

2016 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development Institutions and SDG implementation

The 2016 meeting of the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) took place from 11 to 20 July 2016, at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. The HLPF is mandated to follow up and review the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and this meeting was the first one that took place since the adoption of the Agenda. Twenty-two countries presented voluntary national reviews (VNRs) of implementation of the Agenda during the ministerial segment of the Forum.

The importance of institutions for SDG implementation featured prominently in the deliberations. Several speakers noted that “institutions matter” – with some stating that strong, stable and mature institutions are crucial for the implementation of the SDGs (Denmark, Madagascar, Major Group of Women, Palau, Rwanda, Samoa, Sierra Leone, Thailand/G77, Uganda). The need for integrated approaches and the principle of leaving no one behind represent special challenges to institutions, above and beyond the complexities associated with realizing the targets.

The discussions showed that there is no single possible approach to institutional innovations likely to facilitate policy integration. Several speakers (France, Jordan, Slovenia, Sri Lanka, Turkey, UNDP) noted that addressing integration and policy coherence is an important step to achieve the SDGs, identifying fragmentation as one of the main obstacles towards implementing the SDGs. The cross-sectoral challenges of the SDGs require an integrated approach, warranting institutional innovation and arrangements that facilitate such approach (Asia-Pacific Forum on Women Finland, Malaysia, Norway, Palau/Pacific Island Group).

Countries are integrating the SDGs into national policies and programs, and an increasing number of countries are putting institutional mechanisms in place; giving new mandates to existing mechanisms, or establishing new high-level commissions, councils, coordination bodies and mechanisms for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (Brazil, China, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Finland, Guatemala, Indonesia, Iran, Jamaica, Japan, Luxembourg, Mexico, New Zealand, Nigeria, Philippines, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Togo).

Which institutional arrangements are likely to facilitate policy integration however, remains unclear. There were lively discussions over Estonia’s call to place SDG coordination at the center of the government, and not in a line ministry. It resonated with Uganda, while France noted that context matters and that it is necessary to respect existing institutional structures. In terms of the level of lead agency, Finland argued for the highest level possible such as the Prime Minister’s Office, which is a ‘neutral’ body and in a better position to engage line ministries.

Amid discussions about institutional arrangements for SDG implementation, Botswana drew attention to two institutional challenges. The first challenge is in the lack of connection between ministries traditionally responsible for sustainable development (e.g., ministry of environment) and those responsible for mainstreaming development (e.g., Ministry of Development and Finance Planning in Botswana). Another challenge lies in the approach of putting in place a

national coordination committee on the SDGs that would harmonize different work streams. The big challenge here is accommodating new institutional layers without putting additional costs on the government (Botswana). Georgia also noted the risk to complicate an already complex transformation process with additional bureaucracy (Georgia).

The European Union pointed out that breaking down silos through the merger of ministries can be counter-productive in some situations. It can lead to ineffectiveness, loss of transparency and accountability, especially if the reduction in the number of ministries is too large. The European Union emphasized instead the importance of “teaching silos to dance”, i.e., by changing the procedures to address SDGs and involving the agencies in cross-cutting projects or promoting partnerships with stakeholders; so that they become more flexible without losing their essential functions.

Beyond institutional silos, the importance of breaking down mental silos was also highlighted. It was noted that it would be very difficult to implement new and transformative agenda with institutional structures that do not allow crossing boundaries and with people who do not see the interconnected nature of individual goals and targets, and their impacts (Finland, Mexico, Turkey).

There are gaps in engaging the parliaments. The discussions showed that there is a particular gap with respect to parliamentary involvement in the follow-up of the 2030 Agenda. The SDGs are often seen as the exclusive domain of the executive branch or a ministry-driven exercise. But the Inter-parliamentary Union noted that a litmus test of national SDG ownership will be the extent to which parliaments are involved in national reviews. Parliaments are uniquely placed to hold Governments accountable for SDG implementation, and several speakers emphasized the importance of engaging them (Finland, Norway and Romania). More specifically, some speakers acknowledged the central role parliaments could play in advancing the SDGs by adopting enabling legislation, including key budget bills (Inter-parliamentary Union).

