



INTRODUCTION

**NATIONAL INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR
IMPLEMENTING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS:
WHERE ARE WE AFTER FIVE YEARS?**

A. National institutional arrangements for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals: where are we after five years?

Institutions are paramount to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is well recognized in the Agenda itself.¹ Five years after the start of the implementation of the Agenda, governance issues remain at the forefront. For instance, a study of the voluntary national reviews (VNR) presented at the high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF) in 2019 highlighted that 38 out of 47 countries had identified governance as a key priority for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, significantly more than in previous years.²

Since 2015, most countries have adjusted their institutional frameworks to support their commitments to implementing the 2030 Agenda. This has comprised, inter alia: incorporating the SDGs and other elements of the Agenda into the national institutional context (for instance, national strategies and plans, planning processes, and the work of parliaments and existing government or multistakeholder institutions); creating new institutions (for example, high-level coordination mechanisms or technical working groups); and setting up new mechanisms for engaging various stakeholders around SDG implementation. Such changes, which have been documented through successive snapshots provided by the voluntary national review (VNR) reports presented by countries at the high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF) every year, have taken place gradually, at a pace typical of those to be expected in the institutional area, with typically some years between initial design and implementation.

Starting in early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused an abrupt shock to all countries. The economic and social shocks created by the pandemic have set back progress in numerous SDG areas, as documented in various reports. In addition, the pandemic period has highlighted even more the importance of national institutions for the achievement of the SDGs. The pandemic and governments' responses to it have impacted the functioning of public institutions in ways that directly affect the capacity of governments to deliver the SDGs, starting with the basic functions of government, including the delivery of public services and public administration. The imperatives of managing the pandemic have meant that governments have had to take quick decisions in terms of resource allocation, prioritization of policy agendas, and sustaining the functioning of key institutional processes, all of which potentially create tensions with long-term goals such as the SDGs. The pandemic has also revealed institutional weaknesses in areas critical for piloting the SDGs, such as crisis preparedness, policy integration, communication, and others. This has happened in countries at all levels of development. Lastly, the pandemic also highlighted the importance of trust

between people and governments, as well as the broader social contract under which societies operate. On the other hand, the year 2020 has also witnessed institutional innovations in areas as diverse as administrative management, stakeholder engagement, transparency and accountability.

In this context, it is doubly important to take stock of developments in institutional arrangements for implementing the 2030 Agenda. The main objective of this report is to document key trends in this regard, through a focus on a few selected dimensions.

B. Scope of the report

Among many possible entry points, this report focuses on three dimensions of institutional change at the national level that are relevant to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. First, it documents changes in institutional arrangements for SDG implementation. Second, it assesses the development, performance, strength and weaknesses of monitoring and evaluation systems for the SDGs. Third, it examines efforts made by governments and other stakeholders to enhance the capacity of public servants to implement the SDGs.³ These three dimensions are important for several reasons; and their importance has been highlighted anew since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Documenting changes in national institutional arrangements for SDG implementation

Five years after the start of the 2030 Agenda, it is important to take stock of how far countries have gone in adapting their institutional frameworks to implement the SDGs and in mainstreaming the SDGs throughout their institutions. Already one-third of the SDG implementation period has elapsed, and yet many countries are still putting in place or adjusting key elements of their institutional systems in relation to SDG implementation. This long time scale of institutional changes should in itself be considered as an important factor in the capacity of countries to deliver the SDGs. It also implies that the institutional side of SDG implementation is vulnerable to short term changes in national contexts, including changes in policy agendas. These considerations have received relatively little attention in the SDG literature and discourse so far. They suggest the need for increased attention to the challenges and practicalities of institutional reform.

In order to capture the increasing complexity of national institutional arrangements for SDG implementation as they evolved since 2015, the report uses two approaches. The first one, taken by several studies and reports based on voluntary national reviews, is to look at the development of institutional mechanisms such as sustainable development strategies and national development plans; high-level coordination

mechanisms for SDG implementation; involvement of various levels of governments in SDG implementation, monitoring and evaluation; and others.⁴ The first chapter of the report documents the creation of institutional mechanisms over time, using examples from a sample of 24 countries. A second approach is to document the development of institutional entry points for various actors involved in SDG implementation at the national level. Over time, such entry points have tended to increase, which reflects the increasing maturity of institutional arrangements for SDG implementation. Chapter 1 documents the multiplicity of entry points for a selection of key institutional actors other than central governments.

