Innovative Multilevel Coordination and Preparedness after COVID-19

Louis Meuleman[1]

How COVID-19 put multilevel governance under pressure and what innovations have come out of that

The COVID-19 pandemic and the simultaneous occurrence of many other crises—including climate-induced disasters, economic crises, and (geo)political conflicts—have changed the scope and course of government at all levels. National and subnational authorities have suddenly found themselves back in the driver's seat following (in many countries) decades of efficiency-driven measures which ultimately led to diminished capacity to address key societal issues. Whereas national Governments have often taken the lead in overall crisis management, subnational governments (at the state, provincial and municipal levels) have been on the front lines of street-level, hands-on governance. They have been confronted with the complexity (or "wickedness") of the challenges and compelled to deal with the paradox that many large challenges can simultaneously be crises (requiring immediate action) and complex problems (requiring multi-actor involvement and long remedial processes with many "small wins"). The cascade of crises in recent years has led to the realization that new and existing challenges surrounding multilevel governance need more attention.

Many countries reported in their voluntary national reviews (VNRs) of progress made towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that the pandemic had compelled them to make changes in their institutional structure.[2] Argentina established the Federal SDG Network for Provincial Governments to facilitate the exchange of ideas and strategies among governing authorities at this level for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The pandemic also accelerated the use of scientific data in decision-making processes. It prompted countries such as Greece, Italy, and the United Arab Emirates to leverage the development of digital services for the collection and aggregation of data to drive evidence-informed policymaking.

Although the levels of government within a country are usually legally and politically separated, they are still intertwined and engaged in multilevel governance. Generally, national Governments are well placed to observe the linkages between local and supra-local challenges at the subnational level and may be best equipped to respond to larger-scale challenges. Local governments are closer to residents and are often the first to identify emerging economic, social and environmental challenges. They may be best positioned to address such problems before they grow to a national scale.

While each country has its own politico-administrative, sociocultural and historical context, all countries share certain similarities. The current poly-crisis has forced national Governments to mobilize financial and other resources on an unprecedented scale. Because crisis and disaster management has been driven by extreme urgency, standard rules and procedures have in some cases been suspended for the sake of expediency; Governments have taken legislative shortcuts—sometimes bypassing legislators and key stakeholders and forgoing evidence-informed regulatory impact assessment to facilitate rapid implementation. National Governments, confronted with the continuation of crises, may feel the need to establish crisis governance as the "new normal". This would have consequences at the national level. For example, there would be less investment in the long-term strategies needed to achieve the SDGs and other aspects of sustainable development by 2030 (and beyond). The key principle of leaving no one behind would have lower priority. Policies would be less informed by scientific and stakeholder evidence. At the subnational level, the national focus on crisis management could imply a more restrictive legal framework in which to operate, less funding (with the diversion of more budgetary resources to national crisis management), and less freedom to use available budgets. Overall, the centralization trend induced by COVID-19 and other crises has exerted heavy pressure on relations between national and subnational governments. However, in such situations, there are always innovative practices that emerge—as (almost) everything becomes fluid under pressure.

Federal systems often have a powerful second level of government, and the federal Government cannot intervene in many policy areas. This can create tensions in a multilevel system. Belgium has three Regions that are each responsible for their own regional, provincial and municipal government; Germany has sixteen federal subdivisions (*Länder*) and Austria has nine; and Spain has 17 Autonomous Communities, each made up of provinces and municipalities that also have a certain level of autonomy. These and other countries with similar administrative structures are part of a multilevel governance system that is not primarily hierarchical. In such cases, important responsibilities relating to the SDGs often lie with the regional government, so appropriate mechanisms and structures need to be in place to facilitate effective multilevel governance in order to achieve the SDGs.[3]

From fragmentation to collaboration

The allocation of responsibilities and tasks to different levels of government, which is usually regulated in the national constitution, can represent either "fragmentation" or "specialization", depending on the circumstances. Fragmentation has a negative connotation and specialization a generally positive one. Specialization becomes fragmentation when the parts are not communicating and coordination is difficult. Fragmentation happens vertically between government levels and horizontally between policy sectors and their institutions. Ideally, vertical and horizontal fragmentation should be tackled together. In a fragmented institutional framework, the organizational—and mental—silos make it very difficult to adopt the holistic approach needed for the SDGs. Building trust is an important way to overcome silo thinking. Beyond this, trust is an important indicator of how people perceive the quality of government institutions in democratic countries and how they interact with them.[4]

As evidence of its commitment to counter fragmentation and promote collaboration between the different levels of government, Italy included in its 2022 VNR a thematic analysis of efforts to localize the SDGs. The VNR also included voluntary local reviews (VLRs) prepared by local authorities cooperating with central institutions in the implementation of the National Sustainable Development Strategy. Italy has decided to institutionalize policy coherence by including a national action plan on policy coherence for sustainable development as an annex to its National Sustainable Development Strategy.

From slow progress to real-time collaborative multilevel governance

As a reaction to the inflexibility and sluggishness of traditional rule-based relations between national and subnational governments, some countries have started to engage in real-time collaborative multilevel governance. The Netherlands, with its long-standing participative governance culture, has such a mechanism for addressing strategic policy issues, including the SDGs. Intergovernmental dossier teams have been established to discuss what each of the three tiers in the country's administrative system (national, provincial and local) can contribute to addressing challenges with a strong multilevel dimension. The three governance levels come together in real time to discuss how to tackle specific pressing problems. This is an additional approach that in no way undermines the subsidiarity principle or the legal hierarchy between the levels. In other countries, multilevel collaboration might not look the same; comparative research on urban sustainability transitions has shown that multilevel relations can differ among national governance cultures.[5]

Another example of real-time collaborative governance can be found in Colombia, where multilevel processes have supported the allocation of budget resources across territories and the establishment of common reporting formats.[6]

A review of VNRs shows that the SDGs are being used to incentivize better collaboration between national and subnational governments.[7] In Cabo Verde, 22 local platforms have been established as multi-stakeholder spaces to link national and local SDG strategies. In Spain, the Network of Local Entities for the 2030 Agenda integrates 317 local actors and aims to promote the coordination of actions at the local level to implement the 2030 Agenda.