Some countries are indeed already engaging their parliaments. The Parliament of Switzerland is fully integrated and the Parliament of Norway is actively involved in SDG implementation. The National Parliament of Pakistan adopted the SDGs as part of its National Agenda, establishing a Secretariat to serve as a resource center. In Mexico, parliaments have an important role to play in implementing SDGs, particularly in terms of formulating budgets. Afghanistan established several working groups with various stakeholders, including its Parliament.

Localization of the SDGs and engagement of local authorities is limited. According to several countries, successful implementation of SDGs will depend on local authority actions and effective national-local collaboration and coordination (Australia, Colombia, Georgia, Honduras, Indonesia, Mexico, Pakistan, Slovenia, United Cities and Local Governments). Many of the activities in implementing SDGs will take place at the sub-national level and will be led by local authorities (Italy, World Bank). Thus, it is important to bring the global agenda down to the local agenda (Belgium, European Commission, major group for Local Authorities, Mexico, UN-HABITAT, United Cities and Local Governments). This importance is illustrated in Australia’s case, where the State governments are tasked to deliver most of the social support to indigenous people, showing that policies for indigenous population require integration across different government levels.

However, engagement of local authorities and other local actors has generally been limited, according to Honduras and the City of Istanbul. Localization was generally found challenging (India). Moreover, although local authorities are well placed to ensure that no one is left behind (Italy, City of Istanbul), given their proximity to the people, the concept of leaving no one behind is not reflected at regional and local levels (Major group for persons with disabilities, UNDP). Also, while an institutional mechanism for localizing the SDGs is needed (Italy), only a few countries and local authorities have so far established (new) institutional mechanisms to that effect, such as a participatory platform, inter-departmental working group, task force or committee to effectively engage local authorities and their stakeholders and communities (Botswana, Catalonia, Germany, Sweden).

Global frameworks should reflect inequality as a pressing concern. While much emphasis was placed on national institutions to realize the common aspiration of leaving no one behind, calls were also made to carefully look at institutional frameworks at the global level. The frameworks for addressing many issues are already in place; but many pressing concerns such as inequality are still lacking the necessary framework as pointed out by Brazil. The need for a “whole-of-international-community” alongside a “whole-of-government” approach was highlighted by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. HLPF should endeavor to improve coherence and coordination within the UN system (Nepal, Thailand/G77).

More discussion is warranted as to how to strengthen national institutions in countries in special situations to deliver the SDGs. It is important to recognize that leaving no one behind needs to be contextualized and made specific to individual countries (Overseas Development Institute). This is particularly true for countries in special situations, where specific institutional capacity challenges warrant special attention. Countries in special situation are in high risk of being left behind.

For example, small island developing states present a special case for the application of the SDGs. Cross-sectoral challenges such as climate change, which was highlighted numerous times during the session, will have a major effect on these countries. Hence, institutional arrangements that will facilitate integrated approaches to SDG implementation including climate change are essential.

In case of countries in conflict- and post-conflict situations, peace- and state-building need to be prioritized and made integral to SDG implementation; with institutions playing an important role in building sustainable peace (Somalia, UNDP). Leaving no one behind would require working more effectively across humanitarian, development, political and peacebuilding spheres, particularly during periods of crisis and/or in conflict settings (UNDP).

Further discussion is also warranted on how national institutions can be strengthened to deliver on the SDGs while ensuring that no one is left behind in countries in special situations.

“Leaving no one behind” requires institutionalized processes of participation among the poor, the marginalized and other stakeholders. If no one is to be left behind, the notion of inclusiveness cannot be treated as an afterthought (UNDESA); inclusive institutions are crucial in ensuring that no one is left behind. There is a need for institutions to support the different dimensions of inclusion such as social security, education and labor (Honduras). In particular, participation was identified to be at the very core of inclusion. Thus, “leaving no one behind”

means establishing inclusive institutions that provide all citizens with opportunities to participate in public life on equal terms (Romania).

Representatives of many stakeholders, including major groups for women, indigenous peoples, trade unions and businesses thus called for the creation of institutional space for public participation, including through institutionalized process of participation among the poor, women and marginalized stakeholders. Countries like Sweden also called for a bottom-up approach, i.e., by putting the poor and marginalized people at the center of planning and implementation of the SDGs, and setting up institutional mechanisms for the inclusion of all people.

