United Nations | Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Inception meeting for the World Public Sector Report 2023

9-10 August 2022

United Nations Headquarters

New York

Expert group meeting organized by

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA)
Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government

The present document is the report of the expert group meeting entitled "Inception meeting for the World Public Sector Report 2023", held from 9 to 10 August 2022 at the United Nations (UN) Headquarters in New York. The meeting was organized by the Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government of the United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs (UNDESA).

For more information on the meeting, please consult: https://publicadministration.un.org/en/news-and-events/calendar/ModuleID/1146/ItemID/3143/mctl/EventDetails.

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the participants and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.

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Context and objectives

The expert group meeting was held in the context of preparations for the forthcoming edition of the World Public Sector Report. Since 2001, the report series has covered issues of global relevance in the field of public administration, including globalization and the role of the State, e-government, rebuilding public administration post conflict, human resources in public administration, participation and engagement, accountability and transparency, and institutional aspects of policy integration.

The 2023 edition of the report will coincide with the mid-point in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Since early 2020 and the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, progress on many SDGs has been negatively impacted and the long-term prospects for achieving the 2030 Agenda have become more dire. Among the observed impacts are deep economic woes, the erosion of trust in governments and public institutions, and increased inequalities and gaps adversely affecting specific groups in virtually all countries. In addition, basic preconditions for sustainable development such as peace and security have been negatively impacted in many parts of the world.

In these circumstances, and given the magnitude of the challenges ahead, it could fairly be asked what role institutional and governance innovations at the country level may be able to play in moving the implementation of the 2030 Agenda forward in coming years.

The World Public Sector Report 2023 aims to examine this issue from three angles:

(i) How can governments reshape the relationship with people and other actors to enhance trust and promote the changes required for more sustainable and peaceful societies?

(ii) How can governments assess competing priorities and address difficult policy trade-offs that have emerged since 2020 and may emerge in the future?

(iii) What assets and innovations could governments still mobilize to make progress on the SDGs?

The report will have three main chapters, which will consider these issues.

The report aims to be forward looking. Rather than focusing on the challenges, which have already been well documented since the beginning of the pandemic, it will emphasize elements and opportunities for putting the SDGs at the center of the policy agenda and make progress on sustainable development from now to 2030.

The 2023 edition of the report will depart from the model used to produce prior editions, which relied on syntheses of the relevant literature and material done by UNDESA staff. The aim for 2023 is to highlight a wide range of expert perspectives, and feature under each chapter of the report a set of short contributions (about 1,500 words in length) from global experts focusing on specific topics, complemented by short overview sections produced by UNDESA staff. Individual contributions will be nominative, with their authors fully recognized. Guidelines for these contributions will be provided by the report team to ensure some level of homogeneity in the contributions and across chapters.

The objective of the inception meeting for the World Public Sector Report 2023 was to collect expert feedback and inputs on the key issues that would need to be addressed under each of the chapters of the report. To this aim, the meeting gathered ten experts from academia and national and international non-governmental institutions, together with the drafting team for the report in UNDESA. Several experts had prepared and shared written inputs for the meeting at the

request of the organizers. The list of participants is included in Annex 1.

The detailed agenda of the meeting is included in Annex 2. An introductory session laid out the context of the meeting, as described above. The next three sessions were dedicated to the discussion of the scope and content of the three main chapters of the report. During the fourth substantive session, participants explored potential sub-topics under each chapter, which could warrant exploring in detail through expert contributions. The next session focused on how to make the report relevant and attractive, and on the elements that should be included in the specifications for expert contributions to the report. During the last session, the next steps in the preparation of the report were presented and discussed.

The remainder of the report elaborates on the issues discussed during the meeting and presents some of the main messages emerging from the discussions. It is organized by meeting session. Some themes and issues that were mentioned in more than one session are reflected only once to avoid repetition.

How can governments reshape their relationships with society?

Participants proposed that this chapter come first in the report, noting that the topic is foundational for the success of policy improvement and for the other two chapters as well.

Participants discussed the wording of the title. Some preferred to replace "reshape" with "enhance," noting that "reshape" can be both positive and negative. At the same time, "reshape" allows for addressing unknowns.

With regard to the premise and structure of the chapter, participants suggested that it assert at the start that its focus is the public sector, whose main goal is to provide goods and services to people who fund it. The overarching questions the chapter should address are how to make the public sector responsive and accountable to the public, and how relationships between governments and social actors have changed. It was questioned, however, whether government is in a position to reshape relationships, as without engagement and voice, relationships will continue to frustrate and fail all actors.

The chapter – and even the entire report – should clearly address the roles of different stakeholders, and specify that government is part of society. In addition to governments, social actors discussed include civil society, the private sector, donors, the public at large, the media, academia, and cooperatives. Cooperatives should be considered in terms of innovation and their relationship with government. For instance, there is an emerging trend in Europe and beyond of cooperatives serving as global networks of experts from different sectors working in support of the SDGs. The chapter should also address capacity to evolve and innovate.

