

Governance and institutional perspectives on advancing sustainable, inclusive, science and evidence-based solutions for the Sustainable Development Goals

Contribution by the Committee of Experts on Public Administration to the 2025 high-level political forum on sustainable development

Assessment of the impacts of the multiple and interconnected crises on the implementation of SDGs 3, 5, 8, 14 and 17

Five years before the intended completion of the 2030 Agenda, our globalized world is in turmoil. Unprecedented challenges of polycrisis management – of the COVID-19 pandemic, spikes in inflation, mounting budgetary pressures and the accumulation of public debt – are shrinking the policy and fiscal space for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The devastating toll of wars, the erosion of respect for international law and territorial integrity of countries, including cases of genocide, the emergence of outright economic nationalism crowding out a rules-based global order, and risks of democratic backsliding are about to generate uncertainties of historical dimensions for citizens, business and governments.

Public institutions as the pillars of sound policymaking at national and international levels (SDGs 16, 17) are questioned. Growing distrust in the ability of government to deliver public goods and services, including in emergency situations, and in the integrity of political leaders has become a global trend. This trend mirrors a decline in the perceived legitimacy and credibility of democratic institutions, fuelling political instability and undermining the rule of law. Responding to the needs of refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons has posed additional challenges due to sheer numbers and the economic, social and political complexities that countries and areas face in providing for or hosting them.

Multilateralism for the benefit of all is in decline as spaces for coordination and collaboration among countries at the global level are abandoned.

Information technology including artificial intelligence, in the hands of few private actors globally is becoming the source of misinformation, manipulation and interference in undermining transparency, accountability and the reliance on evidence in policymaking. It also risks becoming an instrument of institutional dismantling without proper accountability mechanisms in place.

While public administration is an essential asset of economic, social and environmental crises management and advancing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, current experiences point to a potential paradigm shift in public administration: the drive towards ‘small government’ through wholesale reductions of the public sector workforce, the closure of departments and public agencies, defunding of programs and deleting the findings of research and policy analysis.

It is too early to assess the consequences of such a paradigm shift. Questions, however, can be raised about the potential loss of competences and skills in the public sector, the risk of conflicts of interest and diminished accountability of government, the impacts on vulnerable groups and the drag on the analytical capacities to assess the impact of public policies. Attention should also be paid to the implications for beneficiaries beyond

national borders, when, for example, when foreign aid is suspended and/or resources are redirected to military capacity building.

The alternative to such a paradigm shift is building resilience to turmoil and polycrises addressing short- and long-term priorities and making demonstrable progress on achievement of the SDGs. Investment in both the problem-solving capabilities of public institutions and in inclusive, accountable governance is an essential foundation for action. There is an unavoidable need to come face to face with uncertainty and the need to navigate through adaptive learning. Investment in foresight is crucial.

Three key areas where sustainable, inclusive, science- and evidence-based solutions for achieving the SDGs and leaving no one behind are being effectively delivered, especially related to the cluster of SDGs under review in 2025, also bearing in mind the three dimensions of sustainable development and the interlinkages across the Goals and targets

Climate change and environmental policy serves as a prime example of how scientific evidence can provide a common ground for policy discussions, even amidst political tensions. By grounding climate policy in scientific evidence, policymakers can move beyond ideological debates to focus on collaborative solutions to this global challenge.

The critical importance of evidence in driving effective health policy and improving practice is also well-established across clinical care, public health, and health systems. WHO supports countries in adopting rigorous and transparent evidence-informed decision-making processes to enhance the effectiveness, efficiency and equity of health policies and interventions by optimizing resource allocation, minimizing research waste, and improving transparency and accountability.

Science enables policymakers to identify trade-offs and synergies and to design integrated and coherent strategies that maximize benefits across multiple goals while adjusting interventions based on real-time data. For example, advancements in clean energy (SDG 7) are not only critical for combating climate change but can also alleviate poverty (SDG 1) and improve health outcomes (SDG 3) by reducing air pollution and promoting sustainable development. Science provides the necessary tools to calibrate policy responses and to assess how robust or vulnerable they would be in different – positive or negative – futures.

By fostering interdisciplinary research that integrates insights from various fields, collaboration drives both advances in scientific understanding and enables more comprehensive and innovative solutions. In addition, the sharing of data and research findings among researchers and institutions accelerates scientific progress, minimizes redundancy and enhances the reliability and robustness of research outcomes. Crucially, the active involvement of stakeholders in the research process helps ensure that research addresses relevant concerns, leading to more effective and equitable interventions.

