



International Institute of Administrative Sciences (IIAS)

Virtual Dialogue with Observers at the CEPA 20th Edition

SDG Implementation as a Strategic Policy Area

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The discourse of the SDGs, while noticeably clear on the goals to achieve and quite rich in terms of public policies that need to be put in place, tends to deemphasize the operational aspects of SDG implementation strategies. This has been brought to the fore in the current CEPA session through “recognizing the quality of institutions, institutional reform and governance as strategic policy area.”

In my opinion, this is the hardest to achieve because it seeks to align the implementation of sustainable development plans with the strategy. Indeed, once goals are identified, political commitment is secured, and public policies are developed comes the critical question: “Do we have the proper institutions to implement sustainable development strategies.” This bifurcates into several critical questions:

- Did we break-down the SDGs properly at the level of government and PA departments to ensure a coherent execution of policies and the integration of their implementation results at the end with a view to achieving the respective goals?
- Did we align governance processes or may be create new ones to ensure the proper implementation of operational development goals?
- Did we plan proper training and capacity building to achieve the goals?
- Did we do proper resource allocation to ensure the comprehensive execution of the goals?
- Did we define the right KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) to measure the proper realization of the operational goals first and the SDGs ultimately?

Finally, did we put in place the right management of change to ensure the smooth transition from the current state to the desired state so that the host institutions become self-propelling in their development drive. Quality institutions in this short opinion, as is meant also on the CEPA expert paper, refers to institutions that can translate SDGs into tangible results through proper operational plans. In so doing, it satisfactorily answers the above questions.

As the CEPA expert paper rightly suggests, this must be moved to become a strategic policy area for in its absence, failures will mostly occur at this level. SDGs cannot be achieved with institutions that lack

the necessary quality, that are not reformed or that do not operate based on principles of good governance.

I will now relate the above to some of the other measures and policy recommendations to realize the 2030 agenda of the SDGs, just to show that they are all interdependent and that failure to channel SDG implementation through quality institutions will void the process from its sustainability aspects. Additional remarks will be made in relation to some key aspects of SDG implementation as conveyed in the expert paper.

- A. In the strategic planning area, there is established evidence that strategies that divide roles between thinkers and doers end up resisted and distorted in their mode of implementation. Both cognitive and motivational problems seep into the process to stall the mainstreaming of the sustainable development strategies into existing institutions and processes. Doers (i.e., the public service departments that oversee implementation) develop a limited understanding of the strategies (cognitive problem) and are not motivated to implement them because they had a little or no say in their elaboration. **Structures and processes for sustained and multilateral consultation, coordination and cooperation** should hence engulf not only the planning level but also implementation.
- B. **Resource allocation** is key to the achievement of goals. After SDGs are broken down in finer operational goals at the level of different public service institutions, consequent resources must be allocated for their implementation. In the absence of proper operational planning of SDG implementation, no proper resource allocation can be done. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and in line with what is mentioned in the 20th session of the CEPA expert paper, many have called for “repositioning public service, rather than profit, at the center of fields such as health care, education, affordable housing, and social protection.” First this cannot be done in the absence of quality institutions that have proper management of change for strategic planning processes. Second and on a more fundamental issue, in most countries where public service is both ineffective and inefficient, this is usually not the result of pursuing profit at the expense of the social vocation of the state but of dysfunctions of the state because of the lack of good governance. We surmise that dysfunctional states are a bigger problem than profit-seeking states which can be converted into a more benign social function through adjusted resource allocation.
- C. **Sustainability is for the long-term** and requires long term policymaking. But long-term policies will not be effective if not implemented through quality institutions.
- D. “Strategy and direction of institutional, reform is often not seen as a policy area” while as argued above, it is central to reaching sustainability of development strategies. The reason behind this situation could be the disciplinary parochialism of those in charge of development strategies. Indeed, the building of quality institutions is more central to the discipline of public administration and public management than to that of political science or economics. The latter are thought to be more influential in forging the discourse and process of the SDG, hence the marginalizing of developing quality institutions as a strategic policy area.

- E. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a deep antagonism between the State, Government, and the Public Sector on one hand and the general public on the other hand. This was most evident in relation to the lockdown decisions and restrictive measures that were put in place in many countries of the world. The public frequently faulted public authorities for adopting restrictions that were harmful to the economic welfare of people. As a result, there have been frequent calls for civil disobedience and governments had to retract some of these measures as a result (e.g., Germany, Tunisia, etc.). Feelings of anger at the government sometimes run even deeper, and reflected a complete distrust in the entire public sector not only at the level of its public service delivery function but also in terms of its sociology; the term “administration’s people” was frequently used in Tunisia for example to illustrate that people that worked in the public sector, because they were assured of their salaries, were pushing for lockdowns and remote work at the expense of the vital interests of the rest of society. In such conditions of complete **distrust**, there could be no basis for sustainable development.

The International Institute of Administrative Sciences (IIAS), with its avowed mission, of “setting the governance agenda worldwide” has developed over its 90th year history a strong focus on building quality institutions. Its 40 or so study groups scattered across its different entities (IIAS, IASIA, EGPA, AGPA, LAGPA) deal with many facets of quality institutions. The SDG theme has become a permanent feature of its events and publications and is mostly tackled from the standpoint of good governance, capacity building, resilient institutions, inclusive development, etc. Some of its conferences were fully dedicated to one aspect or the other.