In terms of how to illustrate innovative tools, practices and instruments, the chapter should share examples of good practices to promote cross-fertilization (taking care not to compare countries that do not share similar characteristics).

Several challenges and trends regarding the relationship between government and society, which is influenced by many factors, should be highlighted in the chapter. At the core of the issue, there are various, sometimes long-standing, governance deficits. For instance, lack of credible leadership and transparency; a prevalence of nepotism and corruption; and failure to prioritize social equity and to honor government guarantees, such as constitutional freedoms and protections, for which there is inadequate accountability. It is critical for the rule of law to be adhered to at all levels and applied fairly and inclusively to all without exception. Transparency and accountability should also be visible to the public.

These challenges are interrelated with the recent marked erosion of democratic values, traditions, and institutions. Faith in constitutional democracy is declining, and authoritarianism is

on the rise. Norms and standards are increasingly in question, including tolerance of opposition, fairness of electoral processes, and systems of checks and balances. There are efforts to reverse progress on human rights and civil liberties.

Some leaders push – and thrive on – toxic rhetoric and social divides, and will not listen to those who did not vote for them. There is growing intolerance of dissent and reduction of safe spaces for political activists and opposition parties. Many activists are being subjected to false accusations, such as promoting foreign agendas, and to physical attacks. Safe spaces must be established and protected. There is also a need to develop mechanisms to fund campaigns for political office, as resource gaps prevent participation in elections by opposition candidates and thereby sustain elite capture.

In particular, there is a shrinking of civil society space that is widening the gap between governments and civil society. The CIVICUS Monitor, which tracks the state of fundamental freedoms (of association, peaceful assembly, and expression) across countries and territories, found that just 3.1 per cent of the world's population lives in countries where civic space is open. Around a quarter of the population lives in countries where there is no civic space.

These conditions, where voice is stifled, lead to frustration and alienation, especially among youth. In extreme cases, they can even result in their radicalization.

Participants stressed the importance of creating an enabling environment in law, policy, and practice for the engagement of civil society. Reporting on the conditions of civil society partnerships and civic space and making recommendations on legislative and policy changes would contribute to this aim. The UN Human Rights Council's special procedures could be a key source of expertise into which governments could tap. It was proposed that the UN carry out an audit on progress in the implementation of the UN Secretary-General's Call to Action on Human Rights, which addressed civic space, and subsequent guidance issued on civic space. It could be undertaken in conjunction with the Our Common Agenda report's call for UN entities to set up civil society focal points, and a collection of best practices could also be considered.

Efforts can also be made to strengthen national human rights institutions (NHRIs), which support government structures. NHRIs could establish mechanisms such as civil society committees and advisory boards that enable partnership with civil society, for instance in investigating violations of civic rights.

In spite of a steady decline of civic space, participants recalled that many civil society actors were first responders when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Among other things, they helped to inform people about the spread of the virus, supported governments in inclusive decision-making, and distributed personal protective equipment. Several good practices on the part of governments during the pandemic have been identified, such as the inclusion of civil society representatives in presidential task forces and government committees, which led to better and more inclusive decision-making; stimulus packages that had provisions for civil society organizations; the inclusion of information about civil society services and activities on government websites, which enhanced transparency; and tax incentives for giving to civil society organizations.

In the context of holding governments to normative standards, participants also discussed the notion of standards for civil society organizations, which are numerous and diverse and not always aimed at serving the interests of the general public. This centred largely around transparency with regard to membership and funding, which could enhance trust. However, it is important to be wary of laws applicable to civil society that are used to target or exert excessive control over organizations.

Another key trend identified by participants is a retreat by governments from the provision of

public services in favour of privatization, such that people need to pay for services. This outsourcing of government's most basic responsibilities represents an abdication of the social contract between governments and citizens/residents. It contributes to nepotism, corruption, and lack of transparency, enabling policy influence for money, and can undermine accountability for service provision. The need to reaffirm and strengthen the social contract was emphasized.

It was also stressed that disadvantaged social groups often do not receive public services. This is not because they cannot be reached, but because social inclusion and equity are not being prioritized or efforts to promote them are misused for political expediency rather than empowerment (for instance, recipients being required to be members of the ruling party).

Public policy must take into consideration society's culture and norms, yet be firmly grounded in universal human rights. In fact, more than 90 per cent of SDG targets are connected to international human rights obligations. The institutionalization at the national level of international instruments such as rights treaties enables governments to be held accountable for them by other social actors. Investment in local research and development could support these aims. Human rights impact assessments are essential for policies and strategies, in particular to address the needs of vulnerable groups. They would also serve to counteract the growing power of corporations.

Participants further addressed the trend of misinformation and disinformation, with facts increasingly in dispute. Crises can undermine people's ability to process complex information. Yet access to accurate information is necessary to make well-informed decisions, in particular regarding health, hence the WHO raising the alarm about an infodemic amidst COVID-19. Inaccurate information, including propaganda, as well as censorship affect civil space and can suppress minorities and other disadvantaged groups. Journalists who report accurate information risk coming under attack. Not enough has been done by governments and international institutions, including the UN, to promote accuracy of information. There are lessons from the past from which to draw on, for instance effective information campaigns about HIV.