Patterns of institutionalization of SDG implementation at the country level are highly idiosyncratic, and no regularities or “typical” patterns are easily discernible across countries. Countries have built on pre-existing arrangements and created new institutional mechanisms in variable proportions. The type of institutional arrangements that countries choose to put in place and the timing of institutional changes also vary. In spite of these differences, when looking at a sample of countries, trends can be perceived in terms of how quickly after 2015 different types of institutional arrangements have been put in place. While there is a clear trend towards the complexification of institutional arrangements for SDG implementation and the multiplication of potential entry points for different parts of government and non-government stakeholders over time, institutional adjustments are not always linear. Changes in political circumstances in a country can increase or decrease the visibility and prominence of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs on the national policy agenda, and affect institutional arrangements in ways that can reinforce them or diminish their effectiveness.

Taking a medium-term perspective on the development of institutional arrangements for SDG implementation is even more important in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As explored in chapter 4 of the report, the pandemic and the responses of governments to it have impacted public institutions in multiple ways, affecting the capacity of governments to implement the SDGs in both direct and indirect ways. The rapid changes observed across national public institutions during the pandemic, and their potential implications for the post-pandemic period, provide a stark contrast to the gradual adjustments made by countries to the institutional frameworks for implementing the SDGs between 2015 and 2019.

The massive disruptions created by the pandemic have, understandably, shifted attention and resources towards urgent and short-term crisis responses and away from long-term strategies and institutional set-ups to achieve sustainable development. To build back better, governments must nonetheless not lose sight of the latter. Among many potential risks created by the pandemic, the lowering of the political priority of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, the decrease in

the resources available to various institutional processes related to SDG implementation (for instance for data collection and production or for stakeholder engagement), and the reduced capacity of public institutions to focus on long-term issues while addressing emergency situations are prominent. In sum, the institutional changes observed since the beginning of 2020 have disrupted the regular, incremental process of institutional adjustments, which could negatively impact institutional frameworks for SDG implementation. It will be important to consider how lessons from the pandemic can inform institutional strategies to deliver the Goals.

The pandemic has also underscored even more the interconnectedness of the sustainable development goals and the need for policy integration. What initially was a matter of public health has in many ways disturbed or upended, for instance, education, transport, trade, and aspects of equality; effects in each of those areas have yet further been felt in others. The connections among sectors show that institutionalized coordination within public administration and with other institutions is an imperative for cohesive policy responses. With regard to institutional actors, the pandemic may serve to highlight the dependence of public administration on collaboration with other actors to meet challenges and achieve transformative change. Successes in tackling the pandemic and its effects have often featured or included, for instance, civil society, the private sector, and parliaments. The institutionalization of avenues for such multi-stakeholder action can facilitate progress towards short- and long-term goals, including the SDGs.

Assessing the effectiveness of follow-up and review systems for the SDGs

Effective monitoring, reporting and more generally follow and review systems are a key requirement for implementing the SDGs. Since 2015, the work on SDG indicators and the reporting frameworks progressively put in place by countries building on the voluntary national reviews contemplated in the 2030 Agenda have received much attention. However, national follow-up and review systems go far beyond these two elements. Among other aspects, developing an understanding of the effectiveness of follow-up and review processes for SDG implementation involves examining how existing processes of data collection (e.g. SDG indicators, but also other monitoring and evaluation processes that have been in place at the macroeconomic or sector level, as well as information coming from different levels of government) inform policy-making; whether information systems put in place for the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda and other information systems mutually support one another; how monitoring and reporting on SDG progress contributes to government accountability, both through formal oversight by institutions such as parliaments and supreme audit institutions, and through the contribution of various stakeholders; and how the information produced in the context of SDG

monitoring at the national level informs the national policy debate and opens up channels of engagement for various public institutions and non-state actors.