Multi-stakeholder engagement was widely mentioned as an important success factor in SDG implementation (Egypt, Indonesia, Jordan, Latvia, Nigeria, Slovenia, Samoa, Switzerland, Trinidad and Tobago) and a necessary condition of ensuring the necessary ownership (China, Denmark, Finland, Kenya, Philippine Social Enterprise Network). At the national level, a number of countries are already active in stakeholder engagement (Brazil, Estonia, Italy, Japan, Finland, Germany, Mexico, Morocco, Nigeria, Turkey, Viet Nam).

Some stated that participation needs to go beyond consultations and requires institutionalizing the process (major group for persons with disabilities). In fact, several Governments (Colombia, Egypt, Indonesia, Jamaica, Finland, Georgia, Germany, Italy, Liberia, Nigeria, Panama, Sweden) have set up or are setting up various institutional frameworks for engaging stakeholders. Some however found setting up mechanisms for inclusive participation of stakeholders challenging (Lao PDR).

SDG 16 is measurable and is recognized as critical to “leave no one behind”. To realize the principle of leaving no one behind, SDG 16 and developing effective and accountable institutions were seen as critical (Georgia, Ghana, G7+, Inter-parliamentary Union, Samoa). A particular challenge on the institutional front is then to ensure that government institutions themselves do not discriminate against the poor, women and the marginalized, and that access to justice is available for all.

Another related challenge is measuring peaceful, just and inclusive societies. The new SDG 16 Data initiative unveiled during the HLPF shows that Goal 16 can be measured. It is already being measured in many significant ways (Philippines). Moreover, some countries like the United States are already developing national-level indicators for Goal 16.3 (Measuring rule of law and access to justice for all) to help ensure access to justice for all.

The need for strong private sector involvement and strong public institutions that can engage business is recognized. This need to involve private sector was highlighted by many (Egypt, Japan, Norway, PURE consulting, Russian Federation, Switzerland, UAE, Uganda, US Business Global Alliance, World Bank). The private sector is called upon to find new solutions for complying with the SDGs. In Mexico, the Office of the Presidency plays the key role in building partnership with private sector. It established the Sustainability Alliance, an institutional mechanism for private sector engagement. Sweden has an Innovation Council with private sector involvement. It is also important to note that, to have strong private sector engagement,

there should be strong public institutions (German Institute for international and Security Affairs), with increasing effectiveness of public administration capacity (Georgia).

Quality (disaggregated) data and the capacity of statistical institutions are prerequisites for policy planning, review and monitoring of SDG implementation. Realization of the principle of leaving no one behind also requires quality (disaggregated) data, which is crucial towards understanding who is being left behind and in what ways (European Commission). Quality data production is not only valuable for monitoring, but also for evidence-based planning and implementation (Montenegro, South Africa, Switzerland).

A great number of speakers attached importance to developing such data; thus highlighting the need to strengthen the capacity of statistical institutions (China, Dominican Republic, Germany, Kenya, Latvia, major group for women, Maldives, Philippines, Samoa, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, World Bank and others).

Statistical institutions need support, not only financial but also manpower and technical support for data collection and disaggregation (Chad, Cook Islands, Kenya, Samoa, Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, Viet Nam). They can benefit from support from international organizations and regional peer review (FAO, Jamaica, Samoa). There could be an active and institutionalized collaboration between HLPF and the UN Statistical Commission (Switzerland). Engagement with stakeholders is also critical. Beyond official statistics, some governments actively engage civil society to reach the most marginalized population based on citizen-generated data (Finland). There are citizen-generated data such as Global Partnership Sustainable Development Data and Data Shift.

Governments should consider enhancing the production capacity of statistical institutions both at the national and sub-national level (Philippines). This capacity is lacking particularly at the sub-national and local levels (Care International).

Scientists should be engaged more systematically in follow-up and review of implementation of the SDGs including through institutionalized science-policy interfaces. There is a need to engage the science and technology community as an integral part of SDG implementation process, particularly as science and technology are strategic means of implementation (Costa Rica, Japan, UNESCO). The science-policy interface could inform decision-making in several key areas, including by asking who are at risk of being left behind and how policies could reach these segments of the population (UNDESA). It is necessary to overcome the communication gap between scientists and policymakers with more creativity in channeling scientific data and evidence to policymakers. Direct and efficient communications between the science community and policymakers however, remain a challenge. Scientists are already engaged, but they could be engaged more systematically (Estonia).