



**NATIONAL INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS:
A FIVE-YEAR STOCKTAKING**

World Public Sector Report 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



**United
Nations**

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Economic and
Social Affairs



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With one third of the implementation period of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) having elapsed, it is important to take stock of how far countries have gone in adapting their institutional frameworks to implement the Goals.

Institutions are paramount to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is well recognized in the Agenda itself. Five years after the start of the implementation of the Agenda, governance issues remain at the forefront. Since 2015, most countries have progressively adjusted their institutional frameworks to support their commitments to implementing the 2030 Agenda.

Starting in early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted even more the importance of national institutions for the achievement of the SDGs. The pandemic and governments' responses to it have impacted the functioning of public institutions in ways that directly affect the capacity of governments to deliver the SDGs, starting with the basic functions of government and public administration such as law- and policy-making and public service delivery. The pandemic has also revealed institutional weaknesses in areas critical for piloting the SDGs. On the other hand, the year 2020 has also witnessed institutional innovations in areas as diverse as administrative management, stakeholder engagement, transparency and accountability.

In this context, it is doubly important to take stock of institutional developments for implementing the 2030 Agenda at the national level. The World Public Sector Report 2021 aims to shed light on this area, through a focus on three aspects of it: the evolution of institutional arrangements for SDG implementation; the development, performance, strengths and weaknesses of monitoring and evaluation systems for the SDGs; and the efforts made by governments and other stakeholders to enhance the capacity of public servants to implement the SDGs. These three dimensions were relevant before the pandemic and have arguably taken on even more importance since then. The report draws on information at the global level as well as desk research on a sample of 24 countries from all regions. The report also examines the broader impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on national institutions and their implications for delivering on the 2030 Agenda.

Changes in institutional arrangements for implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals at the national level since 2015

Chapter 1 undertakes a comparative analysis of institutional arrangements adopted mainly by a set of 24 countries to deliver specific functions in relation to SDG implementation. Many countries are still putting in place or adjusting key elements of their institutional systems with regard to SDG implementation. On the whole, there is a general trend of deeper institutionalization as well as multiplication of entry points for various actors to support SDG implementation. In fact, compared to other internationally-agreed development frameworks, the first five years of implementation of the 2030 Agenda have seen unprecedented institutionalization at the national level.

The chapter examines changes in several institutional areas that are considered critical in enabling SDG implementation, namely the adaptation of legal and regulatory frameworks at the national level; the integration of the SDGs into national strategies and plans; the development of SDG implementation roadmaps; the creation of piloting structures in government; and the development of aspects of national monitoring and reporting on the SDGs. Greater and more complex institutionalization of the SDGs can be seen in national settings since 2015. The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs have achieved relatively high visibility as well as political salience as an overarching policy agenda in both developing and developed countries, with most countries having put in place coordination arrangements for implementation at a high level. The Goals' integration into national strategies and plans, and their reach into government agencies working in all sectors and across levels of governments, are evident. Also striking are efforts made by national governments to measure progress on the SDGs, both through global and national indicators.

Institutionalization of the SDGs has occurred at different speeds across countries, and within countries across levels of government and parts of the institutional system. While institutionalization does not seem to have occurred more rapidly in either developed or developing countries, many developed countries took a long time to institutionalize the SDGs. Patterns of institutionalization of SDG implementation at the country level are highly idiosyncratic, and no regularities or "typical" patterns are easily discernible across countries; nor are institutional adjustments always gradual or even linear.

Since 2015, institutional entry points for key stakeholders to get involved in SDG implementation at the national level have tended to increase in number and importance, reflecting the increasing maturity of institutional arrangements. They have enabled parliaments, supreme audit institutions, subnational and local governments, non-governmental organizations, academia and experts, and the private sector to engage in various aspects of the elaboration of relevant strategies and plans, SDG implementation, monitoring, follow-up, review, and evaluation, and feedback to policymaking. Yet some institutional actors contribute more than others to the mechanisms and processes set up around SDG implementation.

