



Getting Governments Organised to Deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals

High Level Political Forum
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Summary Report and Next Steps





United Nations, New York. © UN Photo/Paulo Filgueiras

Introduction

In today's global landscape, governments face increasingly complex economic, social and environmental challenges. How can governments get organised to reach the ambition embodied in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals? Achieving progress on the Goals will require governments to work across policy areas. This is no easy task. Multiplying the complex equation of complementarities and trade-offs across the whole spectrum of policy areas covered by the SDGs implies a need for prioritisation and negotiation involving all parts of government as well as the businesses sector and civil society. In addition, the SDGs are also a 'foreign policy' issue, requiring significant involvement from the diplomatic and development communities. In short: delivering on the SDGs is a formidable governance challenge – irrespective of countries' income levels.

“The SDGs are nothing less than a blueprint for a better world. A roadmap to get from the world we have to the world we want to have. It's a bumpy road but it's a vital journey, and we will all be held to account in 2030 for what we have achieved collectively and individually.” Doug Frantz, Deputy Secretary General, OECD

The OECD's 2016 Survey on the role of the Centre of Government already underlines a number of challenges and opportunities in the governance of the SDGs at the national level, including fostering a culture of innovation and supporting a shift from traditional policy tools to ones that are more open to experimentation and citizen feedback. The United Nations' Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) showcase the diverse institutional mechanisms that countries are putting in place to support the implementation of the SDGs. However, these reports also highlight that there is a gap in our evidence base relating to the real challenges and opportunities to ensure countries have effective institutional mechanisms to deliver on the SDGs.

The OECD officially launched in July 2017 a new policy research and knowledge sharing project based on the work conducted under the Network of Senior Officials from Centres of Government. The project aims to deepen our understanding of the institutional arrangements that are being used to deliver on the SDGs. The project was launched during a High Level event co-sponsored by the Governments of Sweden, Mexico, the African Peer Review Mechanism and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (Box 1).

On the 18 July 2017, the OECD, together with the Government of Sweden, the Government of Mexico, and the African Peer Review Mechanism, hosted a side event to the High-Level Political Forum entitled "Getting Governments Organized to Deliver on the SDGs." The speakers included:

- **Amina Mohammed** – Deputy Secretary General, United Nations
- **Anna Kárníková** – Director, Department of Sustainable Development, Office of the Government of the Czech Republic
- **Ardalan Shekarabi** – Minister of Public Administration, Sweden
- **Doug Frantz** – Deputy Secretary General of the OECD
- **Eddy Maloka** – Chief Executive Officer, African Peer Review Mechanism
- **Francisco Guzmán** – Chief of Staff of the President of Mexico
- **Hugo G. von Meijenfeldt** – SDG coordinator, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Netherlands
- **Jose Molinas Vegas** – Minister of Planning for Economic and Social Development, Paraguay
- **Mahamoud Youssouf Khayal** – Member of the Panel of Eminent Persons, African Peer Review Mechanism
- **Margaret Kobia** – Chair, Public Service Commission, Kenya
- **Rolf Alter** – Director, Public Governance Directorate, OECD

The event focused on the challenges implicit to the implementation of the SDGs and innovative solutions that are currently being trialled in countries to address them.

This document highlights the main conclusions from the event and outlines the main evidence gaps that the new research project aims to address.

Delivering on the SDGs is a formidable challenge for countries at every stage of development. As outlined by the United Nations Deputy Secretary General Amina Mohammed during the HLPF event, promoting government institutions that are effective, accountable and inclusive will be critical for every one of the goals, and bringing various government institutions together to develop and implement integrated policies will be key to their success.

One of the many challenges facing countries in the implementation of the SDGs is in ensuring appropriate governance and coordination structures across ministries and levels of government. The implementation of the SDGs will necessarily entail making difficult trade-offs requiring the involvement of different ministries, departments, agencies and centres of government to find the balance between at times competing goals. A survey conducted by the OECD found that coordinating across ministries was the biggest challenge listed by centres of governments (presidents and prime minister's offices) in delivering on the SDGs (OECD 2016).

