wealth of information can become an invaluable source for governments seeking to benefit from lessons learned in other countries.

## 4.7. Conclusion and recommendations

National institutions are key enablers of governments' actions on all the Sustainable Development Goals. In all countries, the pandemic has affected key government functions and processes, undermining the effectiveness of government action. Responses taken by governments through emergency measures have often included changes to existing rules and regulations across the institutional landscape. The need to respond quickly has created additional risks for institutional processes and organizations. Beyond individual institutions, the pandemic has affected whole institutional systems and the way public institutions interact with people.

The pandemic has exposed weaknesses and vulnerabilities of national institutions to society-wide shocks such as COVID-19. The stress put on national institutions and their capacity to cope has varied across countries. In some cases, the shock of the pandemic has compounded pre-existing vulnerabilities.

The crisis has shown the importance of investing in the public sector and strengthening the capacity of public institutions. The capacity of governments and societies more generally to sustain the functions of institutions and make them more resilient to shocks will strongly condition the possibility for delivering the SDGs. The influence of institutions on whether the SDGs can be achieved could go both ways, making projections most uncertain.

On the one hand, the current stress faced by national institutions, when added to other negative impacts of the crisis (for instance, lasting setbacks in employment levels and incomes and high levels of public debt), could easily jeopardize the capacity of governments to foster progress on all the goals. In the worst case, societies face a vicious cycle where crises multiply, public institutions lose capacity and are starved of finance, and governance failures lead to further erosion of trust. In such a scenario, the basis for collective action would be undermined both within and between countries, making it progressively harder to tackle current and future challenges.<sup>180</sup>

On the other hand, the current and post-pandemic periods present a unique opportunity to reimagine the role of

institutions, to promote new governance norms and shift to transformative pathways that strengthen resilience and accelerate action to achieve the SDGs. Sustaining and leveraging the massive engagement that has been witnessed from public servants and civil society in most countries, and finding ways to durably incorporate innovative practices for inclusion, public service delivery, and civic engagement explored during the crisis, should be a priority for governments in this regard. A lesson from the past is that systemic crises are fertile ground for governance innovation, with the potential to lead to new constitutional settlements, marked reductions in inequality, shifts in the balance of political power, and effective efforts to rebuild the social contract.<sup>181</sup>

Institutional principles highlighted in Sustainable Development Goal 16, including transparency and access to information, accountability and anti-corruption, participation and engagement, non-discrimination) are key to understanding how national institutions have been impacted by the pandemic, remediating negative impacts in the medium term, and strengthening the resilience of national institutions over the longer term. More generally, the principles of effective governance for sustainable development, endorsed by the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations in 2018,<sup>182</sup> can inform the efforts of governments in this regard.

While the scope of action for governments during recovery from the pandemic is immense, based on the arguments developed in this chapter, the following limited set of recommendations can be made:

#### *In the short term:*

- Ensure that national policies and programmes taken in response to the pandemic focus on alleviating its negative impacts on the most affected groups in society, and that public institutions execute them in a way that effectively protects people living in poverty and vulnerable groups.
- Proactively publish information on the outbreak and government responses to COVID-19 in accessible formats and through multiple channels, leveraging the potential of ICTs and considering the needs of specific groups and vulnerable and at-risk populations.
- Limit exceptions to the legal deadlines for responding to access to information requests, prioritizing requests related to COVID-19 and response measures, and ensure the operation of oversight bodies and appeals processes in relation to the right to information.
- Establish or leverage existing legislative committees to oversee and independently evaluate the responses to COVID-19, and support open parliament solutions that facilitate live access to parliamentary sessions and meetings and the publication of information on

legislative oversight of budget resources allocated to COVID-19 responses and economic stimulus packages.

- Ensure that supreme audit institutions have the financial, technical and human resources needed to conduct independent audits and oversight of short-term responses to COVID-19.
- Promote collaboration between public institutions, stakeholder groups and communities to generate innovative, proportionate and evidence-based responses to COVID-19 and help enhance public trust.

#### *In the medium term:*

- Ensure that public institutions, in their implementation of recovery efforts, are guided by principles of inclusiveness, responsiveness and non-discrimination, and contribute to addressing inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic.
- Strive for horizontal integration in government action, ensuring that policies enacted to speed up recovery from the pandemic take into account cross-sectoral impacts and interlinkages among the SDGs, and that the actions of different parts of governments are coordinated and coherent.
- Draw lessons from the pandemic as regards the effectiveness of national frameworks governing the relationships among levels of government, including in cases of national disasters and emergencies, and pursue enhanced coordination across levels of government (vertical integration) in terms of policies, budgets, implementation and monitoring and evaluation for the recovery from COVID-19.
- Strengthen the application of risk analysis in public administration in order to increase the resilience of national institutional systems to pandemics and other external shocks.
- Ensure that national oversight institutions have the financial, technical and human resources needed to support governments' longer-term responses, including through risk-based approaches.
- Governments, working with Parliaments and all other relevant stakeholders, should assess how the COVID-19 pandemic and response measures have affected key dimensions of national institutional systems such as accountability, transparency and participation, in order to prevent reversals of progress on these dimensions and to avert negative consequences on public institutions and human rights.
- Take stock of successful practices in terms of engagement, collaboration and partnerships for the delivery of

public services involving non-government actors and tried during the pandemic, with a view to sustaining the mobilization of civil society organizations, communities and individuals for delivering the SDGs.

- Leverage the efforts made by various global organizations during the pandemic to share experiences and lessons learned in terms of institutional innovation and adaptation and public administration practices, not only at the level of individual initiatives, but also at that of whole institutional systems.

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