World Public Sector Report 2018

Chapter brief
Engagement with non-State actors
for integrated implementation of the SDGs

Background

Chapter 4 of the World Public Sector Report 2018 explores how the adoption of mechanisms for stakeholder engagement, both at the systemic and at the sector level, can affect outcomes in terms of integration.

The comprehensive scope of the 2030 Agenda requires coordinated action between all levels and sectors of government and all stakeholders. At the most basic level, awareness needs to be raised and ownership of the SDGs needs to be increased in the whole population if the Agenda is to succeed. Engagement is also key to building integrated visions and strategies for the future as a support to long-term transformation, and to achieving a shared understanding of complex problems and devise integrated solutions that benefit from large societal consensus, which in turn is crucial for ensuring ownership and commitment to those solutions. The interrelated nature of the SDGs requires the formulation and implementation of long-term integrated approaches and the balancing of perspectives from different actors operating in different sectors, and by definition, this can only be done through engagement. Also, adhering to the principle of "leaving no one behind" enshrined in the 2030 Agenda requires engagement with the full diversity of stakeholders, with a particular focus on marginalized groups and individuals. Hence, engagement is a requirement for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The 2030 Agenda clearly recognizes that achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires active action and involvement of all stakeholders. In particular, the SDGs call for inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels (target 16.7), and for inclusive and accountable institutions (SDG 16). Target 6.b and target 11.3 specifically refer to engagement in governance processes in water management and urban development respectively. The Agenda also mentions that follow-up and review processes must be "open, inclusive, participatory and transparent for all people" (paragraph 74d), and reviews should have a "particular focus on the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind" (paragraph 74e). Further, SDG 17.16 emphasizes the importance of enhancing multi-stakeholder partnerships.

A wealth of experience has been accumulated regarding processes and mechanisms for engagement in different sectors, at different levels of decision-making, and with different constituencies involved. The chapter reviews some of these experiences, focusing on how they can inform choices that countries will have to make in designing engagement mechanisms that enhance policy integration.

Stakeholder engagement and policy integration for SDG implementation

Advancing policy integration requires changed procedures for increased interaction with non-state actors - either through formal mechanisms or informal contacts and relations. Mechanisms that allow participatory, multi-sectoral and multi-level problem solving are needed, which need to involve a wide range of stakeholders, in addition to various levels of government.

Non-governmental actors are themselves key drivers of change. They can be directly engaged in solving policy problems and contribute resources through co-production. and can help keep the pressure on governments to act on the SDGs. As beneficiaries and monitoring agents in SDG implementation, stakeholders can contribute direct knowledge of how services and programs work for them in practice, and help governments identify policy solutions that are better tailored to particular contexts.

Different non-state actors bring distinctive benefits and value in their interactions with governments in the process of implementing the SDGs. For example, the engagement of women and girls helps bring gender considerations into policy in various fields. Children and youth inclusion encourages cross-generational thinking. The scientific and technological community can help strengthen the policy-science interface, help raise public awareness, provide information and evidence and identify good practices. Similarly, by engaging with the private sector governments can better mobilise resources and technical assistance through partnerships, as well as leverage the private sector's sustainability initiatives. The report shows that the identification of interdependences among sustainable development goals and targets can be a first step in identifying the set of stakeholders that can support integrated policies in relation to specific issues. It also provides examples of guidelines for stakeholder selection in relation to various issue areas that address the dimension of integration.

Engaging multiple stakeholders involves costs. The administrative costs of setting up and administering participatory processes, both in financial and human resource terms, can be significant. Wide stakeholder engagement takes time and can militate against quick policy responses. Managing stakeholder engagement and the expectations that engagement creates requires public administration and civil servants to build specific skills and capacities and to mobilize the necessary resources to effectively implement participatory approaches.

Tools for engagement: How do they contribute to integration?

There is a wide variety of engagement tools and mechanisms. Different groups of stakeholders require different processes and channels for engagement (e.g. individual citizens versus

multinational firms) as well as different incentives to engage. The literature has adopted multiple classifications to analyze them, none of which seems to be universally preferred to the others. Broadly speaking, all these classifications consider some or all of five broad dimensions: (i) level of engagement, from provision of information to full collaboration and empowerment. This includes the decision-making power of the mechanism; (ii) who the participants are and how they are selected; (iii) institutional design and setup, including level in the decision-making structure (e.g., working level versus high-level); (iv) stages of policy-making or strategic management covered by the mechanism; and (v) internal methods of work and rules of procedure of the mechanism, including methods of communication. The literature suggests that higher levels of engagement enhance development outcomes and may advance policy integration.