In the African region, there has been a significant increase in the number of anti-misinformation (false news) laws. However, those laws do not seem to be effective. Rather, they have led to an increase in self-censorship and have had no identifiable effect on the level of harm misinformation has caused. Punitive laws on speech do not increase trust in government and can discourage people from political participation.

Addressing misinformation requires proactive, rather than reactive, action by governments. It is important for governments to give people access to accurate information and meet people where they are in doing so by engaging with them in accessible ways that take account of literacy and languages used by individual communities. Transparency and accountability are key. Countering misinformation requires understanding that people have questions and, working with the information they have, engaging with them to provide answers. Fact checks should provide a clear explanation of what is false and be prompt and repeated, and corrections sought and even required as well as made visible to those most likely to be misinformed. It can also help to involve and educate community leaders, who could engage with communities in their own language. Media literacy training for children and adults should further be stressed. Governments can engage in partnerships with schools, universities, and media outlets to support such efforts.

Accurate information and data need to be prioritized in government funding for research and reports, from police departments' crime statistics to administrative agency reports on activities and budget spending. Civil society

organizations also need to come to the table to analyze that information and use it to hold governments to account. The publication of information is vital, even though it can be misused.

All of the challenges cited above contribute to a lack of social stability and cohesion and plummeting trust in public institutions, which in turn affect access to public services.

Finally, in order to reshape/strengthen the relationship between government and society, all social actors must show up and participate. Multistakeholder engagement and mutual public accountability are key. All actors, including public institutions, should also be representative of those they serve, which enables legitimacy and trust. Within governments, quota systems – where they exist – are not always enforced.

To promote meaningful citizen/resident engagement in government decision-making, communities must not be treated as beneficiaries only. It is important to avoid tokensim and to work with communities – where they are – to arrive at solutions. Information about how the public can participate needs to be made widely available and in accessible formats (e.g. for persons with disabilities and speakers of minority languages). Examples of relevant initiatives include engagement commissions, participatory budgeting, citizen assemblies, and inclusive youth programmes. Caution must be exercised to prevent any actor or actors from influencing public policy in a way that limits the voice of other actors.

How can governments assess competing priorities and address difficult policy trade-offs that have emerged since 2020?

The chapter builds on the hypothesis that accelerating the implementation of the SDGs requires enhancing the policy space and allocating resources to policies with the most impact on SDGs, which in turn requires strengthening coherence and synergies and managing trade-offs at different levels. Various elements could help enhance synergies and address trade-offs, including the generation and provision of scientific knowledge and evidence to inform policymaking; governance and financing systems and structures that support integration; and procedural elements (e.g., a common policy frame, authority and information) to ensure that policy integration is sustained over time. Expert inputs and the plenary discussion contributed to the identification of trends and experiences related to the theme, and provided suggestions in terms of the chapter's approach and framework, and relevant key messages it could convey.

A reconsideration of public administration has long been foreseen. What is new is the recognition of this need at the highest levels of national and international institutions. The complexity of the SDGs requires universal and complex systems approaches to achieving global outcomes. The SDGs have encouraged governments to think in terms of systems and interconnected goals. Despite the challenges of the current context, there are opportunities for continuing to move in this direction. Policy priorities should not be solely determined in response to crises. The SDGs, as an integrated set of longer-term objectives, should guide government action and the identification of policy priorities, including in times of crisis.

Strategic foresight can help unlock SDG complexity and enhance understanding of how public administration, democratic institutions and the public sector need to change. There is a need to work at different levels to promote change: citizen, organizational/ technical, and leadership levels. Strategic foresight innovations include, for example, an intergenerational fairness assessment tool, which looks at policies with an intergenerational lens. It seeks to scrutinize commitments from senior leaders to young generations, both ex post and ex ante (e.g., related to public debt). Other examples are participative foresight and cross-generational dialogues, which

aim to make citizens' assemblies able to integrate inter-generational perspectives and elaborate scenarios and long-term visions. These are connected to the "national listening exercises" mentioned in the UN Secretary-General's report on Our Common Agenda. There are toolkits available to support conversations and capacity-building. It is important to connect these dialogues to traditional engagement and decision-making processes. Experience shows that they can lead to different conversations and policy ideas. They are a powerful way to bring young voices into expert processes and to promote learning across countries. A third innovation relates to building foresight ecosystems and future generations institutions, learning (from multiple stakeholders. There is a need to build resilient systems, which involve all the relevant actors, including the legislature and audit bodies, with connections not only to the Ministry of Finance, but also to universities. However, there is also a danger to think that the "solution" is institutional and structural only – cultural factors and connections to financial decision-making are critical both at system and sector level.

The report should emphasize the importance of principles and values. Presenting solutions to people in a purely structural, institutional or technocratic way does not help engage them. Many tools and approaches have already been tested. Change is about power and the role of citizens. The report should reflect on the importance of the public sector as a steward, and how it can support citizens to hold their governments to account.