Even though the SDGs are much broader than a typical government programme, they face similar risks in terms of operating in isolation from other processes. Three critical determinants of the effectiveness of SDG monitoring, follow-up and review systems at the national level are: the integration of SDG follow-up and review systems with other monitoring systems; their links with performance measurement systems; and how monitoring information feeds back into the policy cycle to strengthen SDG implementation. As explored in this report, information on these aspects has started to emerge, through evaluations produced by a range of actors. For instance, many of the audits of government preparedness to implement the SDGs conducted by supreme audit institutions in more than 70 countries in recent years considered whether the government had established a mechanism to monitor, follow up, review and report on the progress towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.⁵ Information from multiple sources is used in the report to assess common strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for countries to strengthen their national SDG follow-up and review systems.

In the context of the pandemic and its aftermath, follow-up and review systems for the SDGs take an even greater importance. As abundantly documented, the pandemic has had differentiated impacts on various groups in society. Women have been bearing a disproportionate share of the pandemic's economic and social impacts. More generally, the brunt of the negative social and economic impacts has been borne by the most vulnerable groups and individuals, and within-country inequalities have increased. This has been observed in both developed and developing countries. Negative impacts of the pandemic have affected vulnerable groups in multiple dimensions, including jobs, education, access to health, and other basic needs and rights.

These impacts directly affect progress on a range of SDGs. It is critical for countries to be able to measure and monitor them at the adequate level of detail and in timely fashion, not only to assess setbacks in progress along the different goals and targets and ways to address critical challenges during the pandemic, but also to inform policymaking during recovery efforts and in the longer term. Yet, in many countries systems for collecting and producing data and information relevant to SDG monitoring have been adversely affected during the pandemic, as documented for instance by surveys of National Statistical Offices conducted by the United Nations and the World Bank. This makes the analysis of strengths and weaknesses in national follow-up and review systems for the SDGs even more important than it was pre-pandemic.

Taking stock of efforts to build the capacity of public servants to implement the 2030 Agenda

Another key determinant of the effectiveness of national institutional arrangements for SDG implementation lies in the capacity of public institutions and individual public servants. Achieving the Goals hinges in a large measure on competent and effective national public administrations. Public administrations and public servants have a key role to play in implementing policy changes in practice and reflecting them in daily interactions with citizens. They also have a key role in raising awareness of the SDGs and their implications at the level of specific sectors, locations, and services. They are key relays between the level of strategies, plans, policies and programmes elaborated to implement the SDGs, and effective implementation and delivery on the ground by all actors.

The importance of building the capacity of public administration at all levels for implementing the 2030 Agenda was recognized by United Nations Member States in the Agenda itself; in particular, the text of the Agenda identified key areas where capacity-building should receive attention and resources. Since 2015, considerable efforts have been made by national governments, academia, non-governmental organizations, international organizations and other national and international actors to raise SDG awareness among public servants and build their capacity for SDG implementation. Those efforts have covered areas such as planning, monitoring and reporting, policy integration, stakeholder engagement, and many others. A key question is the extent to which the sum of those efforts has been meeting national needs in this regard. This includes whether training has addressed public servants' and public administrations' ability to reach the furthest behind. As shown in this report, publicly available information on ongoing capacity-building initiatives is limited and does not, in general, provide a clear answer to this question.

Here too, the pandemic has caused shocks that may have profound implications for the delivery of the 2030 Agenda. During the pandemic, public institutions and public servants have faced compelling demands on their resources to continue to provide key public services. Many have been faced with crisis situations requiring radical shifts in the way they operate, as well as reallocation of resources. Within public institutions, this may have resulted in lower priority being given to long-term capacity-development efforts, including those in relation to SDG implementation. Similarly, decreases in available resources or reallocation of those resources to other areas may have negatively impacted the capacity-development activities of many organizations and networks that used to be active providers before the pandemic. In addition, the constraints imposed by the pandemic on physical meetings, travel, and other resources have affected the delivery of capacity-building efforts, with a shift to digital delivery modes whose long-term impacts are yet unknown but could have negative implications for SDG implementation.

