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**Governance and public administration aspects of
empowering people to build equal and inclusive societies
for the twenty-first century**

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Note by the Secretariat

The Secretariat has the honour to transmit to the Committee of Experts on Public Administration the paper prepared by Committee member Moni Pizani in collaboration with Louis Meuleman and Katarina Ott.

* [E/C.16/2019/1](#).



Governance and public administration aspects of empowering people to build equal and inclusive societies for the twenty-first century

Summary

The present paper serves to examine the governance and public administration aspects of empowering people to build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels, with the purpose of achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Based on the 11 basic principles of effective governance for sustainable development developed by the Committee, it focuses on the notions of inclusiveness and equality, which necessitate the empowerment of both people and institutions.

In the paper, empowerment is shown to be both a complex process of increasing the agency of people and communities and a desired outcome for equitable and inclusive sustainable development. It illustrates the critical role that effective, accountable and inclusive institutions play in enabling empowerment through participation, multilevel governance, promotion of social equity and multi-stakeholder partnerships, with the aim of building equal and inclusive societies for the effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Local capacity-building is highlighted in the paper as a requirement for achieving empowerment across diverse phases of public policy- and decision-making processes. In order for countries to implement the 2030 Agenda, national plans need to incorporate concrete local actions, since local governments are more attuned to the needs of their local constituents, in particular those left behind. To that end, appropriate tools need to be provided to assist the local authorities in working towards sustainable development in and for inclusive societies.

According to the paper, each country must follow its own path in empowering people, including at the local level, to build equal and inclusive societies aimed at promoting sustainable development, in the light of its own governance structures, its political, economic and social realities, its local strengths and its unique needs. There is no general blueprint for government reforms with respect to inclusive and equitable approaches to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Tailored, bottom-up approaches are needed to translate national and local governance capabilities into operational and pragmatic approaches to reaching the Sustainable Development Goals.

The theme of the 2019 session of the Economic and Social Council is “One world for all: empowering people to build equal and inclusive societies”. This theme is closely related to that of the 2019 high-level political forum, namely, “Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality”. The present paper has been prepared to support the deliberations of the Committee on the governance and public administration aspects of these themes and may serve as the basis of a draft contribution by the Committee to the 2019 thematic review of the high-level political forum.

I. Linking people's empowerment with institutional aspects of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

1. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development can be implemented only if the international community and national public administrations are equipped with the appropriate institutions and tools to address the challenges of the implementation of the Goals at all levels of governance, including the subnational, national and transnational levels. The full realization of the 2030 Agenda also depends on a collective understanding of the basic principles of effective governance for sustainable development, endorsed by the Economic and Social Council on 2 July 2018 (see [E/2018/44](#), para. 31).

2. At the core of these principles of effective governance for sustainable development are notions of inclusiveness and equality, which entail both people's empowerment and social and intergenerational equity and are encapsulated, respectively, in the seventh principle of leaving no one behind and the eleventh principle of intergenerational equity.

3. Empowerment is a complex process of increasing people's and communities' autonomy so that they are aware of their rights, can claim them and can represent their interests in responsible and accountable ways. Acting on their own authority, empowered people can make their voices heard in decision-making processes, thereby influencing the conditions and the environment in which they live and shaping their own future.

4. Empowerment is also a desired outcome of equitable and inclusive sustainable development. Empowerment is not only about transferring rights and sharing power but also about enabling public institutions and communities to promote sustainable development and inclusive governance. Institutions need to foster empowerment, including through participation, collaboration, and the promotion of social equity, in order to build equal and inclusive societies for the effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

5. Effective, accountable and inclusive institutions can empower citizens in multiple ways, including by ensuring comprehensive and non-discriminatory policy-making and legislation, providing equal access to quality public services and infusing transparency and accountability into public governance and administration at multiple levels (individual, community, national, regional, global) and across all dimensions (political, economic, cultural, social, legal).