Francisco Guzmán, Chief of Staff of the President of Mexico, noted that one of Mexico's key challenges in transitioning from the Millennium Development Goals to the SDGs was in establishing a permanent, multi-sectoral coordination structure that could cover such a wide range of topics, particularly since government agencies are not used to working on wide ranging, cross-agency issues or strategies that require a whole-of-government approach. He also pointed to the challenge of building a large alliance with multiple stakeholders from the public, civil, academic and private sectors working toward the SDGs.

*“We are finding that linking policy planning and budgeting is quite problematic [in supporting the implementation of the SDGs]”
Margaret Kobia, Kenya*



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During the HLPF event, Margaret Kobia, Chair of the Public Service Commission of Kenya, emphasized the need to ensure that the SDGs are fully integrated into the budget process and are not seen as a part of an unconnected process.

In addition, effective coordination requires a cultural and not only a technical shift. Minister Ardalan Shekarabi of Sweden highlighted that the implementation of Agenda 2030 requires a change in the governance culture of a country, which the government cannot do alone, as it will require cooperation and partnership with different parts of society.

Importance of high-level political support

“The SDGs should not be something additional. It should be at the heart and core of government responsibilities.” Francisco Guzmán, Chief of Staff of the President of Mexico

There are a number of potential institutional responses to the governance challenges of implementing the SDGs. DSG Amina Mohammed highlighted the importance of the centre of government during the HLPF event where she noted that when the centre of government functions effectively, it allows collective expertise from across the public sector to be mobilized, and remarked on the political mandate that comes from countries where Prime Minister’s or President’s offices are leading and coordinating implementation efforts.

In Mexico, President Peña Nieto decided that the implementation of the 2030 Agenda should be led and supervised by the Office of the President for two primary reasons: First, their goal was to build on their ongoing dialogue with multiple stakeholders, including state governments and government agencies; and second, they felt that the Office of the President had relevant experience in providing a multi-sectoral view of the public administration. The other instrument President Peña Nieto developed was a National Council of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which is headed by the President and includes representation from 32 state governments, 20 federal agencies, international agencies, the private sector, universities and CSOs. The existence of the Council sends a clear signal of the importance that the government places on the SDGs, and helps guarantee that the centre of government remains engaged in SDG implementation beyond the current administration.

“Why is the PM office especially favourable as a leader in SDG implementation? It’s because other ministries respect us as mediators”. Anna Kárníková, Director of the Department of Sustainable Development in the Office of the Government, Czech Republic

Other countries share similar experiences. In the Czech Republic, the Prime Minister's office is responsible for the coordination of SDG efforts. The Prime Minister's office was chosen as the lead because they can more clearly see the trade-offs that need to be made as they are not defending their own portfolio. One clear message from the Czech experience highlighted during the HLPF event was the need to dedicate resources to identify high-quality staff to ensure the discussion with other ministries is undertaken at the right level.

Czech Republic – Government Council on Sustainable Development (GCSD)

In the Czech Republic, the sustainable development agenda is coordinated at the national level by the Government Council on Sustainable Development (GCSD), chaired by the Prime Minister. The work of the GCSD is supported by its Secretariat in the Sustainable Development Department of the Office of the Government of the Czech Republic. Work on the strategic framework Czech Republic 2030 started in 2015 and has been carried out in cooperation with hundreds of experts and stakeholders gathered in the GCSD and its thematic Committees.

The Council is chaired by the Prime Minister and serves as the main forum providing consultation and building new partnerships among the various stakeholders in the field of sustainable development. One of the main tasks of the Council will be also to follow up on and review the national implementation of the new strategic framework and 2030 Agenda and encourage the country's commitment to sustainable development. The institutional location of the Secretariat allows for horizontal integration, cross-sectoral coordination and mainstreaming of sustainable development into national policy-making.