In many countries, parliaments are still not playing a regular role in oversight of government actions to implement the SDGs. Many parliaments, however, have issued at least one report on SDG implementation since 2015. The engagement of supreme audit institutions differs significantly across countries. As regards civil society, opportunities available for participation and levels of engagement also vary. However, in general voluntary national reviews (VNRs) have catalyzed civil society engagement around the SDGs, even in countries that did not have a strong tradition of engaging civil society in decision-making. The engagement of local governments is highly variable across and even within countries. Sustained efforts at SDG localization have borne fruit in some contexts, including in the form of voluntary local reviews. The existence of national coordination and advisory bodies often enables and facilitates various forms of engagement with the Goals by non-state actors as well as subnational and local governments.

Significant differences remain across countries in terms of the depth of SDG institutionalization. Institutionalization at the national level is therefore a work in progress, with most countries still in the process of refining their institutional arrangements for implementation of the Goals and integrating them within the broader institutional system. This long process is not surprising given the time it takes to change institutions as well as the broad range of the Goals, and some trends are encouraging. In many countries, there is still potential for further engagement of various stakeholders in SDG processes. Here too, the trends are encouraging.

Evaluations of the effectiveness of institutional arrangements for SDG implementation at the national level are still scarce. There is scope for greater activity in this area, as well as significant insight to be gained from it.

Monitoring, follow-up and review of the Sustainable Development Goals at the national level

Monitoring, follow-up and review systems and processes are essential for the effective implementation of the SDGs. Countries would ideally integrate SDG monitoring, follow-up and review into existing monitoring and evaluation systems to avoid overlaps and parallel systems. However, given the diversity and different level of institutionalization of existing monitoring systems, countries are at different stages of, and taking different approaches to, SDG monitoring, follow-up and review. Chapter 2 analyses these efforts and identifies strengths and opportunities for improvement in relation to how countries are integrating SDG monitoring with other monitoring processes and with key accountability institutions, opening up opportunities for stakeholder engagement, and using monitoring information to improve SDG implementation.

The chapter finds progress in the institutionalization of SDG follow-up and review systems and in the setting up of national indicator frameworks. National efforts to institutionalize and strengthen SDG monitoring, follow up, and review are evident. However, the resulting systems differ depending on how the SDGs have been integrated into each country's institutional structure. Moreover, while most countries have identified the institutions responsible for SDG monitoring, the performance of such institutional arrangements and systems is not always conducive to effective follow-up and review.

Regarding indicators, most countries have conducted assessments and prioritization exercises to identify the availability of national indicators based on the global SDG indicator framework, and have identified a national set of SDG indicators. However, fewer have identified national targets, baselines and benchmarks. There is also limited information on the alignment of national and global indicators.

Progress is also evident in the traction of the VNR process and its spillover effects at the subnational level. Overall, countries have improved the preparation of the VNRs and the VNR reports themselves. Online reporting has also increased, as countries leverage ICTs and open data to communicate on SDG progress and implementation.

While some countries have established periodic and regular reporting processes at the national level, standardized or routine national reporting and reporting to parliament present opportunities for improvement. The limited provision of regular SDG implementation reports to parliament illustrates the lack of articulation with the institutional oversight system to ensure accountability. A note for optimism is the increasing number of external audit reports on SDGs and the significant uptake they have had in several countries. Stakeholder engagement has also increased and more diverse stakeholders are contributing to SDG follow-up and review.

The chapter identifies significant opportunities for improvement. These include coordination and integration of SDG monitoring, follow-up and review with existing monitoring systems, and strengthening subnational participation in SDG monitoring as well as subnational reporting processes. Other constraints relate to data gaps, disaggregation and quality, coordination of data producers and the capacity of local governments to collect and analyse data. Subnational governments have also experienced challenges with regard to the definition of roles and responsibilities for SDG monitoring, follow-up and review and their operationalization. The value of embedding VNRs as part of a continuous cycle of national monitoring, follow-up and review also deserves attention.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted SDG monitoring, follow-up and review. It has negatively affected the fulfillment of monitoring responsibilities and the routine operation of national statistical systems and oversight bodies. It has also imposed new challenges to the participation of stakeholders, and disrupted VNR preparations as a result of social distancing measures. Innovation, new partnerships and digital technologies have been crucial to support SDG monitoring. However, structural bottlenecks related to communications infrastructure and access to digital devices should be addressed to ensure inclusive and effective SDG monitoring, follow-up and review going forward.

