Economic and Social Council
Committee of Experts on Public Administration
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Urgently transforming institutions for a greener, more inclusive and more resilient world at a time of multiple crises

Contribution by the Committee of Experts on Public Administration to the 2023 high-level political forum on sustainable development (revised)

Key messages and recommendations

1. The ability to respond quickly and effectively to crises is essential but insufficient for sustainable development

With Governments trying to tackle a cascade of simultaneous crises, crisis governance has become part of a "new normal", resulting in relative neglect in six areas: long-term thinking, risk management, use of the best available knowledge, stakeholder participation, promotion of collaborative mindsets among public sector workers and using public financial management mechanisms and instruments to bridge the Sustainable Development Goal financing gap in light of soaring interest rates and global uncertainty. This is understandable but short-sighted. Climate change, for example, is not only a crisis in itself. It is also a whole-of-government and whole-of-society challenge that needs to be addressed in a holistic manner and considering the different contexts. Different governance approaches are needed to address different problems, mixing approaches and switching between them according to the requirements of the situation. If and where Governments focus too much of their attention on issues framed as crises, with the related emergency measures of budgetary expenditures and regulations, parliaments and societal stakeholders – civil society, business and academia – should step up and organize their role as "countervailing powers", helping to keep Governments accountable and on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, with a long-term perspective and at all levels.

2. National Governments should empower subnational governments to accelerate Sustainable Development Goal implementation

There is much to gain as regards effective multilevel governance between the national and subnational levels. It is in the interest of national Governments to stimulate subnational governments to regularly conduct voluntary local reviews and accelerate action to leave no one behind by supporting policymaking that takes into account the needs and aspirations of all segments of society, especially the poorest and most vulnerable and those subject to discrimination. Roles and responsibilities between governance levels should be clearly established, based on the principle of subsidiarity, with allocation of appropriate human, financial and technical resources and sufficient flexibility to collaborate across all levels in real time should the urgency of a problem require it. Strengthening of subnational government needs to be among the priorities as a key lever for the achievement of sustainable development and public service delivery. National policy outcomes also benefit from promoting inter-municipal collaboration and partnerships. This allows the scale-up of successful innovations, increasing the level of skills and the joint purchasing power of subnational authorities for sustainable public procurement.

3. A functioning coordination mechanism for sustainable development across all ministries at the highest level is a must

While clear structures are good for accountability and focussed effort, overcoming the silos of departments and sectors is still an important challenge. An essential part of improving policy coherence for sustainable development (target 17.14) is the proven good practice of establishing a coordination mechanism for sustainable development across all ministries at the highest level. This is one of the eight sub-indicators of Sustainable Development Goal indicator 17.14.1. The United Nations Environment Programme has made available a self-assessment tool for measuring policy coherence following the methodology developed for indicator 17.14.1. The results of pilots with the self-assessment suggest that the tool can deliver robust and reliable results only when stakeholders are involved. A monitoring and evaluation capacity in the centre of Government that helps to advance targets and solve bottlenecks to accelerate the achievement of the Goals can also bring to bear the power of the highest political authority to align ministerial initiatives.

4. A rapid upgrade of risk management in government and its integration into Sustainable Development Goal-related coordination mechanisms is necessary

The current accumulation of global crises calls for a rapid upgrade of risk management in government and its integration into Sustainable Development Goal-related coordination mechanisms, such as centres of Government or other piloting structures. Foresight and risk prevention, mitigation, adaptation and resilience will reduce exposure to crises. They will also inform assessments of trade-offs and synergies among the Sustainable Development Goals and increase the potential for coherence of implementation.

5. The need to strengthen institutions for more integrated solutions to achieve the vision and Goals of the 2030 Agenda remains strong

Accelerating and deepening institutional integration through whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches can bring about systems thinking for transformative changes in governance and public policies in line with the vision and goals of the 2030 Agenda. The challenge is to convey these systemic solutions into compelling collective action narratives that galvanize the political economy in support of lasting and evidence-informed solutions, eschewing quick palliative approaches, overcoming mis- and dis-information, and bridging social, economic and political divides within and across countries. Despite ongoing efforts to improve governance and a clear commitment to the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the global level, progress on the Goals is more uneven than expected. Meeting the challenges of transforming institutions for a greener, more inclusive and more resilient world will depend on accelerated efforts to build a capable State at all levels and in all areas of government action relevant to the Goals. Multidimensional analyses of institutions in relation to national sustainable development priorities and an agile portfolio approach to addressing capability gaps across the whole of government are seen as part of the solution.

6. Countries should be encouraged to integrate reflections on a vision of society in 2050 in their planning, monitoring and reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals

As sustainable development requires a long-term perspective in public policymaking, countries should be encouraged to integrate into their delivery of the 2030 Agenda reflections on a vision of society in 2050. The *Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews* prepared by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs could be adapted to incorporate this longer-term perspective in their planning, monitoring and reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals.

7. Countries should exercise credible, transparent and participatory budgetary decision-making in order to speed progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda

Credible planning and execution of national and subnational budgets are critical pillars for achieving the sustainable development goals. Budgetary allocations and deviations have a significant impact on the efforts to "transform institutions for a greener, more inclusive and more resilient world" while guaranteeing that the core principles of fiscal discipline, legitimacy, predictability, credibility, participation, transparency, and accountability are respected as much as possible. Countries are invited to reinforce their data infrastructure and reliance on evidence-based budgetary policy making, their institutional flexibility and human capabilities, as well as mechanisms for budget coordination across levels, for enhancing transparency and participation in the budgeting process, and budget scrutiny by independent supreme audit institutions.

8. To ensure that adequate attention is paid to the governance and institution building aspects of the 2030 Agenda, Sustainable Development Goal 16 should be reviewed annually at the high-level political forum, alongside Sustainable Development 17 on partnerships for the Goals

Strong and well-functioning institutions are key to addressing the current multiple crises effectively. However, current trends point to decreasing accountability and inclusiveness and a narrowing of public space that leaves many stakeholders out of policy processes. The review of indicator 16.6.1 reflecting budget credibility points to deviations between planned and executed budgets above 5% in almost half of all countries reporting on this indicator. Such trends may further undermine the holistic implementation of the 2030 Agenda and progress towards sustainable development.

9. The effective collection, use and communication of reliable data and evidence is critical to promoting a whole-of-society approach to delivery of sustainable development

A stronger case for the contribution of evidence to improved social and economic outcomes should be made while also accounting for how information is used and communicated, for example by translating ideas and evidence into issues that matter for different segments of society. Digital transformation and the use of new technologies could also help enhance the cost-effectiveness of research, providing options to study more aspects of policies and programmes, providing data and actionable findings in a more timely and cost-effective manner. Greater data and evidence generation, combined with widespread access by all stakeholders, can be expected to create a more level playing field for policymaking with a greater focus on the public good, provided the opportunities, challenges and risks of new technologies such as artificial intelligence are properly understood and managed, with an approach anchored in respect for human rights. Researchers and evaluation practitioners, for their part, could make better use of the evidence base with evaluations seen as part of a range of complementary inquiries that support government decision-makers, the private sector and civil society actors in efforts to tailor research for practical decision-making for the greatest social impact.

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