Whilst the centre of government is important, the OECD's work also illustrates the range of institutional mechanisms that have been used to implement the SDGs. For example, in one third of the countries the OECD reviewed, the centres of government (through the offices of Prime Ministers and Presidents) were leading the SDG implementation effort. In another third, those offices were working jointly with other ministries. In the final third, the Prime Minister and Presidential offices were not involved at all. The Voluntary National Reviews also provide significant insights into the ways in which national institutional arrangements are being defined -- either inter-ministerial committees often chaired by the Head of State or Government, or entrusting the implementation to a specific ministry (typically Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Finance), or other inter-agency structures (United Nations, 2017).

While there is no single institutional model that will provide a solution to the many implementation challenges of the SDGs, given that countries are still experimenting with how to best deliver on this agenda, it is critical to be aware of and understand the potential benefits of each of these emerging practices.

Enabling horizontal and vertical coordination

“We created a National Team for the Country Strategy comprised of people coming from the productive sector, from the social sector, from academic and cultural sectors who have the mandate to pursue the implementation agenda and to be the brokers between the different administrations”. Jose Molinas Vegas, Paraguay

Along with the need to have political support provided by the centre of government, **promoting partnerships with constituencies within and across governments** is proving to be equally important.

“We have learned some lessons since we started this process. Firstly, a whole of government approach is essential. And this means that all ministries must be responsible for implementation.” Ardalan Shekarabi, Sweden

The Czech Republic example highlights the importance of “translating” the SDGs across national government structures and mandates. The targets contained in the Czech National Development Strategy, similar to the SDGs, were formulated cross-sectorally. A whole of government approach was seen as an important element in bringing other ministries on board and, to a large degree, avoiding the power struggles that might have emerged otherwise.

A number of innovative practices were highlighted during the HLPF event to foster cross-government coordination. Jose Molinas Vegas, the Minister of Planning for Economic and Social Development of Paraguay, provided an example of how vertical and horizontal integration can be mutually reinforcing. Building a national budget aligned to the SDGs enabled the development of outputs that contribute to both the SDGs and to national development goals.

Paraguay's national development plan, furthermore, allows activities to be prioritized based on local needs, since each municipality has its own participatory development plan aligned to the national plan. Similar efforts have been undertaken in Mexico to align indicators developed by the Secretariat of Finance to the SDG targets (Mexico 2016).

In the Netherlands, the SDG coordinator in the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, credited the success of the initiative on the informal nature of the coordination system both in terms of the inter-ministerial relationships and the relationship with other stakeholders. Inter-ministerial coordination was first negotiated by the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, who encouraged other ministries to adopt 10-20 targets to help ensure that responsibility for implementation was spread across the government. The SDG Coordinator also lacked elements which might otherwise foster competition but proved to be an advantage in deliberations with other ministries (such as power, people or resources). He worked with the ministries on allocating responsibilities based on the goals the ministries had taken on and encouraged each ministry to invest their own resources to help ensure successful implementation.

"I was appointed as the SDG Coordinator without three Ps, the famous three Ps: no power, no people, and no pennies" Hugo G. von Meijenfeldt, Netherlands

Other examples outlined during the HLPF event, show how countries have structured their response vertically in an effort to integrate sub-national governments into the delivery of the SDGs. The Mexican government, for example, established a National Council of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and they were able to increase the involvement of sub-national governments, as state and local governments will be key to ensuring the achievement of the SDGs. Many of the SDGs are to be delivered at the local and state level, and as a result, federal level involvement is necessary but not sufficient to ensure success.

The Netherlands and Mexico

Two countries that participated in the panel discussion, the Netherlands and Mexico, highlight the importance of ensuring horizontal and vertical coordination. It is important to note, however, that the heads of government in these countries provide different levels of engagement. In the Netherlands, coordination of SDG implementation is more disaggregated among various ministries, while in Mexico, the Office of the President plays a larger role. Nevertheless, both cases highlight the importance of enabling horizontal and vertical coordination:

The Netherlands

In the Netherlands, responsibilities have been assigned to all the ministries concerned, with the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation in charge of overall coordination. An SDG network of focal points with representatives from each ministry and the Association of Netherlands Municipalities has been established and meets regularly. It is chaired by a specially appointed high-level coordinator for national SDG implementation, assisted by a small secretariat.