6. There is no general blueprint for government reforms in support of inclusive and equitable approaches to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The road to inclusive and equal societies is highly contextualized and cannot be imposed from outside. Each country must follow its own path in empowering people to build equal and inclusive societies aimed at promoting sustainable development, while taking into account its own political, economic and social attributes, strengths and unique needs.

II. Identification of progress, gaps, areas requiring urgent attention, risks and challenges in achieving inclusiveness

7. Member States have been making progress in incorporating the Goals into their national development plans and policies and/or sustainable development strategies. The mainstreaming process has involved the participation of subnational governments, civil society organizations, the private sector and multiple stakeholders. Nevertheless, the incorporation of the 2030 Agenda into national frameworks,

priorities and policies based on multi-stakeholder engagement is not the goal in and of itself.

8. Local solutions should be supported appropriately and scaled up to national levels if inclusive implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the national level is to be effectively translated into action on the ground. Countries need to move from an inclusive national plan to concrete local actions. To that end, they should have the tools to assist local authorities in working towards sustainable development and inclusive societies.

9. In order to ensure the effective involvement of local authorities, it is imperative that local institutional capacity be strengthened. Local governments are more attuned to the needs of their local constituents, in particular those left behind. Without empowering subnational and local institutions, the Goals might not be achieved. The process of assessing and implementing local public policies to empower people and institutions should be designed, executed and monitored in a participatory and transparent manner. Multilevel and multi-stakeholder strategies of engagement should be at the centre of processes of institutionalizing engagement at the subnational level.

10. In many countries, addressing geographical inequalities is an important dimension of ensuring that no one is left behind. For some island States whose geography poses special challenges, population dispersion may necessitate additional efforts in order to reach everyone.¹ Empowerment of remote and rural communities is important in this context.

11. An example of rural empowerment can be found in Bangladesh, where the delivery of public services has been decentralized through the establishment of over 4,000 one-stop information and service delivery outlets, known as union digital centres. The centres are microenterprises, each of which is run by citizen entrepreneurs, one male and one female, in tandem with a local government representative. They provide free and fee-based public services such as, registration of land records, birth registration, telemedicine and passport and job application assistance.²

12. Cooperation and coordination, whether top-down or bottom-up, may be able to address urgent problems. However, real-time multilevel and multi-stakeholder governance, carried out in a genuinely collaborative spirit and in harmony with country-specific attributes, might be a more effective governance approach in such cases. Multilevel governance practices, carried out in real time in support of the Goals, involve the use of electronic platforms to receive and collect data on policy and service issues and to keep track of actions taken towards resolution of issues with transparency and accountability. Such practices can accelerate measures to address complex governance challenges.

13. Such multilevel action could build on innovation/acceleration labs and real-time governance centres and societies, such as those in Andhra Pradesh in India. For example, the real-time governance centre of Andhra Pradesh is connected to a “People First” call centre where issues reported by citizens are immediately entered into a database, thereby allowing the government to assess the resolution of various issues and gauge response times.

¹ *Synthesis Report 2017: Voluntary National Reviews*, prepared by the Division for Sustainable Development, Department of Social and Economic Affairs of the Secretariat, p. 28.

² For more information, see <https://a2i.gov.bd/publication/union-digital-centers-in-bangladesh-present-status-and-future-prospects/>.

III. Successes and lessons learned on empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality

People's empowerment and inclusive participation

14. Participation has been promoted by Governments and civil society as a tool to improve governance and advance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It can be described as the process through which individuals acquire the skills and the means to influence public decisions and can be practiced through different mechanisms in various localities and countries.

15. Participatory governance can foster an environment of co-responsibility among civil society organizations and the community. It can stimulate inclusiveness and empowerment and enhance a sense of ownership, helping to ensure that community needs are met. Inclusive participation and engagement can improve policy development, service delivery and public accountability. More specifically, it can also be effective in overseeing the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the process of achieving the Goals.

