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Public Administration and the Sustainable Development Goals

Prof. Dr. Geert BOUCKAERT, President;
Rolet LORETAN, Director General; and
Dr. Steve TROUPIN, Strategic Projects Officer
International Institute of Administrative Sciences

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) constitutes the global development agenda to be achieved by 2030.

2. Public Administration features more prominently in the SDGs than in the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). First, having a proper public administration system is now a stand-alone development objective. Second, public governance systems are now explicitly mandated to contribute to the realization of SDGs through policy instruments. Finally, the remaining SDGs are embedded and framed in public governance, and their realization will strongly depend on it. The formulation of the SDGs may refer to different levels of commitment, but still: public administration is everywhere in the SDGs. The first section elaborates on these three roles of public administration in the 2030 agenda.

3. This prominence of public administration in the SDGs is a positive development. As professional community, it now has the duty to take over these important responsibilities. In the second section, IIAS contributes to the SDG agenda by focusing on the performance management system for the SDGs.

II. THE THREE ROLES OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

-- Public Administration as a Stand-Alone Development Objective --

4. The MDGs focused on essential human needs: nutrition, sanitation, health, basic education, poverty alleviation... Their strength laid in this very simplicity.

5. Development is however much broader than that. It certainly encompasses the need to security, citizenship, and basic rights of human beings too.

6. The 16th SDG recognizes that. First, targets 16.1, 16.2, 16.4 and 16.a put a great deal of emphasis on the monopoly of violence governments are entrusted with: ensure the safety of citizens and prevent violence by other groups. It sets, second, basic rights of citizens: enjoying a legal identity (16.9), participating to decision-making (16.7), accessing to justice (16.3). Finally, it establishes some principles of good administration: promoting the rule of law (16.3), protecting fundamental freedoms (16.10), corruption-fighting (16.5), non-discrimination (16.b), access to information (16.10), and effectiveness, accountability and transparency of public administrations (16.6).

7. Other SDG targets directly relate to the policy instruments of public administration: women's participation to political decision-making (5.5), sustainable public procurement practices (12.7), policy coordination and coherence (17.13 and 17.14), and public-private partnerships (17.17).

-- Policy Instruments of Public Administration –

8. The SDGs are much more specific than the MDGs in terms of the policy instruments that public governance should be mobilize.

9. A first responsibility of public governance relates to the provision of developmental goods and public services, notably: social protection systems (1.3), housing and basic services (11.1 and 1.4), public transport (11.2), municipal waste management (11.6), domestic work (5.4).

10. Second, public administration is called upon to adopt policies, strategies or measures to achieve certain SDGs: poverty eradication policies (1.b), gender equality and empowerment policies and laws (5.c), access to water and sanitation (6), access to energy (7), economic policies aiming at supporting productive activities, job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovation (8.3), social protection policies (10.4), regulation of financial markets and institutions (10.5), migration policies (10.7), inclusion and integration policies (11.b), regulation of fishing practices (14.4), measures against degradation of natural habitats (15.5), against poaching and trafficking of protected species (15.7), and against the introduction of invasive alien species (15.8).

11. Third, public administration has the duty to refrain, to eradicate or interrupt certain policies or behaviours: eliminate agricultural export subsidies (2.b), prevent and treat substance abuse (3.5), eliminate discriminatory laws, practices and policies (10.3), rationalize fossil-fuel subsidies (12.c), or prohibit certain fisheries subsidies (14.6).

12. Fourth, public governance systems have to mobilize resources to achieve certain SDGs: for poverty alleviation (1.b), for rural infrastructure (2.a), for health (3.b), for scholarships available to developing countries (4.b), for R&D in general (9.5) and in the agricultural sector (2.a), to help developing countries combating climate change and its impacts (13.a), to protect biodiversity (15.a), to finance developing countries (17.2 and 17.3) and make their long-term debt sustainable (17.4).

13. Finally, the public administration contributions also extend to international circles: ensuring the representation of developing countries in international financial institutions (10.6), providing a global support to efforts to combat poaching and trafficking of protected species (15.c), promoting a universal, rules-based, open, non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trading system (17.10).

-- The Public Governance Embeddedness of the Remaining SDGs –

14. Like the MDGs, the remaining SDGs, although not explicitly relying on policy instruments of public administration, are nevertheless embedded and framed in a public governance context.

15. Public governance refers to the interplay between the public sector, the private sector and the non-profit sector for the realization of policy objectives.

16. Depending on the national contexts, the public sector will realize these SDGs on its own, or coordinate the actions of the private or non-profit sector on the other.

III. PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

-- Introduction –

17. Bouckaert & Halligan distinguish four levels of performance management: performance administration, management of performances, performance management, and performance governance. The latter two levels constitute an ideal-type where indicators measure the right things on a right way, and where the performance information is effectively used to inform policymaking, steer public administrations and render account.

18. Public administration literature has consistently emphasized the risk of decoupling between performance management and these functions, the former becoming a bureaucratic obligation bringing limited added value to the latter. It matters that the performance management system for SDGs avoids this risk, and effectively contributes to better policies, organizational performance and accountability.