Building the capacity of public servants to implement the 2030 Agenda

The 2030 Agenda recognizes that capacity in governments at all levels is critical to successfully implement, follow up and review the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Achieving the Goals hinges in large part on competent and effective national public administrations. Chapter 3 explores capacity-building efforts directed at enabling public servants at all levels to steer and support the transformations called for by the 2030 Agenda. The chapter focuses on capacity-building in relation to cross-cutting functions that directly support SDG implementation, leaving aside capacity-building efforts at the level of specific goals and targets.

Capacity-building for SDG implementation for public servants at the national level is delivered by an impressive variety of actors, both national and international. Government institutions and schools of public administration are prime “natural” providers of capacity-building activities on SDG implementation targeted at public servants. In many countries, government departments have developed training material and delivered training activities on SDGs, in others such training has been organized for members of parliament. Academia also plays a key role, often operating in collaboration with governments. National and international networks working with specific constituencies such as local governments, parliaments, supreme audit institutions and others have played a considerable role in developing training material and administering training in public institutions. International institutions and global think tanks have also been active in this area.

Since 2015, Governments -- either individually or in partnership with local, national and global actors -- have carried out a broad range of initiatives to raise awareness of the SDGs among public servants and enhance their skills in a variety of areas. Important efforts have been made to provide support and training in key areas identified in the 2030 Agenda as needing strengthening. For instance, Governments have enhanced capacities to mainstream the SDGs in long-term planning, while training-of-trainers modules and many other products have promoted and supported SDG localization. Governments and international institutions have strengthened the capacity of national statistical systems to produce disaggregated data at national and subnational levels and enhance mechanisms for monitoring, reporting and evaluating the SDGs. The United Nations system has supported governments in the preparation of their voluntary national reviews. Global efforts have also built the capacity of parliaments and supreme audit institutions to assess SDG implementation.

Capacity-building on policy integration and policy coherence has also developed rapidly since 2015. National governments (especially planning ministries) have built capacity to analyse policy synergies and trade-offs, conduct analyses of policy coherence, and seek increased policy integration. These efforts have been supported by international and regional organizations through the development of models, toolkits and related training.

A key component of strategies to build the capacity of public servants to implement and contribute to the 2030 Agenda is to provide them with guidance and guidelines that enable them to incorporate the SDGs in their daily work. This can range from basic awareness-raising products that aim to inform public servants in the context of their institution or organization, to training sessions, to more detailed guidance material that describe how the SDGs should be integrated into the various processes of an organization, from procurement to reporting to communication. This is an area that has witnessed the development of increasingly diverse training and capacity-building materials.

Although capacity-building is mentioned as a priority in many voluntary national review reports, in general, limited information is available on existing gaps and SDG-related capacity-building activities. Among the 24 countries examined in this report, few

have conducted a comprehensive, government-wide assessment of capacities needed to implement the SDGs. In some cases, external audits have provided insights in this regard. As of 2020, capacity-building strategies and plans for SDG implementation at a whole-of-government level are also extremely rare. However, many countries have incorporated SDG-related concerns into capacity-building strategies and plans at the sector or thematic level. This includes national strategies for the development of statistics.

Capacity-building efforts seem to have initially been driven largely by the “supply side”, with important efforts made by international organizations and networks to provide support and training in key areas identified in the 2030 Agenda as needing strengthening, such as planning and statistics. While an increased range of capacity-building products has become available since 2015, the degree of customization of capacity-building activities to beneficiaries’ needs is difficult to assess. Research done for this chapter also suggests a very fragmented landscape, with capacity-building activities targeting different ministries, government agencies and public institutions with little apparent coordination among them. Fragmentation can lead to duplication of efforts and capacity-building materials as well as missed opportunities for synergies.