The importance of culture and people working together was also highlighted. Government can be understood as an ecosystem where people can play with each other to create new experiences, innovations, and new ways to look at and reframe things. Weaving people together in an ecosystem can make a difference for advancing SDG implementation.

Another area in which the SDGs have had a positive impact is budget systems. Several countries have made an effort to link budget allocations to development objectives (e.g., Argentina, Colombia, Mexico and the Philippines). This trend needs to be further supported and encouraged as a way to make trade-offs more clearly assessed and acted on. This is particularly relevant in the current context, as austerity and limited fiscal space require most governments to make drastic choices. Governments should also be encouraged to better link Public Financial Management (PFM) decisions to development outcomes for different groups in society.

Open data and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have facilitated these changes in budget systems. However, there are also some limitations. First, the quality of information varies across countries. Second, improvements in the legibility of budget allocations do not always trigger policy changes. Also, reforms to link budget allocations with development objectives have mainly been aimed at reporting, rather than informing policymaking. Finally, while civil society is active in key SDG areas such as climate change, CSOs often lack budget knowledge. Using budget information would help all stakeholders to more effectively advocate for change to support SDG implementation. PFM ecosystems should engage with multiple stakeholders beyond the executive (parliament, supreme audit institutions, independent fiscal institutions, etc.).

Participants highlighted some examples of changes in managing policy trade-offs as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, including at the local level. For example, the city of Bogota (Colombia) made the decision to invest significantly in childcare, domestic care, and training for women. This triggered positive results in terms of productivity, employment, security, and addressing violence against women. The investment itself was not significant, but very focused and comprehensive. At the national level, New Zealand's focus on well-being might have also had an impact on how the country responded to the pandemic. The discussion also emphasized

the importance of not only addressing trade-offs, but also synergies as well as "trade-ons" among policies (i.e., mutually beneficial and reinforcing policy decisions).

The loss of trust in government was again identified as a key problem, as it undermines the effectiveness of government action. This challenge has been further compounded during the pandemic, as governance processes were suspended and given the erosion of democratic institutions in many countries. In this regard, participants highlighted the importance of capturing in the report how good governance, quality decision-making, legitimacy and trust, compliance with legal obligations, the rule of law, accountability and transparency can be safeguarded and institutionalized. They also highlighted that both professional civil servants and civil society have been key actors in resisting this democratic erosion.

Participants agreed on the need to clearly define innovation, avoiding the trap of understanding it as mere novelty and/or associating it only with ICTs. Innovation is not going to solve all problems. It will depend on how it is used, where, for what and by whom. Several participants noted that governments have been slow at harnessing emerging technologies for good. There is also a risk that innovations are adopted in a performative, ritualized way. In addition to innovation, the report should also consider how we use what we already have in government in a more efficient way.

Participants highlighted the important role of cities (and particularly large cities) in promoting innovation. Some of the most innovative solutions to current sustainable development challenges will come from cities.

There are challenges associated with the accelerated digital transformation brought about by the pandemic. Not only because of the digital divide, but also related to "data extractivism" – extraction of data from the online presence of people, in a way that is feeding algorithmic decisions that often generate new forms of discrimination or reinforce existing ones. Simultaneously, new technologies may help governments to mobilize resources and to design and implement compensation systems that better reach different groups.

Moreover, as technology companies lead developments, the regulatory role of the public sector as well as the adoption of international standards (e.g., UNESCO's principles of ethics in artificial intelligence) often are behind. Participants noted that impact assessment tools (e.g., environmental, social) may help identify some of the potentially discriminatory impacts of new tools and technologies.

Participants underlined that the report should convey a clear message in terms of the value of globalization and multilateralism. An approach to resilience based (only) on national action is not feasible. The role of the UN as a centre of global approaches is key to promote mutual learning and foster knowledge-sharing across countries. Multilateral agencies often play a key role in promoting and advancing new approaches. For example, the engagement of multilateral development agencies with national governments in foresight work has made a significant difference in the level of implication of national actors in South-East Asia. Moreover, the report should consider the importance of multi-stakeholder approaches. Different stakeholders can work together to foster a common understanding of problems and possible solutions.

While recognizing the value of multilateral responses, participants also highlighted the need to take a contextual approach when analyzing innovations, policy synergies and trade-offs at the national level. For example, consider the implications of emphasizing the role of ICTs when large segments of the population in African countries do not have access to electricity. Also, in the context of the pandemic, countries have balanced policy priorities in different ways, based on their contextual circumstances. For example, Malawi's judiciary overruled the government's

decision to go on lockdown based on economic and livelihood arguments.

Participants also emphasized the importance of focusing on coalition building and how to build networks of change. Strong systems-level interventions in critical areas may help bring about change. Participants stressed, for example, the need for "indigenous" decision-making; a stronger role of international organizations in holding governments to account; and designing institutional processes that connect issues inter-generationally to inform decision-making. Participants also highlighted the importance of knowledge, managing and connecting to new forms of knowledge, and engaging youth in order to rethink the future of public administration.

