

SDGs – universal blueprint for sound public policies

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“Unless we act now, the 2030 Agenda could become an epitaph for a world that might have been.”

United Nations SG Guterres, The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023
- Special Edition,

I.

There can be no doubt: the assessment of progress in the implementation of the SDGs at the mid-point of the Agenda 2030 calls for urgent action.

Pursuing ongoing strategies, institutional upgrade and investment will have to be complemented by innovations in critical areas, such as

- better data and measurement in practice to strengthen the evidence of policy making and facilitating monitoring.
- further improvement of SDG oriented governance arrangements, from stronger and agile institutions to wider and effective participation and inclusion of all stakeholders
- more exchanges of experiences and good practices among countries for deepening policy learning
- greater compliance with financial commitments of donor countries in support of the SDGs.

However, beyond innovations to reduce systemic bottlenecks to better, governments will have to gauge the challenges arising from the contextual developments since 2015: The pressures of the **multi-crises** – Covid 19, inflation, food, war, inequality – have forced government action worldwide to shift into crisis management mode. Recent **natural disasters** around the world are reinforcing the priority of climate change initiatives. New geo-political configurations are emerging as concerns about national **economic**

dependencies and **interruptions of global value chains** are prompting governments to engage in measures of national security and sovereignty.

The perception of a **crowding out** or at least increasing **tensions** between emergency measures and structural changes on the one hand and SDG implementation on the other is heightened through current budget policies. Demands for financial resources to deal with the crises, climate change or trade and investment dependencies are exploding, while the limits of **fiscal space** become tighter in all countries. Anticipating decreasing **fiscal credibility** of public finances leads many governments to reduce SDGs related expenditures.

As there is no indication that these dynamics will slow down anytime soon, reinforcing the role of Agenda 2030 needs more than systemic innovation driven by the “SDG community”.

New initiatives need to be rolled out to anchor the SDGs as the policy framework of the future able to guide governments in navigating their societies and economies through the challenges of shifting global context.

II.

Three measures of revitalizing the Agenda 2030 stand out.

Establish shared ownership of the SDGs among the global North and South

A large part of the citizens around the world are still not aware of the SDGs – despite the growing “SDG community”. Knowledge and understanding of the SDGs is generally weak among the **general population**. They are not aware of the ambitious nature of the SDGs nor their potential as a global concept of a sound public policy framework. The perception of the “non-SDG community” is primarily shaped by **government as crisis managers**.

Major worldwide investment should therefore be made to **mobilize all stakeholders around the SDGs** – from citizens to experts to decision makers in public policy and business: raising awareness of the SDGs, explaining the unique qualities of the SDGs, and presenting their critical contributions in shaping a livable future.

Clarity about long-term SDG based national plans, visions and strategies would also contribute to reversing the trend of **declining trust in government**.

The success of mobilization will largely be driven by transforming the principles of **participation and inclusion** into reality. This implies both: an active role of governments to invite, consult with and listen to stakeholders all along the policy cycle. It also includes preparing citizens for participation and respecting the **space of self-empowerment of citizens**. The space for innovations, including technologies, in these areas is huge - in public administration as well as among citizens.

VNRs offer great potential **to raise ownership** by making their preparations a nation-wide movement through well-planned participatory processes, discussions and the inclusion of dissenting voices.

From SDG outputs to outcomes

Despite a diverse and growing availability of data, KPIs and measurement of achievements of the SDGs, for ordinary people and voters to adhere to the SDGs more is to be done in **illustrating the benefits at both individual and societal level**.

Focusing on outcomes rather than outputs is likely to raise the understanding, interest in and attraction of citizens in the SDGs to the benefit of the legitimacy of political leaders who are engaged in promoting SDG implementation.

As it is the **regional level** where **policies meet people**, regional and city governments play a critical role in lending outcomes visibility and acceptance, for example through **livable neighborhoods** with decent housing, good schools, clean air and green playgrounds or **inclusive local labor markets** with job opportunities, infrastructure for mobility, research and training clusters and absence of poverty.

Localizing SDGs is a promising perspective in this regard provided **multi-level governance arrangements empower local authorities** adequately, in terms of delegated authority, financial resources, legal frameworks, and **voice in nationwide policy design**. Participation and inclusion will have to become standard practice and would be supported by VLR/VCR, ideally aligned with VNRs.

Technologies can be an important facilitator of delivering outcomes as long as they are designed and applied in a **citizen centric** approach, excluding in particular none of the beneficiaries of public goods and services who may need to be brought in through analog mechanisms.

Change mindsets in the government machinery

Establishing public institutions for implementation of the SDGs is advancing in many countries, but they are only the well-known first step.

To generate **effective functionalities** within institutions and organizations in line with the SDGs require **changing mindsets in the government machinery**. Key SDG practices of co-ordination, collaboration, or the imperative of coherence do not emerge by themselves, as persistent **silos mentalities** and the wider failure of many public sector reforms have shown.

Recent UN work on changing mindsets points to the **importance of beliefs and attitudes** of the public work force standing in the way of changes of working methods. The UNCEPA **Principles** of effective governance for the implementation of the SDGs include a range of **strategies** to establish SDG compatible attitudes.

Changing mindsets in the government concern both policy makers and the public workforce alike.

Political and administrative leaders will have to commit publicly to the SDG vision of a better future for all and to introduce the working methods and delivery of policy outcomes, including evidence, trade-offs and prioritization at political level. (Citizens will embark more easily on the SDGs when they realize that governments live and work by the rule.)

Prevalent attitudes and beliefs of the **public workforce** dating back to **traditional theories and understandings of bureaucracy** must be confronted and replaced with the mindsets underlying the concept of sustainability - in addition to upgrading capacities and competences.

The currently ongoing review of the **UN standards of excellence in public administration education and training** offers a practical opportunity of innovation to mainstream the SDGs into the curricula of Schools and Institutes of Public Governance and Administration. At the same time, performance

management should ensure that changes in behavior and attitudes of public employees be awarded throughout the government machinery.

III.

Conclusion

Countries are on their way to SDG implementation, but significant changes in the context since 2015 call for further action and innovation to accelerate implementation.

Beyond further improvements of the systemic framework of the SDG - strong and agile institutions, monitoring progress, peer exchanges and peer learning, financing mechanisms – closer attention need to be paid to the implications of the changing economic, social, environmental, and geo-political context since 2015.

Shared ownership of the SDGs, aiming at outcomes, and changing mindsets in the government machinery are proposals for further consideration.