In general, available information does not easily allow for a consolidated picture of ongoing efforts at the level of individual countries. Similarly, there is hardly any evidence that the efforts to enhance the capacity of civil servants, parliamentarians and staff from other public institutions to implement the SDGs are evaluated.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, capacity-development efforts have been impacted in different ways. An abrupt shift to online activities is the most obvious change spurred by the pandemic; however, little is known about the changes in learning outcomes that may have occurred because of it, and about its longer-term impacts for capacity in the public service.

A broader look at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on national institutions and its implications for implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals

At all times, national institutions are a key enabler of governments’ and other stakeholders’ actions to foster progress on all the SDGs. The pandemic and its impacts have affected public institutions in different ways, which all have implications for the implementation of the SDGs.

On a first level, the pandemic has directly impacted the ability of national governments and national institutions to steer and monitor the SDGs as a programme of action. For instance, social distancing measures have hampered the operations of national statistical offices and the collection of data necessary for SDG monitoring. The resources available to other key institutions tasked with SDG implementation may also have decreased during the pandemic. The majority of countries presenting VNRs in 2020 reported that COVID-19 had disrupted VNR preparations.

The massive shock created by the pandemic has also created a range of risks, from decreased political salience of the 2030 Agenda to hardened resource constraints to the long-term goals embedded in the Agenda becoming seen as secondary to urgent needs created by the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. These risks have become more apparent as the pandemic lingered beyond its initial outbreak.

Among the key questions for governments is how to keep sight of the SDGs and how to preserve the policy and fiscal space to achieve the needed transformations they require while continuing to respond to the pandemic and managing recovery. While the choices of governments in this regard will depend on a country’s context and circumstances, one key area of attention should be the articulation of the large public expenditures that are currently made to respond to COVID-19 and support recovery, and the longer-term strategies and plans to deliver the SDGs.

On a second level, the pandemic has affected broader national institutional systems in ways that could hinder SDG implementation.

The pandemic has created major disruptions to the functioning of governments as a whole and of specific public functions, including policymaking, the provision of basic services, law enforcement and the justice system. It has severely tested the resources of institutions in individual sectors. Restrictions and social distancing measures have challenged the working methods and processes of virtually all public institutions, creating obstacles for the regular conduct of business and potentially undermining legislative oversight and other institutional checks and balances. As importantly, the pandemic has revealed limitations and potential for improvement in cross-cutting dimensions of government action such as crisis preparedness, science-policy interfaces, communication, and the use of digital government, which are important determinants of governments’ capacity to manage crises.

The capacity of national institutions to foster policy integration in all its dimensions is critical to setting visions, strategies and plans that align with the 2030 Agenda, devising and implementing coherent policies, and allocating resources accordingly. It has proven to be even more critical during the pandemic. Institutional arrangements for horizontal integration - the capacity of government departments to work together, for vertical integration across levels of government, and for engagement with non-State actors, have all been challenged, both in developed and developing countries.

The capacity of institutional systems to promote efficient and effective public spending and limit corruption, in particular through accountability and oversight mechanisms, impacts the delivery of actions to promote the SDGs. It became clear early on that emergency responses as well as measures adopted by governments to limit the economic and social impacts of the pandemic, such as response and recovery packages, can increase risks to accountability and integrity, including through greater opportunities for fraud and corruption. Across countries, oversight institutions have deployed a wide range of mechanisms to enhance transparency and government accountability during the pandemic.

At a broader level, the way in which institutions are set up and operate in practice influences the trust that people place in them and their ability to promote transformation at the societal level (for example, through changing social norms or fostering whole-of-society approaches), which are necessary to achieve the SDGs. During the pandemic, some governments have effected broader changes in political and institutional systems, such as the adoption of emergency laws that allow rule by decree and the suspension of individual liberties which, in part depending on how they further evolve, may have long-term negative consequences for human rights, particularly those of marginalized groups. In many countries, the pre-pandemic balance of power among institutions may be durably altered, with consequences for the relationship between States and their citizens and the capacity of societies to collectively set and follow pathways to achieving the SDGs.

At all these levels, lessons learned from rapid institutional changes experienced by countries in response to COVID-19 should inform efforts to recover from the pandemic and implement the Sustainable Development Goals.