Mexico

Mexico has established the Specialized Technical Committee on Sustainable Development Goals, comprising a number of Mexican government agencies charged with monitoring indicators related to the SDGs. It is headed by the Office of the President. The Committee is mandated to: (a) revise and adjust the indicators recommended by the United Nations to include those significant to Mexico; (b) agree on the sources of information for the purpose of monitoring data at the national and subnational levels; (c) coordinate regular update of indicators and their publication as open data; (d) manage a pilot, open source platform for the SDGs; (e) integrate progress reports; and (f) coordinate with other stakeholders. Recently, Mexico has established a National Council of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as a binding institution between the Federal and local governments, civil society, the private sector and the academia.

Ensuring stakeholder participation

The fourth emerging lesson highlighted during the HLPF event was the importance for governments to ensure institutions are in place to support stakeholder participation and not only engagement in the implementation of the SDGs. As outlined by the United Nations Deputy Secretary General, Amina Mohammed, the SDGs call for governments to listen to people, engage them in decision making in very real ways and involve them in ongoing consultations in the decision making process.

A commitment to effective citizen involvement requires time, energy, and trust, as well as willingness for governments to listen and to be persuaded. There are a number of examples of how governments are going beyond consultation to real participation. In Paraguay, government efforts are focused on aligning citizens' aspirations to the national development plan and developing a scorecard which is part and parcel of promoting government accountability. During the HLPF event, Minister Vegas noted that consulting people and aligning local aspirations with global aspirations is an effective way to align government instruments. The Swedish Minister of Public Administration, Ardan Shekarabi echoed this experience by highlighting how, despite Sweden's long tradition of collaboration between the different sectors of society, delivering on the SDGs will require the development of new forms of cooperation between the public sector, private sector and civil society.

“Having the opportunity to consult people and to align local aspirations with global community aspirations is an open door that allows us to align all government instruments to pursue this purpose.” Jose Molinas Vegas, Paraguay



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Sweden – National Delegation

The Government is collectively responsible for implementing the 2030 Agenda. The issues are prepared by the ministries based on each minister's area of responsibility. In addition to this, the Minister for Public Administration is responsible for coordinating and promoting the implementation of the Agenda nationally in Sweden. In March 2016, the Government appointed a national delegation with a commission to support and stimulate the work with Sweden's implementation of the 2030 Agenda, both nationally and internationally. The delegation is tasked with anchoring the Agenda and the 17 goals, as well as with conducting a broad dialogue on sustainable development with authorities, county councils and municipalities, the social partners, the private sector, civil society and the research community. The delegation has the responsibility to promote the exchange of information and knowledge between these stakeholders and relevant international actors. The members have broad experience and knowledge from different parts of society.

The Dutch government's focus on citizen engagement also illustrates how facilitating relationships between stakeholders promotes engagement and buy-in. For example, in the creation of the coordination mechanism for delivering the SDGs, the government tried to go beyond consultation to ensure that the participating groups were engaged in the delivery and monitoring of the targets. Specifically, the government supported the formation of groups comprised of youth, academics, local authorities, business and finance representatives, and representatives from the ministries, and put the groups in charge of drafting sections of the Voluntary National Reviews (typically drafted by government officials). This innovative approach of active engagement has created a diverse and representative group invested in delivering the SDGs over the longer term.

Role of peer-to-peer learning and open communication

“We can all benefit from learning from each other – peer-to-peer-learning – and the creation of arenas for exchange of views at different levels are critical in order to deliver on the SDGs.” Ardalan Shekarabi, Minister of Public Administration Sweden

The experiences that countries outlined during the HLPF event – Mexico, the Czech Republic, Paraguay, Sweden and Kenya – illustrate how many of the challenges in implementing and coordinating the SDGs are shared, which suggests the essential role that **peer learning and lesson sharing** plays in supporting countries in their implementation efforts.

