INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The year 2023 marks the midpoint in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. From 2015 to 2019, the international community paid significant attention to progress made on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The role of public institutions and public administration as essential levers for the transformations required to make progress on all SDGs was well recognized, thanks among other things to the existence of a dedicated Goal (SDG 16) on peace, justice and institutions.

In early 2020, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic caused an abrupt shock in every country and the international community. Even before the pandemic, many SDGs, including SDG 16, were not on track to be achieved by 2030. Beyond the profound initial disruptions caused by the pandemic, which negatively impacted progress on many SDGs, its continuation over a protracted period caused serious setbacks in the prospects for achieving the 2030 Agenda. Among the lasting 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. The pandemic imperiled and even reversed progress in expanding women's rights and opportunities. In addition, basic preconditions for sustainable development such as peace and security have been negatively impacted in many parts of the world.

While at the beginning of 2022 the world was cautiously anticipating a progressive end to the pandemic restrictions, the war in Ukraine, among other impacts, triggered sharp rises in energy and food prices globally, resulting in global inflation. Subsequent geopolitical events have negatively impacted basic preconditions for sustainable development such as peace and security in many parts of the world and have threatened to further derail progress on the 2030 Agenda, making SDG targets more difficult to address in the short and medium terms.[1] In this changed context, it is crucial not to lose what has been achieved so far and to identify opportunities for advancing progress.

In many ways, the pandemic exposed pre-existing long-term trends and risks affecting the relationships between people and their Governments, including the polarization of public opinion, misinformation and disinformation, increased inequalities, the negative impacts of digital divides, and reduced opportunities for participation. It also revealed institutional weaknesses affecting the coherence of policies across sectors and collaboration among levels of government and further underscored the inequalities in access to basic public services such as education, health and justice. The pandemic gave some of those trends and risks higher visibility and salience on the international policy agenda,

as reflected in *Our Common Agenda*, a landmark report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations published in 2021.[2] The pandemic also exposed weaknesses in the critical functions of government, including risk management and crisis preparedness, communication with the public, science-policy interfaces, transparency and accountability.[3]

At the same time, out of necessity, public institutions across the world had to experiment and innovate during the pandemic. Innovations were observed both in the inner workings of public institutions and the way they interacted with one another and the broader society, and at the interface with people in relation to public service delivery. In some sectors drastic changes were made, such as the shift to online teaching and learning, with both positive and negative impacts. New ways of delivering critical public services through collaboration with non-State actors were found. Tools were mobilized by a range of actors to maintain or expand transparency and accountability around key actions of Governments, including the use of public funds and policy changes that impacted human rights and civic space. The range of institutional innovations observed during the pandemic was vast and diverse, as no two countries faced exactly the same set of challenges at the same time or had the same institutional landscape. Interestingly, in some sectors and for some types of institutions, there have been efforts to document changes implemented since 2020.[4] However, this has generally not been the case.

Capitalizing on successful institutional innovations undertaken during the pandemic could be a powerful enabler of the type of transformation that is called for if public institutions are to support the realization of the 2030 Agenda—making them more effective and resilient to shocks, more participatory and inclusive, more forward-looking and able to steer societal change, and more transparent and accountable, as called for in SDG targets 16.6 and 16.7.

Starting from this premise, the 2023 edition of the *World Public Sector Report* represents an effort to examine institutional changes that were observed in different contexts, sectors and policy processes, and to explore the potential for preserving and building upon successful innovations that can have a positive impact on the achievement of the SDGs in the post-pandemic period. The key question guiding the report is this: What role can institutional and governance innovations play at the country level to move the implementation of the 2030 Agenda forward in the coming years?

The report is designed to be forward-looking. Rather than focusing on the challenges, which have been well documented since 2020, it emphasizes opportunities for putting the SDGs at the centre of the policy agenda and making progress on sustainable development between now and 2030.

Scope of the report

The report examines institutional changes at the national level and their potential for the post-pandemic period from three angles:

- How can Governments reshape their relationship with other actors, including the people they serve, to enhance trust and promote the behavioural changes required for more sustainable and peaceful societies?

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

- What assets and innovations can Governments mobilize to transform the public sector and achieve the SDGs?

These three questions cover key areas of focus of past editions of the *World Public Sector Report*. The 2018 edition looked at institutional integration in the context of the SDGs. The 2019 edition reviewed six key institutional principles encapsulated in the SDGs and their operationalization across the 2030 Agenda and in specific SDG areas. The 2021 edition included a chapter that took stock of institutional changes driven by the pandemic. The reader is referred to those reports for more in-depth information. Of course, the present report focuses on only three of the many potential dimensions of interest that could have been selected. The chosen scope does not include, for example, the topic of public service funding, a longstanding subject of discussion among public administration scholars and practitioners that received considerable attention during the pandemic and has been given even greater attention in its aftermath.