16. Inclusive participation and engagement can also be integrated throughout the policy-making process, from the strategic formulation of policies to their implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Diverse types of people-government interactions can be considered by policy-makers and other stakeholders through representation by, inter alia, civil society and/or political representatives. Participation modalities can include information-sharing, co-production of services and shared decision-making within partnerships. The type of participation modality that works best in each context often depends on a range of factors, including governance traditions, institutional mechanisms, and the willingness and capacity of governance actors, including civil society organizations, to change advocacy-oriented mindsets and behaviours to partnership-oriented efforts. The latter requires, inter alia, diplomatic skills and co-responsibility arrangements.

17. Participation should be considered in both the policy- and decision-making process and in the assessment of development outcomes. Public policy should address the needs of the population with targeted and concrete solutions that not only recognize the specific needs of different groups but also benefit all people. New modalities of participatory governance are created through innovation labs and participation platforms. The Civic Innovation Lab in Santa Fe, Argentina, for instance, provides the space for citizen-driven innovations and bottom-up solutions that promote social transformation, democratic governance and sustainable and inclusive community development. Similarly, LabGov, an innovation lab in Chile, employs an interactive, human-centred approach to addressing public problems, delivering quality public services and improving citizen-government interactions.

18. Empowerment involves enhancing people's skills and capabilities while expanding the means and resources that allow them to participate in development processes. When empowered, people are better able to hold their Governments and service providers, at the national and subnational levels, accountable. Participatory budgeting in local or subnational governments is a powerful mechanism through which people and their organizations can provide feedback and decide on the services, priorities or programmes that Governments should fund.

19. Public sector representatives at all levels should become more receptive to participatory approaches that further the inclusive and equitable implementation of the Goals, such as improving policy development, enhancing human-centred service delivery and strengthening public accountability. In order for people to successfully engage in the policy-making process, certain background conditions and enabling

factors must exist, such as a favourable legal framework for inclusive governance and participation, including at the local level, as well as partnerships and strategic alliances with an active civil society.

Inclusive local governance

20. Implementation of the 2030 Agenda is progressing. Nevertheless, more emphasis needs to be placed on empowering subnational institutions since they are involved in decision-making processes such as the formulation, execution and control of public policies and sustainable development initiatives and are often among the first to respond to population needs and demands on the ground. The need to localize the Goals places local capacity development and local governance at the centre of public policy-making and administration.

21. The principle of subsidiarity and multilevel governance can be instrumental in fostering inclusive local governance. According to that principle, central Governments, in order to be inclusive and responsive to the needs and aspirations of all their constituents, should perform only those tasks that cannot be carried out effectively at subnational levels. Multilevel governance facilitates subsidiarity by promoting horizontal and vertical collaboration, cooperation and integration across levels and functional areas and sectors. This principle and related actions can spur inclusiveness, strengthen territorial cohesion, reinforce local solutions, reinforce a sense of ownership and forge co-responsibility, while maintaining the central Government's capacity to address broader issues with national and/or international implications.

22. Similarly, to promote and invigorate inclusive local governance, it can be helpful for responsibilities and resources to be decentralized in some countries. In highly centralized governance contexts, power might need to be transferred to relevant actors and agencies. Decentralization could be implemented as a general approach in public administration and/or in specific sectors with a view to localizing the Goals. This might require increasing political, administrative and financial autonomy at different administrative levels in tandem with institutional capacity development.