Investing in talent and capacities and co-creating capacity development and training for the public service is critical. An integrated approach to government requires training and changing mindsets. In the Philippines, for example, before applying foresight methods, training and capacitating personnel of the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) was key to enable people to think creatively and find new solutions. Governments, civil society, and the private sector need to think differently to act differently. For example, while risk management systems exist in public administration, they are usually not integrated with other cross-cutting functions and systems. Training the public service and other stakeholders is key to support sustained integration of core public administration systems and processes.

What assets and innovations could governments still mobilize to achieve the SDGs?

Attaining the SDGs is challenging in the context of multiple crises - including COVID-19 - and shrinking budgets. Governments and local communities played a central role in the COVID-19 response. Participants noted that several institutions, particularly institutions of justice, did not ensure checks and balances during the pandemic. Yet, innovations have enhanced public service delivery in education, among other areas. India offers an example of a shift to public versus private education during the pandemic (reversing earlier trends) and experimentation to reach learners in under-serviced areas during lockdowns due to COVID-19. Education services can effectively leverage and scale up innovations that emerged during the pandemic and increase their responsiveness to bridge the learning gap created by protracted school closures.

Participants noted the need to rethink and reframe public administration and build the capability to imagine things that do not yet exist to help achieve the SDGs. There was a call to move away from a business model that treats citizens as customers. Government must be people-centred and inclusive; a model based on values and ethics is more desirable.

A trend identified was the growing role of the public sector in most countries since the pandemic, which raises questions about the size and role of government in the future. Participants suggested that the issue of the size of the government should be about the "smart" size that fits society's needs. It may relate to the number of people receiving services and the number of areas regulated by public authorities. It is not only about the number of people working in government, but also about the capacity of the government to bring the private sector and other stakeholders to the table. It should also be seen in generational terms, in line with population patterns. It would be interesting to explore how the pandemic may have spurred a reconsideration of the consensus in terms of what corporations "owe" to governments and society in exchange for the provision of basic infrastructure and other assets that they use.

The future belongs to a flexible public sector that is agile, innovative and effective. Innovation requires a rethinking of the current model of operation of the public sector. It should not only be seen at the digital but also at the analog level.

It is about doing things differently, transforming while combining innovation with effectiveness and efficiency. To thrive, innovation requires an enabling environment that encompasses infrastructure, regulation, organizational culture, mindsets and capacities, among other things (it was suggested that a checklist of what such an environment would entail could be annexed to the WPSR). While civil servants need optimism and agency (the power to influence), it is important to also look beyond government and its capacities and examine how other actors, including the private sector, can be mobilized.

Participants reiterated the suggestion that the report reflect on the respective roles of key stakeholders. They emphasized the importance of engaging people at the community level (through legal authority) to strengthen deliberative public engagement processes and co-create conditions that can foster progress on the 2030 Agenda. The pandemic offered opportunities to strengthen the role of frontline public workers and their relationships with local governments in a joint effort to achieve the SDGs. The local government ministry in India was cited as an example of the use of action planning to achieve the SDGs at the local level. An indigenous system for managing land in British Columbia, Canada, which empowered every person to voice opinions, was considered an example of a bottom-up and participatory deliberative governance framework. Yet, it was also mentioned that there is often a gap between consulting with the public and actually taking their voices and inputs into account for policy design.

Some participants emphasized the need for rule-based and well-defined public administration arrangements to be in place for participatory decision-making and self-determination. Others observed that a "gamification" approach to participation is desirable, as it does not require knowledge about a specific issue and allows stakeholders to voice concerns and question assumptions. It was noted that the impact of participation goes beyond its immediate results, and also includes the changes it produces for those who are engaged (e.g., participatory budgeting is not only about a reallocation of resources, but also increases people's understanding of the budget process).

Communities and individual citizens can be mobilized as assets through community co-production. Cooperatives, among other actors, can help advance the SDGs in a more targeted way. Co-production can also happen around SDG data, targets and indicators. An example from the USA ("Community Voice for Health"-community health needs assessment survey) illustrates how community-engaged research can inform what governments do to collect survey data and reflect the voices and needs of underserved communities. Nevertheless, co-production faces challenges when there are threats to democracy; in some instances, it may also lead to dissatisfaction with service delivery. Co-production requires a mutual accountability framework, among other factors.

Participants discussed current trends around digital technologies and the role they could play in transforming the delivery of specific SDGs and targets, as well as in helping to monitor and measure progress in their implementation. Because the change digital technologies produce is not predictable in all contexts, it is important to avoid oversimplified narratives of their positive impact on SDG implementation. Digitalization is part of the solution but is not a response by itself. Contextual responses are needed, especially at the local level. It was noted that during the pandemic, digital transformation exposed the vulnerabilities of excluded groups in many contexts (digital divides). It also unveiled new threats, including expanded citizen surveillance by totalitarian regimes.