Margaret Kobia, Chair of the Public Service Commission in Kenya and Chair of the Effective Institutions Platform added that facilitating peer-to-peer experiences in a way that successfully shares experiences, knowledge and innovations will require a forum where country representatives can talk freely about the challenges and where they can share experiences of what works and what does not. Whilst the HLPF provides a high-level platform to highlight progress in the implementation of the SDGs, what is needed in parallel is **a forum where more frank discussions can take place and sharing of experiences** in support of finding innovative solutions.

Peer learning is also not only restricted to national entities. It is also critical to **ensure that international organizations and other development initiatives can be mutually supportive**. Professor Eddy Maloka, CEO of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), noted during the event that there is a need for dialogue on the SDGs in Africa to ensure that the goals of the Agenda 2063 reinforce those of the SDGs. There is in particular a need for African countries to improve their response to the SDGs and learn from the weaknesses in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals.

The aim, therefore, is to build a common language for the implementation of the SDGs. The APRM, for example, is in the process of integrating the SDGs into their reviews and to ensure that they focus on how countries are organizing their response to the SDGs at the national level so as to facilitate learning across the continent.

Conclusion

“Getting governments organized to deliver on the SDGs is going to be absolutely essential in implementing the 2030 Agenda. At the end of the day, it is about governments delivering on services and delivering major, major promises to people.” Amina Mohammed, Deputy Secretary General, United Nations

The HLPF event underscored the need for additional evidence to support governments in their decision-making processes relating to the implementation of the SDGs. While the UN Voluntary National Reviews provide an important accountability mechanism for governments, they do not allow for an in-depth or frank discussions of the challenges and innovative approaches in this area.

“We don’t want that the SDGs pass by on one side with Africa on the other.” African Peer Review Mechanism

In order to close this evidence gap, the OECD launched a new policy research and knowledge sharing project to complement the United Nation’s Voluntary National Reviews and deepen the OECD’s understanding of the institutional arrangements that are being used to deliver on the SDGs. The areas of focus include:

- The institutional mechanisms that have been created to support the implementation of the SDGs, and in particular the role of the Centre of Government and the role of the SDGs as a driver for transformational change.
- The coordination function and the management of trade-offs between the SDGs and their targets and the impact on the ways in which evidence is used, governance and decision-/ policy-making processes are organised and policies are made.
- Integrating the SDGs into the budget process and ensuring coherence between performance and budget frameworks.
- The institutions needed to secure stakeholder engagement including domestic accountability institutions (parliaments and Supreme Audit Institutions) and civil society and the private sector.

The SDGs set out to be transformational. In this sense a new reflection on the governance mechanisms to implement such a cross-cutting and complex agenda will be needed. Several of the panellists highlighted this fact and in particular that the governing institutions that have been developed over many centuries were designed to respond to challenges through a top-down decision making system. While this structure may be effective at solving simple questions, it will not be as effective at resolving complex challenges, such as those tackled by the SDGs.

As United Nations Deputy Secretary General Amina Mohammed noted, getting governments organized to deliver on the SDGs is going to be essential in implementing the 2030 Agenda, since successful delivery is ultimately about governments providing services and delivering on the major promises that have been made.

By asking what problems governments are trying to solve, identifying potential solutions and ensuring the appropriate stakeholders are involved to help deliver, it becomes clear that no single entity can achieve the results on their own. The depth and ambition of the SDGs call for a concerted and coordinated effort of the public, civil and private sectors.

“We have to rally all the actors...this is one incredibly important way of doing it. We need to do this consistently. How do we keep you engaged? How do we keep people standing up in the room? It’s got to be because we’re not saying the same thing over and over again, but that we are also speaking truth to power” DSG Amina Mohammed, United Nations



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