Three examples of measures to accelerate progress towards SDGs through well-coordinated actions in key transitions to bring progress to scale (food security, energy access and affordability, digital connectivity, education, jobs and social protection, climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution), building on interlinkages between SDGs to ensure cohesive progress

First, given the complexities of the current global context, advancing sustainable, inclusive, science and evidence-informed solutions for the implementation of the SDGs can no longer be generated solely by improving the functioning of the government machinery. New governance and institutional perspectives that integrate an understanding of the evolving global context and its influence on societies with government

actions and capacities to stay the course towards achieving the SDGs by 2030 need to be further elaborated and tested.

Second, efforts to implement the SDGs over the next five years should build on a systems thinking approach that recognizes the interdependence of global systems – adapting the framework of the SDGs to address turmoil and crises and the building of resilience for the future simultaneously. At the same time, political decisions must be communicated in a way that makes it clear whose needs are being addressed and what those needs are. Systems thinking without linking to people’s concerns may result in further distrust of governments.

Third, the Committee addressed the relation between the implementation of the SDGs and macro-level developments to some extent in its 2024 input to the HLPF. A pentagram of action brought to the attention of the forum referred to five key transformative actions to accelerate SDG implementation. These actions included: (1) prioritization of and planning for implementation of the SDGs; (2) budgeting for the SDGs; (3) a competent and capable public sector workforce; (4) effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels; and (5) broad participation and partnerships with stakeholders.

The five action areas of the pentagram remain highly relevant. There is no doubt that a competent public sector workforce, accountable institutions, investment in digital government, broad participation of stakeholders, among others, will remain key ingredients for progress on equitable delivery of the Goals, and on the implementation of any other public policies for that matter.

Follow-up actions and measures being undertaken by the Committee to support implementation of the 2023 SDG Summit Political Declaration and the outcomes of the 2024 Summit of the Future, to advance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Issues in prioritization of and planning for implementation of the SDGs is an ongoing subject of analysis for CEPA. The Committee’s work is intended to draw attention to the need for governments at all levels to reorient public policies explicitly towards the SDGs and maintain a long-term orientation in policy processes in the face of multiple crises. At the same time, where challenges are heavily impacted by complexity and volatility, leaders must be open to dynamic partnerships and a series of ‘small wins’ similar to delivering solutions to complex, ‘wicked’ problems. Advising ECOSOC on how public administrations can support the implementation and progress reviews of the SDGs – from both a short-term and long-term perspective – is at the centre of the Committee’s work.

The continued elaboration of the UN principles of effective governance for sustainable development and their operationalization by the Committee continues to provide an essential reference point for Governments and international organizations in building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels, including from sectoral perspectives.

The provision of expert advice on sound, inclusive, science- and evidence-based public financial management is one of its specific contributions to advancing commitments and actions in various development contexts. For example, countries are encouraged to develop or improve spending review frameworks and strategies and integrate them into the budget process. Such tools can provide systematic updates on public expenditure and enable the government to manage the aggregate level of expenditure, identify savings or reallocation measures and improve effectiveness of programs and policies.

The Committee similarly provides independent, expert advice on public sector workforce development, promotion of broad participation and partnerships with stakeholders in policy processes, leveraging digital technologies in government and other areas of concern.

Recommendations and key messages to be considered for inclusion in the Ministerial Declaration of the 2025 HLPF

Staying the course of SDG implementation within the 2030 Agenda at times of polycrises, geo-political tensions, conflicts and wars, declining trust in government, resource strain and fast changing technology requires an urgent shift of governments towards comprehensive systems thinking and action. A fundamental paradigm shift of public administration towards ‘small government’ and abandoning multilateralism risks creating more uncertainties and vulnerabilities globally, together with economic, social and environmental losses

Closing the governance gaps in systematic, science-informed analysis of interactions across SDG domains will enable the identification of root causes, accelerate the implementation of effective interventions, and strengthen the ability to track progress. A revival of strategic collaboration and co-creation across sectors and borders would renew opportunities of generating policy synergies in the delivery of interlinked public goods relating to climate, health, migration, and economic growth and development or political stability, reducing inequalities and promoting peace. Science-policy dialogue on interactions should serve as part of the foundation for policymakers and other stakeholders in defining priorities.

Strengthening the conditions for scientists to conduct high-quality, independent research and effectively engage in policy processes is pivotal. Clear channels of communication must be established to raise awareness of the need for relevant research agendas and to facilitate the timely and appropriate use of scientific evidence in policy formulation. Scientists need to convey the results of empirical research and analysis, theory development, modelling and foresight scenarios in formats that are synthetic, authoritative, timely and policy relevant, and can be related to the needs of people.

While science and evidence-informed solutions provide a valuable foundation, they should not be seen as the sole determinants of policy decisions. The implementation of the SDGs demands also new mindsets and transformational - not transactional - leadership. Legitimacy of elected officials and commitments to voters, considerations of coalition building, societal values, and high ethical standards are all factors that promote quality public policymaking and beneficial outcomes for all.