Participants also discussed the need for global digital cooperation to support the attainment of the SDGs. International solidarity is essential to respond to the global crisis. Global and local protocols around digital public goods can allow governments to be agile and deploy data while helping to preserve privacy. The intellectual

property regime is particularly relevant when it concerns technologies that are affecting fundamental rights (e.g. to health and education).

Addressing the negative impacts of digital transformation to promote inclusion and equality may require a rethinking of public spaces and the current notion of public good and common interest. It is also important to reform policy and regulatory environments to support the co-existence of different models for providing connectivity and the opening of space for various actors beyond corporations to play a role, including community networks. Attention to resources and institutional frameworks is needed to ensure the full impact of digital transformation.

Beyond digital inclusion, people need to be engaged to meaningfully shape and use the internet and digital technologies to meet their specific needs and realities. The mobilization of collective intelligence can inform responses to persistent and emerging challenges and identify areas with high potential for transformation to achieve the SDGs. The co-creation of digital solutions should be underpinned by values and principles related to human rights, sustainable development, gender equality, and social and environmental justice.

Discussion on specifications for expert contributions and how to make the report relevant and attractive

There was a discussion of the draft specifications that will be used to guide the framing and drafting of the sections to be provided by external expert contributors under each chapter. The experts were in agreement with the approach proposed by the drafting team, which focused on the following elements:

- Brief description of the sub-topic; its importance (or renewed importance) in the context of the pandemic; its relationship to the topic of the chapter; and its relevance for SDG implementation;
- Background and policy context in which the observed changes happened (including, for example, how they were affected by the conditions prevailing during the pandemic), the stakeholders involved, and the problem they aimed to solve;
- Illustration of (some of) the changes observed through examples (from one to several to many, e.g., through a table). Examples could be about innovative practices, tools, institutional processes, organizational change, among others;
- Results or trends observed (as of today); strengths and challenges that have emerged. Promising innovations, and, in case they have already been observed or evaluated, impacts (including how the pre-pandemic institutional landscape may have been altered);
- Prospects for the promising innovations, new arrangements and practices described above to be sustained over time and effectively support the attainment of the SDGs, taking elements of the national context into account (e.g., recovery from COVID-19, fiscal space, legal and regulatory framework, political support).

Participants stressed the need to explain to expert contributors that the report is going to be different from previous editions and will be developed with a different approach. In their contributions, experts should be encouraged to refer to a few key relevant resources that can allow interested stakeholders to dive deeper into the topic. They should also be encouraged to include policy recommendations in their sections.

Building on the substantive discussions from prior sessions, participants outlined their suggestions in order to make the report relevant and attractive.

The report should be informative, coherent, illustrative and actionable. It should clearly state

how it differs from other reports and how it is expected to be used.

A suggestion for the overall framing of the report was to explain its relevance to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, taking note of the current context, and illustrating how the content of the report provides clues to making progress towards the SDG and reducing the gap between where we are and where we would like to be by 2030.

Several participants said that the report should have a constructive tone which recognizes the interests and values of all stakeholders. It should acknowledge the complex environment in which the public sector is currently operating and the difficulties it confronts. The report should be considerate of differences that exist across countries.

The report should be thought-provoking and convey the sense that achieving the SDGs is possible. Ideally, it should make readers question their assumptions. It should use examples and experiences, present and past, to take readers into the future by highlighting possibilities and opportunities. The report should emphasize that there is value in collective intelligence, in collaboration, and in generating options. Case studies can provide a good entry point to showing realistic opportunities and ways of doing things.

There was a suggestion to include, at the beginning of each chapter, an overview of the key challenges from the lens of that specific chapter, and then set the framework for exploring and analysing opportunities.

It was pointed out that attention will be needed by the report team to ensure the coherence of the report, both across and within chapters, so that the different inputs relate and speak to one another.

There was agreement that the report should not shy away from providing recommendations. One of the approaches suggested was for the report team to build on recommendations provided by experts in their contributions to produce key messages for practitioners. It was also suggested to write the conclusion in an open manner, presenting options and inviting the reader to further reflect.

There was a suggestion to include a checklist of key issues to be considered for the adoption of innovative approaches in an annex to the report. Another suggestion was to provide an overview of the main global processes which are going to take place in the next five years, also in an annex.

Lastly, it was suggested to document the reach of the report and follow up on stakeholders' take-up of its messages.

Next steps

The timeline for the preparation of the report was still being discussed at the time the meeting was held. The key deadline is the SDG Summit, which will take place in September 2023. The goal is for the content of the report to be finalized by the end of August 2023, so that its key messages can be distilled around the Summit.

Intermediate milestones are as follows, subject to adjustments as the preparations unfold. In September 2022, the report of the meeting will be finalized and shared with the meeting participants. Starting in September 2022, the scope of the chapters of the report will be refined, and the report team will identify potential external contributors who could address relevant sub-topics under each chapter. As relevant, participants in the expert group meeting may be contacted for further suggestions regarding the themes that they suggested for inclusion, as well as experts who could address them in the report. Starting in October, contributors would be contacted by the report team and invited to send drafts of their sections by the end of 2022. In parallel, research and drafting for the overview sections would start. A first complete draft of the report would be produced during the spring of 2023. During the summer of 2023, the report will be finalized and approved, edited, and designed.

