

Promoting effective governance and institutional reform to accelerate the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals

Key messages and selected recommendations for accelerating progress and moving on transformative pathways for realizing the decade of action

Contribution by the Committee of Experts on Public Administration to the 2020 thematic review of the high-level political forum on sustainable development

Accelerated action to achieve the SDGs calls for ‘fast-track’ reform initiatives based on innovative breakthroughs as well as incremental reforms that target long-term, cumulative results.

Accelerated action can be achieved through mechanisms such as legislative reform and collaborative models of governance; access to quality public services with focus on education; promotion of transparency and accountability; balancing of long-term needs with short-term urgencies; resource mobilization for the achievement of strategic, institutional and policy goals; and collaboration between national, subnational, local and community levels to address issues and take action in real-time.

Acceleration of the implementation of the SDGs will benefit from a balance of public strategy as planning and design, and public strategy as learning by doing. At the same time, a significant portion of basic government action is about stability and reliability, ensuring the delivery of protection and services to citizens by providing, inter alia, evidence-based and adequate legal and policy frameworks. Where to focus the development of capacity for change depends on the existing quality and performance of public administration and governance in a given institutional setting.

Innovation and acceleration may produce both success and failure. Accelerating the implementation of the SDGs requires policy and governance innovation, which come with their embedded and corollary risks. Accepting the need to innovate means the willingness to take those risks. At the same time, governance failures are not contingent upon unpredictable events alone. They often result from a mismatch between the design of a governance mechanism, the problem it is intended to address and the underlying social and political context. Other forms of governance failure emerge because of lack of governance capacity (competences, skills, capabilities) or ineffective management of governance frameworks.

Many Government institutions are not able to implement the SDGs at the desired scale and speed because of a general undervaluing of the public sector in economic theories of the past decades, which has resulted in smaller but less effective public administration and a disregard of the public value that it may create.

The ability of the public sector to deal with crises is also essential as has been seen in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic. Some Governments have shown a greater readiness to

deal with the crisis than others, for example through well-functioning health systems that leave no one behind, and an ability to rally different arms and institutions within the public sector, for example to activate virtual learning and teaching support while addressing persistent digital divides. The Covid-19 pandemic may set back the attainment of the SDGs. It could also point to the ability of Governments to take extraordinary steps to attain the SDGs.

Silo-thinking continues to hamper the holistic implementation of the SDGs and hinder action to ensure that no one is left behind.

A strong political commitment will be needed to connect the political and administrative silos within international policy action, development aid, and peacebuilding, as well as for the reinforcement of existing multilateral and regional political and economic mechanisms. Some countries have well-functioning and flexible public administrations while others have not yet reached that level. Still others have malfunctioning and/or fragile administrations. In addition, many countries may have a well-functioning public administration in planning, for example, but not in other arenas, such as implementation. Others that have transformed their public administration into lean and efficient operations may have caused conditions that chip away at their overall effectiveness.

Several enablers and catalysts of accelerated action and transformative pathways for SDG delivery include public-private partnerships, electronic and open government, inclusive service delivery, training, public sector ethics, transparency and innovation.

Another transformative pathway to sustainable development concerns budgeting for the SDGs. Integrating the SDGs in budgeting may benefit from a shift towards performance-based budgeting particularly since traditional budget structures or "line item budgets" may thwart, or at least not encourage, SDG implementation efforts. One transformative policy area that is repeatedly being identified as a lever for effective governance is sustainable public procurement. E-procurement has also proven itself to be a transformative tool for SDG implementation, particularly SDG 16.

Artificial intelligence can be a powerful means to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda as well as to monitor progress pertaining to all of the SDGs. However, many challenges need to be addressed for artificial intelligence to achieve its full potential as an enabler of sustainable development. These include questions of data availability, accessibility, quality, volume, labelling and integration, computing capacity, artificial intelligence-related skill sets, the capacity of State institutions to acquire and deploy artificial intelligence, the receptivity of leadership and potential for malignant use. Other challenges that would need to be addressed are the potential impact of artificial intelligence on fairness and equity and human rights. The societal threats and opportunities related to artificial intelligence have yet to be fully explored for purposes of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

At subnational levels, leaving no one behind can be accelerated through decentralization, local development and strengthening of local government finance and financial management.

Leaving no one behind will often require avoiding top-down approaches to local development and the establishment of focal points within communities to assess the extent of possible decentralization, value optimization and impact of national-local transfers. Inclusion of subnational actors in voluntary national review processes should be encouraged to strengthen local ownership of the SDGs, along with the development of local SDG strategies by large cities or by groups of smaller cities.

A coherent whole-of-government approach and the collaborative engagement of all relevant institutions and stakeholders throughout the policy cycle are crucial. Aligning SDG policies in a coherent way calls for the availability of auditable data on outcomes –

statistical offices, audit offices and civil society organizations, among others – and access to technology platforms and knowledge hubs that can promote sharing, mutual learning and local ownership. Widespread communication, in particular with youth, is important to build awareness and support action.

Combatting corruption is a precondition of effective governance for the acceleration of implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Every administration must be vigilant towards the risk and reality of corruption and conflicts of interest in public life, given the corrosive effect on public trust in governance and the detrimental economic impact. Corruption raises costs, distorts decisions, misallocates resources and discourages enterprise and investment through its unpredictability; it is linked to overspending, fiscal deficits, under-collection of taxes, under-absorption of funds, gender inequality and discrimination against minorities and other vulnerable groups in access to positions of power and a brain drain from the economy. However, combatting corruption should not lead to rigid administrations where innovation and risk-taking are no longer possible. Accountability with flexibility within an innovative and learning public service is essential. Responses from public services must be swift when necessary and take into account changing circumstances while ensuring that adequate checks and balances are in place.