A crisis is a good time to observe real-time collaborative multilevel governance. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal Government of Germany used a two-level pandemic crisis management mechanism: the Conference of Premiers of the federal states of Germany (*Ministerpräsidentenkonferenz*), with the participation of the Federal Chancellor (*Bundeskanzler*). The Conference played a leading role during the pandemic (a role that was unusual when compared with normal times), holding frequent meetings and taking decisions. Some of the decisions were implemented successfully, whereas others were not;[8] outcomes were mixed, and at times citizens felt confused by the complex results.

Between top-down governance and voluntary local reviews

Traditional multilevel governance is top-down. The local government tends to have little power, especially in presidential systems. The top-down approach can be fast in times of crisis, as observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is otherwise typically slow. National laws and policies might require years of preparation and even more time before they become locally embedded and practised. For example, the local implementation of new European Union legislation can take up to six or seven years from the time the initiative is adopted by the European Commission, in part because the rules first need to be translated into national legislation, linked to relevant action items, then delegated across the different levels of government.

The subsidiarity principle (as defined in article 3b of the Treaty establishing the European Community) limits the top-down approach to some extent. Subsidiarity aims to ensure that decisions are taken at the most "appropriate" level, with appropriateness referring to the capacity of public authorities at each level of governance to make decisions on issues of direct relevance to them and to implement related policies. The empowerment of local government makes bottom-up governance more effective since measures can be taken at the lowest level at which they can be implemented effectively.

VNRs presented at the 2022 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development offer evidence of a growing trend

towards localizing the SDGs.[9] The Government of Eswatini recognized an urgent need to decentralize functions and devolve powers to the local level in order to fast-track developmental projects and programmes and reduce disparities. A more centrally steered approach has been chosen by Indonesia to strengthen coordination between the national and subnational levels for the implementation of the SDGs.[10] There is a formal requirement to integrate the SDGs and the national medium-term development plan into medium-term regional and local plans. A roadmap is also required for implementation of the SDGs and other action plans, annual reports, and biannual monitoring systems at the subnational level. The VNR of Italy highlights the effective multilevel governance initiatives enacted by its regions, autonomous provinces and metropolitan areas to implement national sustainability objectives at the local level. For this, coordination mechanisms have been established between central and local authorities. The Government of the Philippines reports that it has sought to foster a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach to SDG integration through cross-sectoral SDG programmes, activities and projects implemented at the various subnational levels.

The adoption of the SDGs in 2015 seems to have encouraged subnational governments to become more involved in the global sustainable development discourse. Even before the SDGs were launched, cities belonged to international networks such as the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy, Local Governments for Sustainability, and United Cities and Local Governments. Many cities have taken the lead in tackling social challenges and in addressing climate change and other environmental issues. Frontrunning large cities often perceive government at the national level as opposing innovation and blocking progress. At the very least, this points to a lack of effective collaboration and communication in a multilevel governance context.

Local and subnational governments have become more vocal, ensuring that their voices are heard through channels such as VLRs and voluntary subnational reviews (VSRs) of SDG implementation. Only four VLRs were launched during the July 2018 meeting of the High-level Political Forum (by Kitakyushu, Shimokawa, and Toyama in Japan and by New York City in the United States), but such reviews have become increasingly popular; in 2022, 26 VLRs were presented at the Forum. The United Nations provides guidance and other support for the preparation of the VLRs.

Multilevel capacity-building

Level-specific governance frameworks may come into play with the division of tasks between national and subnational governments because different types of problems require different governance styles and tools. When tackling a climate-induced flood disaster, coordination is usually needed at a level above local authorities; when dealing with very complex problems, being close to citizens provides a better understanding of the challenges; and certain routine issues should not be dealt with bureaucratically or through lengthy dialogue but might benefit from outsourcing to an efficient private operator. Such level-specific governance approaches should be synergistic but can also be divisive and undermine progress if relations between the levels are not managed well. Capacity-building at all levels is needed to help authorities at each level understand the circumstances and responses from other levels of government.

Various SDGs (especially SDG 11) require implementation at the urban level and thus depend on strong engagement from local actors and institutions. This may require additional decentralization and devolution so that municipal powers are concomitant with responsibilities. The complexity of managing 17 interrelated SDGs may present difficulties for municipalities with capacity constraints or similar challenges.[11]

National action plans to increase policy coherence for sustainable development—in line with SDG target 17.14—can help Governments strengthen the capacity for effective coordination across government levels. Italy is currently one of the frontrunners in this area.[12]

Conclusion

Traditional multilevel governance—in which national Governments exercise control over subnational governments—has not disappeared and may even have become stronger as a result of the need for central crisis management in recent years. Nevertheless, more collaborative and bottom-up approaches are gaining momentum. This is important because, for a number of reasons, multilevel governance for sustainable development requires combining top-down and bottom-up approaches as well as the integration of the horizontal, cross-sectoral dimension.

Endnotes

1   Louis Meuleman is Visiting Professor of Public Governance at KU Leuven, Belgium; member of the United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA); Vice-Chair of the Scientific Committee of the European Environment Agency; and Director of the think tank Public Strategy for Sustainable Development (PS4SD) in Brussels.

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