Annex 1. List of participants

Yamini Aiyar
President and Chief Executive, Centre for Policy Research

Rolf Alter
Senior Fellow, Hertie School Berlin's University of Governance

Lisa Amsler
Distinguished Professor, Keller-Runden Professor of Public Service, The O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs, Indiana University

Valeria Betancourt
Communications and Information Policy Programme Manager, Association for Progressive Communications

Shermon Cruz
Founder, Executive Director, and Chief Futurist, Center for Engaged Foresight

Juan Pablo Guerrero
Network Director, Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency (GIFT)

Naledi Mashishi
Researcher, Africa Check

Gogontlejang Phaladi
Development Practitioner, MD Pillar of Hope org

Mandeep Tiwana
Chief Programmes Officer, CIVICUS

Cat Tully
Founder and Managing Director, School of International Futures

Lisa Ainbinder
Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government, UNDESA

Aránzazu Guillán Montero
Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government, UNDESA

David Le Blanc
Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government, UNDESA

Valentina Resta
Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government, UNDESA

Juwang Zhu
Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government, UNDESA

Annex 2. Agenda

TUESDAY, 9 AUGUST 2022

09:30 - 10:00	Registration
10:00 - 11:00	Opening Session *Opening remarks:* Mr. Juwang Zhu, Director, Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government (DPIDG), United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) *Introduction of participants* *Overview of the meeting agenda and report preparation:* Mr. David Le Blanc, Chief, Institutions for Sustainable Development Goals Branch (ISDGB), DPIDG, UN DESA
11:00 - 13:00	Session 1: Expert presentations and plenary discussion on key issues to cover in Chapter 3, entitled "How can governments reshape their relationships with society?" *Moderator:* Ms. Lisa Ainbinder, Governance and Public Administration Officer, ISDGB, DPIDG, UN DESA *Presenters:* • Ms. Gogontlejang Phaladi, Development Practitioner, MD Pillar of Hope org (Botswana) • Mr. Mandeep Tiwana, Chief Programmes Officer, CIVICUS (USA) • Ms. Naledi Mashishi, Researcher, Africa Check (South Africa)
13:00 - 14:30	Lunch break
14:30 -16:30	Session 2: Expert presentations and plenary discussion on key issues to cover in Chapter 2, entitled "How can governments assess competing priorities and address difficult policy trade-offs that have emerged since 2020?" *Moderator:* Ms. Aránzazu Guillán Montero, Senior Governance and Public Administration Officer, ISDGB, DPIDG, UN DESA *Presenters:* • Ms. Cat Tully, Founder and Managing Director, School of International Futures (UK) *(remote)* • Mr. Rolf Alter, Senior Fellow, Hertie School Berlin's University of Governance; Member, UN Committee of Experts on Public Administration (Germany) • Mr. Shermon Cruz, Founder, Executive Director, and Chief Futurist, Center for Engaged Foresight; Chair, Association of Professional Futurists (Philippines) • Mr. Juan Pablo Guerrero, Network Director, Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency (GIFT) (USA)

WEDNESDAY, 10 AUGUST 2022

09:15 – 11:15	Session 3: Expert presentations and plenary discussion on key issues to cover in Chapter 1, entitled "What assets and innovations could governments still mobilize to achieve the SDGs?" *Moderator:* Ms. Valentina Resta, Senior Governance and Public Administration Officer, ISDGB, DPIDG, UN DESA *Presenters:* • Ms. Yamini Aiyar, President and Chief Executive, Centre for Policy Research; Member, UN Committee of Experts on Public Administration (India) *(remote)* • Ms. Lisa Amsler, Distinguished Professor, Keller-Runden Professor of Public Service, The O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs, Indiana University (USA) • Ms. Valeria Betancourt, Communications and Information Policy Programme Manager, Association for Progressive Communications (APC) (Ecuador)
11:15 - 11:30	Experts break into two groups (one remaining in the 23rd floor conference room and one directed to the 17th floor conference room)
11:30 - 12:30	Session 4a: Identification of (i) subtopics to be highlighted under the chapter overviews in sections submitted by experts, and (ii) potential contributors (2 breakout groups) *Group 1 facilitator:* Ms. Valentina Resta, UN DESA *Group 2 facilitator:* Ms. Aránzazu Guillán Montero, UN DESA
12:30 - 14:00	Lunch break
14:00 – 15:00	Session 4b: Identification of (i) subtopics to be highlighted under the chapter overviews in sections submitted by experts, and (ii) potential contributors (plenary) *Moderator:* Ms. Lisa Ainbinder, UN DESA
15:00 - 16:00	Session 5: Discussion on (i) how to make the report forward-looking and useful; (ii) templates for expert contributions *Moderator:* Mr. David Le Blanc, UN DESA]
16:00 - 17:00	Session 6: Next steps: process for producing the report Closing *Moderator:* Mr. David Le Blanc, UN DESA

Annex 3. Sub-topics identified by experts for the three chapters of the report

Breakout group 1:

Chapter 1: How can governments reshape their relationships with society?

