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Committee of Experts on Public Administration

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Application of the UN principles of effective governance for sustainable development for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals

Knowing better where countries stand on their way to 2030

This conference room paper was prepared by Committee member Rolf Alter in support of the Committee's deliberations on the application of the UN principles of effective governance for sustainable development for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. This note benefitted from a first round of comments from members of the Bureau in mid-2022. The Secretariat assisted with selected references to relevant ongoing work elsewhere in the organization.

Background ¹

In its previous sessions, the Committee agreed that it could be useful to associate a set of global Sustainable Development Goal indicators with each of the principles, with a view to strengthening the analytical basis for assessing the impact of reform policies on building strong institutions and achieving the Goals. Among other ideas, the Committee considered a model for understanding indicators at different levels of analysis, as well as a way of thinking about indicators in relation to the impact of the principles on sustainable development, the contribution of commonly used strategies and, at an operational level, support for structures and processes.

An initial question posed to the Committee concerned the data and indicators needed. There was an impression among the members that the field may be dominated by statistical offices, resulting in officially agreed indicators that may be well-supported by data but sometimes not sufficiently helpful to policymakers. It was also recognized that additional data collection and reporting requirements could be difficult to accommodate within existing resources. Enhanced transparency and better presentation of existing data should be actively considered. The Committee's work on indicators should be undertaken in cooperation with the relevant policy domains as well as data experts, such as those in national statistical offices.

The Committee and the Praia Group on Governance Statistics noted a high degree of conceptual consistency between the Praia handbook framework and the principles of effective governance, notwithstanding some differences in terminology. The Committee welcomed continued collaboration

¹ For additional details, see notes by the Secretariat on effective governance for sustainable development: putting principles into practice and reviewing outcome ([E/C.16/2020/3](#)) and on relating the principles of effective governance for sustainable development to practices and results ([E/C.16/2019/4](#)).

with the Praia Group and observed that a contribution could be useful in areas that may be less studied by the statistical community, for example in connection with the principles of collaboration, independent oversight, subsidiarity and intergenerational equity.

The Committee agreed that future work should draw on the work of the Praia Group on Governance Statistics and other initiatives, as appropriate. The Committee could especially benefit from the experience of the Praia Group in terms of various challenges in statistical methodology. Specifically, the adoption of an internationally agreed framework for assuring data quality could assist the informal working group in screening prospective indicators and data sets, both official and unofficial. The Committee noted that the elaboration of methodologies for tier III indicators for Goal 16 was one of the main activities of the Praia Group and looked forward to the Group's further progress in this area.

There was also a recognition among Committee members that some dimensions of effective governance for sustainable development were difficult to measure and that governance structures and processes were not static. Moreover, there were many tools available to measure governance. Some consideration needed to be given to harmonization, across and within regions, in areas where international comparisons was merited.

Owing to the detailed nature of the subject, the Committee decided to defer detailed further consideration of indicators to a future session and to invite its informal working group on the governance principles to continue to study the matter during the intersessional periods.

ECOSOC, for its part, has taken note of the initiative of the Committee to associate a set of indicators with each of the principles, with a view to contributing to strengthening the analytical basis for assessing the impact of reform policies on building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels, and to engage with regional organizations in putting the principles into practice ([ECOSOC resolution 2020/21](#), para. 10).

Potential future work

Strengthening national statistical systems and measurement and monitoring (M&M) are critical strategies of sound policy making, one of the CEPA principles of effective governance for sustainable development. The 169 targets and 250 indicators internationally agreed provide a robust framework for national monitoring and international comparison.

In the interest of accelerating SDG implementation, there is nevertheless space for further improvement of data governance, the institutional architecture of statistical systems and of the qualities and expansion of the range of indicators. The challenges of insufficient data in the context of COVID-19 and other current crises management also provide relevant insights of the importance of improving data availability and quality in support of broader and better SDG implementation.

The main purpose of the note is to support CEPA in considering whether to reinvigorate work on indicators of effective governance for sustainable development and how a short- and medium-term PoW on governance indicators by the Committee could be enriched through co-operation with the relevant United Nations organizations, regional organizations and professional and academic communities. Four lines of potential future work on indicators by the Committee have been suggested as described below.