19. According to Sustainable Development Solutions Network, the MDG monitoring system suffered from a number of flaws that prevented it from fulfilling its ideal functions: performance information was out-dated, incomplete and of poor quality, and the whole system had emerged more from trial and error than thorough planning.

20. Therefore, the performance management system for the SDG project received significant attention from the outset. A wide-ranging consultation with stakeholders led to two reports published in 2015 before the adoption of the SDGs bringing forward several guiding principles. The United Nations statistical commission mandated an Inter-Agency Expert Group (IAEG) to elaborate these principles further design a performance management system for SDGs.

21. In its March 2016 report, the IAEG proposed a set of 241 global indicators to measure the achievement of the 169 targets of the 17 SDGs (as a matter of comparison, the MDGs contained 8 objectives, 21 targets and 60 indicators). It also set several principles: member states are responsible for producing the performance information, national statistical agencies are the focal point in that respect, the performance reporting gets an annual character, national targets acquire a complementary character.

22. In this debate, the IIAS wants emphasizing two points: the importance of coupling the performance management system with the policy cycle, and of relying on thematic communities to achieve coordination.

-- Coupling SDG Performance Management with National Policy Cycles --

23. The SDG framework is an input to national priority setting. It expresses a strong vision, agreed upon by all member states, as to the direction nations should engage in. However, other inputs could drive nations in other directions.

24. The panel of the United Nations Committee of Experts in Public Administration, held in the 2015 IIAS Congress in Rio de Janeiro, led to one important insight: the SDGs are ambitious and all-encompassing to such an extent that no nation in the world will be able to realize all the goals, targets and indicators. Therefore, each member state should first initiate a national priority-setting process where priority goals and targets are set and translated into national indicators according to own needs, resources and cultural traditions. This was considered as essential for the national ownership of the 2030 agenda, the avoidance of the bureaucratic risk, and the effective realization of the SDGs.

25. The emerging performance management system for SDG puts much emphasis on the elaboration of universal indicators and the systematic production of performance information for purposes of global reporting. However, it is equally important to measure the level of commitment to the SDGs and the extent to which these commitments are realized. This implies that member states would report, in a standardized form, as to (1) the goals and targets they are really serious about, (2) the quantitative indicators they commit themselves to meet, and (3) the means by which they intend to measure their success. In such a scenario, global agencies would also fulfil supporting functions, providing technical guidance for the elaboration of indicators, and organizing platforms from countries to learn from one another's experiences.

26. Preparatory reports estimated at US\$ 1 billion the annual investment required to produce global performance reports on the achievement of DGs, and referred to the 2015 International Conference on Financing for Development to free up the necessary budgets therefore. This investment

should support member states in effectively realizing the 2030 agenda, not only in producing global performance information. It should upgrade the SDG performance management system from the level of performance administration to that of performance governance.

-- Trusting Thematic Networks to Achieve Coordination --

27. The recommendation formulated above – to let member states determine their commitments to the SDGs, define own indicators therefore, systematically collect performance information and report thereon – is theoretically expected to increase the value-for-money of the investment in the SDG performance management systems. It has an important drawback, however: member states will inevitably pursue different priorities and witness differing levels of ambitions. Specialization, in short, will come at cost of coordination – a classical problem in public administration.

28. Public administration literature distinguishes three coordination mechanisms: hierarchy, market and network. Setting universal indicators and reporting duties belong to the first category. IIAS recommends relying on network mechanisms as well.

29. SDGs will mobilize many specialized fields. Public administration is one of these fields. As indicated in the previous section, it will have a significant responsibility to help member states realizing the 2030 agenda. Other specialized fields have comparable responsibilities: the health sector, the water management sector, the education sector, the agricultural sector...

30. All these fields have achieved a significant level of institutionalization: for each of them, international agencies, national institutions, academic communities, professional associations, enterprises and NGOs exist.

31. Such institutionalized fields are organized into networks that provide them with the needed coordination. Research and development generate innovative ideas that are diffused inside the network, reinterpreted and translated by every actor according to its own context. With strong leadership, such processes could lead stakeholders to share the SDG vision – an outcome labelled institutional isomorphism elsewhere.

32. IAEG refers to these specialized fields as the thematic level of SDG monitoring, whose ascribed role is to complete the performance information provided by national statistical institutions on the achievement of global SDG indicators.

33. The contribution of these thematic networks to the 2030 agenda could and should be more significant. First, they have the expertise member states need to set adequate priorities according to the national context. This policy advisory function should be recognized and supported. Second, they have a role to play in ensuring the global coordination of national efforts to realize the SDGs, by organizing cross-national learning processes. Such processes rely on the comparison of national achievements and presuppose thus the production of performance information needed for purposes of global SDG reporting as well.

34. As an international organization organizing the production and diffusion of policy relevant public administration knowledge, the IIAS is willing to contribute to the SDG agenda, by engaging in comparative research in its Study Groups, by sharing national experiences in its Solution Groups, and by contributing to global debates through its general consultative status vis-à-vis ECOSOC.