There is therefore a need to better understand the trends in and features of capacity-building efforts in support of SDG implementation targeted at public servants, in terms not only of how they have developed over the past five years and are meeting the needs of countries, but also of how they could be adjusted in the future, taking into account lessons from the pandemic period.

C. Content of the report

In addition to this introduction, the report includes four chapters.

Chapter 1 reviews institutional adjustments made by countries to integrate the SDGs into their national institutional frameworks after five years of SDG implementation. The chapter illustrates the developments that have occurred in selected institutional areas such as the integration of SDGs into national planning processes, the creation of high-level mechanisms for SDG implementation, and the involvement of parliaments in SDG matters. It also documents institutional entry points that are available to different stakeholders at the national level to participate in SDG implementation.

Chapter 2 reviews national systems for monitoring, evaluation, review and follow-up in relation to SDG implementation. The chapter looks at the progressive institutionalization of national SDG monitoring, follow-up and review systems, as well as at progress made in terms of monitoring the SDGs and reporting on SDG implementation. The chapter also examines how SDG monitoring, follow-up and review systems contribute to ensuring government accountability on SDG implementation. The final part of the chapter examines the integration of SDG follow-up and review systems with other monitoring systems; their links with performance measurement systems; and how monitoring information feeds back into the policy cycle to strengthen SDG implementation. This last part provides abundant material for countries to assess the strengths and weaknesses of their national follow-up and review systems for the SDGs.

Chapter 3 looks at capacity-building on SDG implementation targeting public servants at the national level, including subnational levels as relevant. The chapter considers the priority given to capacity-building on SDGs by governments, as reflected in national documents. A range of capacity-building products, tools and delivery channels are presented. The focus of the chapter is on activities directly linked to the implementation of the SDGs as a programme of action, such as awareness raising, initial and continuous training of public servants, SDG planning and monitoring, policy coherence and policy integration. The chapter takes stock of the current limitations of available information on the scale, impact and effectiveness of capacity-building efforts as a whole, and

formulates recommendations to countries and international actors in this regard.

Chapter 4 examines the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on national institutions, and the potential consequences of those impacts for the delivery of the SDGs. The chapter aims to provide a reference to the broader institutional context of the pandemic that can be contrasted with the longer-term perspective of the first three chapters. Key dimensions of the impacts of the pandemic examined in the chapter include the functioning of public institutions; policy integration; government accountability and transparency; and trust between governments and citizens. The chapter provides a limited set of recommendations in this regard.