1. Data governance for narrowing the data gap

Despite progress in the quantification of the SDGs and the definition of KPIs, data gaps continue to be a major obstacle to assessing performance in the implementation of SDGs of individual countries and

in cross-country comparisons. Missing time series, timeliness, granularity and comprehensive coverage add to the difficulties of precise monitoring of progress in implementation and impact of SDG policies. The same applies to qualitative indicators where standardization for the purpose of comparability is a particular challenge.

The experience of the ongoing polycrises demonstrates how data gaps tend to limit the choices of public support policies in favor of protecting citizens and private sector against economic hardship. Means testing and targeting vulnerable households and enterprises in the interest of delivering on the principle of leaving no one behind and budget efficiency are not applicable since data on income, consumption or cost of production are not readily available or not accessible due to data-privacy concerns. The alternative is general fiscal support through price and wage subsidies for all.

Narrowing the data gap expands the reach of effective M&M and facilitates identifying good policies or “policies that work” to inspire policy makers across sectors and boundaries.

As countries differ in their data governance arrangements and institutional architecture of data collection for SDG implementation, comparing approaches, pathways of transition towards SDG data collection, institutional set-ups, resources, competencies as well as methods of data collection in terms of sources and partners will enable an exchange of good practices and experiences.

2. Strengthening indicators of policy coherence

Despite the explicit consideration of synergies, trade-offs and unintended consequences among the SDGs to strengthen coherence of policies, applying the principles of collaboration, sound policy making, and M&M is generally suffering from a silo-based indicator framework and the lack of measuring institutional capabilities. Risk management facing interconnected and cascading events already long before COVID-19 is an obvious case of the urgency to develop more integrated indicators to respond to the complex web of interlinkages among SDG goals, principles of effective governance and strategies. Related UN-system efforts are underway to promote the collection of data on policy coherence (SDG 17.14.1) and to move beyond GDP through a scorecard approach.

Cross sectoral themes such as gender, youth or governance arrangements across levels of government require equally multidimensional indicators to capture the status quo of SDG implementation and the identification of good policies. Where national performance is part and parcel of global challenges such as climate change, coherence of data across countries is essential. The System of Environmental Economic Accounting (SEEA) provides a valuable example of common indicators.

3. Indicators for priority setting

Priority setting among the SDGs takes place generally at national level, as demonstrated by VNRs and other comparative country analyses. It requires top-level indicators to inform and enable decision making by political leadership albeit possibly at the expense of broadening and deepening the data base in the interest of comprehensiveness and thoroughness. A paper on the use of governance indicators in VNR and VLR under discussion in DESA could provide relevant contributions.

The call for strategic outcome indicators at priority setting levels was experienced already in the context of governments` transition towards performance-based policy design and implementation when many countries struggled with indicator overload. The way-out consisted in establishing very few high-level (outcome) objectives and cascading specification of performance (output) indicators with increasing degrees of detail, in particular in budgeting. Para 75 of the 2030 Agenda refers explicitly to an indicator framework covering all levels of government.

The availability of top-level indicators is even more important at times of crisis when the urgency of decision making takes precedence over medium- and long-term SDG based policy design and implementation. The current phenomenon of polycrises makes the call for indicators at ultimate decision-making level even more critical.

4. Indicators and indices

In the interest of effective governance for the implementation of the SDGs, indicators for prioritization and decision making at political leadership level should in principle be comprehensive. Indices are a frequently used methodology to encapsulate targets, instruments and institutional set-ups.

However, indices are criticized for their complexity, lack of transparency and the exclusion of qualitative assessments. Methodological improvements include, for example, easy references to the sources of data series to construct the index or detailed explanations of the weighting scheme applied. An international framework for the design of indices could contribute to standard setting, greater acceptance and alleviation of skepticism.

Issues for discussion

What are innovative data governance arrangements to favor and accelerate narrowing quantitative and qualitative data gaps?

Which data governance arrangements would support most effectively the development of integrated multidimensional sets of indicators?

How can development and choice of top-level indicators better align with the governance arrangements of priority setting?

How can governance arrangements contribute to co-existence and compatibility of different categories of indicators for the political leadership of government and the machinery of government?

What are the options of CEPA of carrying forward potential indicator topics?

- Integration with other Working Groups in design and implementation of indicator work
- Advancing individual or all lines of indicator work against selected Principles of Effective Governance and relevant strategies developed so far
- Linking up with the APRM for drawing on recent experiences on indicator work among AU countries
- Close co-operation with the UN Statistical Commission supported by the Secretariat
- Integration of CEPA indicator work into its peer dialogue with VNR/VLR countries