A sound methodological argument to explain why the relationship between governments and society could be enhanced (indicators such as levels of trust in public administration)

Examples of tools such as barometers to assess the relationship between governments and society: e.g. the Citizen Ownership Index that measures faith in one's country, in one's leaders; the World Justice Project (a global comparative assessment over time - around 130 countries)

Legal frameworks that give voice to citizens across the policy continuum (US example)

Examples of meaningful (non-tokenistic) citizen engagement, participation with government

Shrinking of civic space

Regulatory frameworks around access to information (need for cybersecurity that doesn't reduce civic space)

Civic education to promote awareness of rights to engagement, domestication of international instruments (to empower, build capacity of civic society)

Representativeness of the civil service – at all levels – and how it enhances inclusion and strengthens ties

Chapter 2: How can governments assess competing priorities and address difficult policy trade-offs that have emerged since 2020?"

Progress in foresight and its integration into policy evaluation systems (to see the connections across the goals) / risk management (vs crisis management)

Existing processes to examine trade-offs need to be upgraded into integrated, transparent and participatory SDG-based decisions-making, with accountability mechanisms (weighing emergency measures and constitutional processes)

Malawi case: the judiciary supported the public in rejecting the government lockdown

Harmonization of statutes (constitution, public health act, etc.)

Budget process transparency, integration, SDG tagging

Chapter 3: What assets and innovations could governments still mobilize to achieve the SDGs?

Capacity of civil servants to deliver services; space for civil servants to innovate and fail – changing mindsets

Institutionalizing the engagement of the public in service delivery

Corruption (regulatory frameworks; enforcement; asset recovery mechanisms) – impact on people and SDG achievement (Brazil example; raising awareness of UNCAC)

Evaluation systems of policies and legislation (their underpinnings, away from well-being and towards growth)

Roles of the private sector and civil society; co-production

The crisis as an opportunity to create change (inspired from the presentation on changes in the education system in India during the pandemic by Yamini Aiyar)

Closing the digital divide

Innovation should enhance efficiency and effectiveness and access to services (e.g. justice)

Innovative tools: Gamification, artificial intelligence, data analytics (but the chapter opening should clarify that innovation is not just about tech, and the examples cited should not just be about tech)

Local level: address the local level, but the local level needs resources and coordination with the national level -- multi-level governance

Civil servants must know about the SDGs, including to effectively support multilateralism

How to safeguard good governance practices? (through law, practices, etc.)

Annex to the chapter: checklist for an enabling environment for innovation (including organizational culture)

Breakout group 2:

Chapter 1: How can governments reshape their relationships with society?

Discussion about relationality in the context of governance – what relations are all about: interactions, agreements/disagreements…

Space for youth political participation in Africa

Visions to achieve "high trust societies": example of Ambition 2040 in the Philippines

Transparency of the global supply chain for digital technologies

Quality of public information systems for effective, meaningful communication with citizens (global)

How much dialogue and communication is taking place in virtual settings (including virtual health, job search), and how may this change decision-making?

[Increased] centrality of community life

How much information have governments disclosed about their activities, about public services?

The digital divide and its impacts (e.g. on education) ; community-based solutions for connectivity

Link between digital and physical public services (new digital services do not make up for broken public services)

How collective behaviors can be mobilized during crises: example of *Bayanihan* ("collective heroism") in the Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic

COVID as an opportunity to restructure institutions and processes: example of the Futures Committee in Parliament in the Philippines

Complementarity of participatory decision-making and self-determination in governance

What mechanisms do States have to address corruption?

COVID-19 as an "awareness raiser" of global issues

Chapter 2: How can governments assess competing priorities and address difficult policy trade-offs that have emerged since 2020?"

Contextual: shrinking fiscal space as determinant of public choice

Using the COVID-19 experience to re-think about how to address crises

How did the practices and impacts of institutions change: example of the Futures Committee in the Philippines

Budget tagging for the SDGs/ linking SDGs with planning and budget processes: from reporting to use in decision-making?

How to make civil society use budget information more? Linking climate change movements with decision-making on budgets

Strategic foresight (and lack of access by civil society to it) as a mechanism to elicit clarity

How to sustain democratic values/ principles even in emergencies?

Chapter 3: What assets and innovations could governments still mobilize to achieve the SDGs?

Transparency of agreements between governments and the private sector on private provision of public services

Issues regarding data safety/cybersecurity provided by the private sector

Unpacking the dominant discourse on cybersecurity and privacy

The role and risks of automation (chatbots, AI) in public services

Focus on participatory budgeting

Gender approach to public administration

What is the doctrine about obligations of private companies to the State (taxes, revenues, etc.), and how has it changed? (tech companies, vaccines, etc.)

Indigenous groups in governance

Independence and professionalization of the public service

Ownership of specific goals / SDGs by civil society to defend key rights and institutions

Emergence of new leadership literacies