D. Methodology

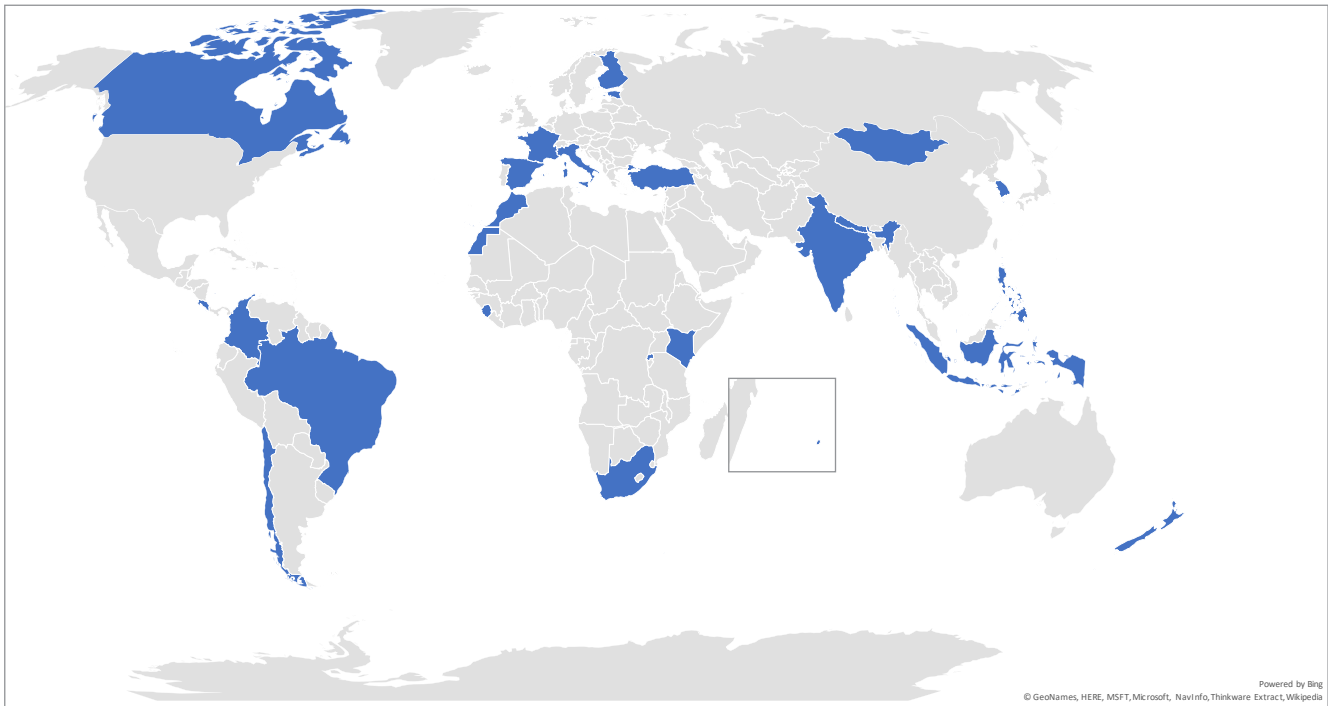
The report was led and prepared by the Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government (DPIDG) of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. The research and report preparation were done remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the existing landscape of information on institutional arrangements for SDG implementation at the national level, the preparation of the report followed a multi-source, multi-method and tiered approach.

At the core of the report, a sample of 24 countries representing all regions was selected for in-depth research. For countries in this sample, the report team researched all publicly available information, including voluntary national reviews (VNR) reports, national sustainable development strategies and national development plans, legal and policy documents coming from different levels of government, parliaments, and oversight institutions. Academic articles and studies, reports, and evaluations produced by non-governmental actors in English, French and Spanish language were also used whenever available. Templates for collecting information in a comparable way across countries were prepared, which covered the areas of monitoring and evaluation and capacity-building. Examples collected by the report team in the 24 countries were fed into a database that informed the first three chapters of the report.

A second level of information included the VNR reports presented by Member States of the United Nations from 2016 to 2020. The report also made use of studies and reports published by international organizations, international networks and other stakeholder, covering relevant topics in relation to institutional arrangements at the national level.

In order to elicit detailed information in the areas of monitoring and evaluation and capacity-building for the SDGs, the report team also conducted a survey to a set of international organizations active in these fields, through a

Figure A
Sample of countries selected for in-depth research



Source: Authors' elaboration.

questionnaire. Nine organizations responded to the survey. Finally, an open call for inputs to the report was issued in June 2020. In all, over 30 experts and organizations provided contributions to the report.

The report relied on peer review by UN and non-UN experts, in addition to internal review in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

Endnotes

- 1 See A/RES/70/1 found at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>.
- 2 Shannon Kindornay and Renée Gendron, "Progressing National SDGs Implementation: An Independent Assessment of the Voluntary National Review Reports Submitted to the United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2019" (Ottawa: Canadian Council for International Cooperation, 2020).
- 3 Other institutional dimensions, policy functions and supporting processes relevant to SDG implementation have been explored in detail in recent editions of the World Public Sector Report, for instance, budgeting, risk management and policy integration. Also, the report does not go down to the level of specific goals within the SDGs, the implementation of which is supported by specific institutional arrangements.
- 4 As an illustration, UNDESA's Compendium of national institutional arrangements for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda documents institutional arrangements in the following nine areas: high-level institutional arrangements; national strategies for sustainable development; involvement of Parliaments; involvement of local authorities; involvement of supreme audit institutions; engaging and equipping public servants; engaging civil society and the private sector; arrangements for monitoring and review; and budgeting processes.
- 5 INTOSAI Development Initiative, "Are nations prepared for implementation of the 2030 Agenda?" (Oslo, 2019).