Methodology

The planning and preparation of the *World Public Sector Report 2023* was led by the Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government (DPIDG) within the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA).

The present report follows a model different from that of previous editions, which were integrally written by DPIDG staff. In order to reflect a wide variety of perspectives and explore selected issues in greater depth, the report team chose to solicit short individual contributions (about 1,800 words in length) from a wide range of global experts, who were asked to review institutional developments in specific areas under each of the main chapters. The report presents those contributions, along with overview sections written by UN DESA staff that frame the theme of each chapter and introduce salient questions. Another United Nations report for which this model was used was the *Trade and Environment Review 2013*, published by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.[5]

Once the model for the report had been agreed, the writing team convened an expert group meeting at United Nations Headquarters in New York in August 2022 to support the framing of the report.[6] The meeting gathered ten experts from academia and non-governmental organizations together with the report team. The discussions covered key issues that should be addressed in the chapter overview sections. It also provided an initial list of subtopics under each chapter that might warrant in-depth examination through targeted contributions from qualified experts.

After the meeting, the team narrowed down and refined the list of subtopics. Experts (including some of the expert group meeting participants) were invited by the lead author of each chapter to address these topics. For each contribution, brief terms of reference were prepared. As a general direction, contributors were asked to highlight whether and how changes had been implemented in public institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic to address or mitigate multiple intersecting challenges related to the implementation of the SDGs. The different contributions present the subtopic, explain its relevance (new or renewed in the context of the pandemic), and highlight its potential for contributing to SDG implementation in the post-COVID-19 period. Depending on the specific subtopic, the contributions focus on innovative practices, tools, institutional processes, or organizational change, and use examples from different country contexts to illustrate the main arguments. Each contribution contains key messages, policy recommendations or action points that could inspire national Governments, international organizations, and other stakeholders to move forward. The report features 23 contributions by 38 experts (see below).

In reading the report, it is important to keep in mind that the overview sections for the three main chapters are not a summary of the expert contributions. In general, their scope is broader and includes topics that are not addressed in the expert contributions. The latter are intended to complement the former by giving an in-depth view of selected subtopics and suggesting policy recommendations.

Content of the report

In addition to the introduction, the report includes three substantive chapters and a conclusion.

Chapter 1: How can Governments strengthen their relationships with society?

In recent years the relationships between people and Governments have been profoundly altered. Civic space is eroding globally, and its nature has changed. Increasing polarization is observed within societies. Perceptions of corruption have increased. Inequalities have widened, and many have limited access to justice. The accuracy of information has become a pervasive and contested issue. The role of

traditional media has declined, while social media have been playing an expanding role in shaping, pushing and manipulating opinions. The traditional channels and trade-offs of "voice" and "exit" seem to operate differently now than they did 20 years ago. The rapid move to digital government is reshaping the relationships between people and the State. These trends were already apparent, but many became more visible or salient during the pandemic period, to the point that restoring trust between people and public institutions is now seen as a key goal as well as a critical requirement for achieving progress on the SDGs.

Against this backdrop, the overview section of the chapter recalls the importance of positive relationships between government institutions and other actors in society for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals and highlights some of the ways in which these relationships are measured and assessed. It then examines governance deficits and opportunities in three key areas: the delivery of responsive and inclusive services, government transparency and accountability for meeting commitments, and the expansion of digital government. The section then reviews some of the post-pandemic opportunities for Governments to reverse adverse trends by supporting democratic values, traditions and institutions, preserving and broadening civic space, and combating disinformation and misinformation.

Expert contributions to this chapter cover the following topics:

- Towards a fair fiscal contract? What do the private sector and high-net-worth individuals "owe" society?

- Gender equality in public administration: a new normal for Governments three years into the pandemic

- Communication with social actors on the COVID-19 pandemic: implications for future crises

- Regulating the use of digital technology by public administration to protect and strengthen human rights

- The appetite for e-justice is a chance to advance Sustainable Development Goals and entrench rights protection

- Civic space and the COVID-19 pandemic

- Youth voice and sustainable public policy: rejuvenating urban democracy

- Combating misinformation as a matter of urgency: an African perspective

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

The circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the intensity and importance of the interdependencies among the SDGs. Reversals in the implementation of some SDGs may influence the achievement of other SDGs, creating new patterns of interlinkages. Looking forward, policy trade-offs can be expected at different levels in the general context of fiscal hardship and increased public debt, which limit policy space in the long term. How Governments choose to address such trade-offs and how they engage with citizens to identify paths forward and generate support for their policies is likely to depend on both the capacity within the Government and elsewhere to analyse existing and potential trade-offs and the political will and availability of mechanisms to translate analysis into decision-making.