Engagement mechanisms at the systemic level

At the systemic level, there is great institutional variation in terms of the engagement mechanisms being used. Approaches build on the lessons learned during past decades, for example, from National Councils of Sustainable Development (NCSDs). In the SDG context, stakeholder engagement has taken place at different stages of policy-making, including: awareness raising on the 2030 Agenda; adaptation and prioritization of Goals to the national context; the development of national SDG implementation plans; SDG implementation; and monitoring and review.

Institutional structures for engagement involve several types of stakeholders and operate at various levels of government. While some of these structures are led by governments, others are led by non-state actors. Some institutions have decision-making powers while others are advisory bodies. Some engagement structures are created at the local level.

Efforts to engage stakeholders in monitoring, review and reporting are limited but gaining increasing attention at both the global and national level. Many Member States recognise the importance of engaging stakeholders in the process of preparation of voluntary national reviews (VNRs) at the UN high-level political forum on sustainable development. The extent of engagement and the methodology varies from country to country.

Engagement mechanisms at the sector level

Institutional attempts at integration at the level of specific sectors or issues have been widespread. The level of stakeholder engagement as well as the structures and approaches to foster stakeholder engagement seem to vary across sectors and within the same sector from country to country. The types of stakeholders engaged also vary within and between sectors. Participatory approaches that foster a high level of stakeholder engagement in planning and decision-making processes have been highlighted for example in ocean and forest management.

The types of structures for stakeholder engagement used in various sectors include multi stakeholder networks and platforms, multi-sectoral committees or councils, and advisory and expert committees. Consultation approaches also include public hearings, workshops, consultations through open

meetings, and incorporating stakeholders in teams responsible for preparing strategic documents (e.g. policies, plans or programmes).

Multi-stakeholder partnerships

UN Member States have placed high hopes on multi stakeholder partnerships (MSPs) for the realization of the 2030 Agenda. Several countries have put forward multi-stakeholder partnerships or created frameworks for those in relation with the SDGs. For example, the Netherlands has a broad coalition of over 75 different stakeholders referred to as the "Global Goals Charter NL". Participants ranging from companies, to banks, to civil society organizations, have signed the charter and are contributing to the implementation of the SDGs. Finland's whole-of-society approach to the achievement of the goals encourages stakeholders from all parts of society to make public commitments that contribute to the goals. At the sectoral level, MSPs have been increasingly prominent over past decades. The role of philanthropy in development has become more visible in recent years. Evidence in terms of how MSPs can contribute to policy integration is scarce, and the topic does not seem to have been systematically studied. Specific examples suggest that MSPs can be at odds with integration and coherence at the national level.

Challenges and way forward

There is no systematic evidence yet on the performance and effectiveness of engagement mechanisms – both informal and institutionalised- and how they may contribute to a more integrated implementation of the SDGs.

Typical challenges facing engagement and participation highlighted in the literature may also affect the impact of engagement mechanisms on integration. For example, differences in power, capacity and resources between the public, civil society, government institutions and the private sector can result in outcomes that heavily favor one or several of the stakeholders. This has been a recurrent concern in natural resources sectors, such as extractive industries.

Political factors play a key role in determining the way engagement mechanisms are designed and allowed to function, and their ultimate impacts on policy. The public administration literature underlines that engagement is a strategic policy tool that governments use to manipulate the outcomes of political processes. This explains the importance given by stakeholders to the specifics of selection and representation in multi-stakeholder processes, and the demands for transparency in this regard.

Some examples of stakeholder engagement show the potential of bottom-up participatory approaches that work across levels of decision making, involving soft forms of coordinated action to address specific development problems or seeking broad policy change. These exemplify the potential for engagement, horizontal integration and vertical integration to be mutually reinforcing.

More information

The World Public Sector Report 2018, its executive summary and other materials are available at:
https://publicadministration.un.org/en/Research/World-Public-Sector-Reports