The overview section of this chapter provides examples of changes in institutions that support decision-making by Governments to resolve trade-offs at different levels and in different sectors. It highlights how Governments and public institutions have used tools such as budgets, risk management, science-policy interfaces, modelling and scenarios to analyse trade-offs, frame corresponding policy choices for the public, and make decisions. It explores innovations undertaken to increase policy coherence, coordination across sectors and levels of government, and engagement with non-State actors, as well as changes made to improve preparedness and resilience to shocks. The chapter highlights limitations and opportunities for the future in those areas.

Expert contributions to this chapter cover the following topics:

- Managing policy trade-offs and synergies at the national and local levels as the urgency of Sustainable Development Goal progress and priority-setting rises

- Building synergies for equality and economic recovery: innovation in social protection systems in Sri Lanka

- Strengthening the science-policy interface in order to operationalize sustainable development

- Operationalizing strategic foresight to better support Governments in managing Sustainable Development Goal trade-offs and synergies in the post-COVID context

- The role of transnational networks and professional exchanges in supporting an integrated implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals

- Risk management in the aftermath of COVID-19: its role in improving the assessment of interlinkages and strengthening synergies to support the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals

- Evidence-based resource prioritization for Sustainable Development Goal implementation

- Government expenditure and sustainable development prioritization: lessons from the Policy Priority Inference research programme

- Building legitimacy for difficult policy choices and trade-offs through open, transparent and inclusive government

Chapter 3: What assets and innovations could Governments mobilize to transform the public sector and achieve the SDGs?

The pandemic period witnessed a wave of effective innovations designed to improve accountability, transparency, public engagement, public service delivery, and approaches to inclusion. Beyond changes in legal and regulatory frameworks and policies, innovations encompassed changes to systems, actors and processes within public administration, as well as changes made at the "front line" or interface between Governments and citizens. While some of these changes may be difficult to sustain now that the pandemic has ended, many innovations may be put to use going forward.

The overview section of this chapter examines the context in which innovation in public administration and public institutions more generally can be understood. It outlines innovations in oversight, transparency and accountability and in multilevel governance, and it highlights the role public servants play in experimenting, innovating and institutionalizing change. The role of digital technologies as a tool for innovation and their expanded role during the pandemic are addressed. The chapter then briefly explores four dimensions of innovation at the interface between Governments and people: innovative and resilient engagement mechanisms; co-production and changes in service delivery; inclusive service delivery; and technology-driven service delivery.

Expert contributions to this chapter cover the following topics:

- Governance reform and public service provision: institutional resilience and State-society synergy

- Uplifting innovation through co-creation: from the local to the global level

- Innovations in health-care service delivery during the pandemic

- Innovative multilevel coordination and preparedness after COVID-19

- Blended learning in medical higher education: new modalities driven by the COVID-19 pandemic and their influence on innovation and performance in a public university in South Africa

- Rethinking the current model of operation for the public sector after COVID-19

At the end of each substantive chapter, a table highlights specific recommendations made by the expert contributors, unfiltered by the report team. The aim is to reflect a diversity of concrete proposals for action that can be taken by national Governments, non-State actors at the national level, and various actors within the international community.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

A short final chapter highlights the report's main findings, going beyond individual contributions to highlight key areas of action that emerge from the three main chapters. The conclusion ends with a short prospective section that outlines a few essential questions that should inform the debate on transforming institutions to support the realization of the 2030 Agenda.

Endnotes

1   See United Nations, "Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: towards a rescue plan for people and planet: report of the Secretary-General (special edition)", advance unedited version (May 2023).

2   United Nations, *Our Common Agenda: Report of the Secretary-General* (Sales No. E.21.I.8), available at https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf.

3   See United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *National Institutional Arrangements for Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals: A Five-Year Stocktaking—World Public Sector Report 2021* (Sales No. E.21.II.H.1), available at https://www.un.org/en/desa/world-public-sector-report.

4   Examples include the following: as highlighted in the *World Public Sector Report 2021*, efforts were made to review databases created after the beginning of the pandemic to document changes in access to information laws and their applications; the *World E-Parliament Report 2022: Parliaments after the Pandemic* reflects on the rapid acceleration of the use of digital tools by parliaments during the pandemic and implications for the future; and the report of the 25th UN/INTOSAI Symposium (2021) takes stock of the responses to the pandemic among supreme audit institutions across the world, focusing on both their working methods and their strategic priorities.

5   United Nations Conference on *Trade and Development, Trade and Development Review 2013—Wake Up Before It Is Too Late: Make Agriculture Truly Sustainable Now for Food Security in a Changing Climate* (UNCTAD/DITC/TED/2012/3) (Geneva, 2013), available at https://unctad.org/webflyer/trade-and-environment-review-2013.

6   For more information, see United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Inception meeting for the World Public Sector Report 2023", report of an expert group meeting organized by the DESA Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government and held at United Nations Headquarters in New York on 9 and 10 August 2022.