Partnerships and strategic alliances

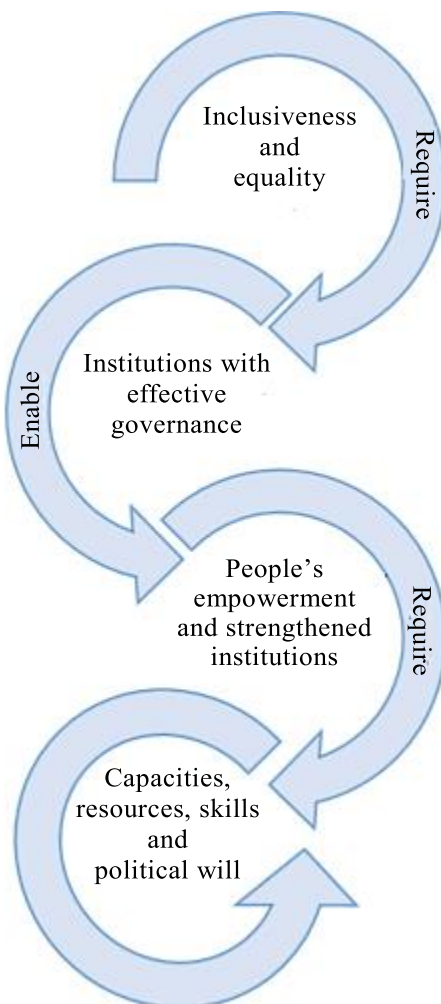
23. Collective action on the part of business, government and civil society is necessary for achieving sustainable development. Partnerships for effective governance and sustainable growth need to be scaled up from the level of individual ventures to that of multi-stakeholder networks. Creating alliances is also valuable for leveraging complementary resources, contributing to innovative solutions and mobilizing resources.

24. Partnerships can have a significant effect when a variety of actors are involved, with partners working towards shared objectives that are aligned with national development strategies and people's needs and aspirations. Partnerships between governmental and non-governmental actors have differing scopes, functions and objectives. For instance, Governments may work together with international organizations, universities, the private sector and civil society organizations to pursue diverse development objectives such as spreading quality education, increasing access to basic services such as water, sanitation and health care or enhancing trade. Global partnerships are also very important. Bilateral, South-South and triangular cooperation are global arrangements that can enhance interactions among stakeholders and improve development outcomes for all involved.

25. Challenges for stakeholder engagement include difficulties in reaching the most marginalized and the tendency to involve larger non-governmental organizations

rather than smaller, community-based organizations and individuals. Creating synergies and maintaining strong collaborative relationships with stakeholders entails a renegotiation of the roles, responsibilities and relationships between different stakeholders.³ As the figure below illustrates, inclusiveness and equality require institutions with effective governance, which then enable both people's empowerment and strengthened institutions. In turn, those require capacities, resources, skills and political will, so that leaders can facilitate coordination across communities and among stakeholders, while the people empowered in this way are able to exercise their agency.

Essential elements of empowerment



IV. Emerging issues likely to affect inclusiveness and equality at various levels of governance

26. Inclusive public institutions require both national and subnational capacities. National capacities are required in order to face complex and multidimensional development challenges across sectors, and subnational capacities are necessary to ensure that local and subnational strategies are aligned with national goals. The

³ *Synthesis Report 2017*, p. 53.

creation of such an enabling environment will require Governments to undertake reforms to increase the human capital of public institutions.

27. While this is a start, it may not be enough to have a well-functioning public administration with a highly qualified workforce capable of implementing the 2030 Agenda effectively. In order to deliver results, the public administration must also have the resources (technical, financial, material, etc.) to coordinate and support implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Public institutions need to align their human resources strategies with the challenges of the 2030 Agenda and with national and subnational sustainable development programmes.

28. Public sector employees play a critical role in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and should be empowered in order to for their potential to be realized. Human resources reforms in many countries have directly resulted in a more effective, responsive and inclusive public administration. Government staff that have been empowered to engage in more collaborative work with other stakeholders are better able to harness their potential to pursue development.

29. Public sector leadership, driven by the Goals, is another element that is crucial in promoting inclusiveness and equality in public governance. Leadership skills will help to balance different priorities in a way that enhances sustainability while reorienting governance towards the empowerment of staff.

V. Ensuring that no one is left behind through action at the global, regional and national levels

30. Ensuring that no one is left behind requires that Governments know who is being left behind, how they are being left behind and where this is occurring in their national territories. Those left behind may include, inter alia, women, indigenous people, migrants and refugees, minorities, persons with disabilities, youth, the unemployed, veterans and the poorest. National budgets should adequately address the needs and challenges faced by these groups.

31. Fair, just and equitable access to public services is as critical to leaving no one behind as the public policies that promote such services. Likewise, empowering people through the promotion of social equity in and of itself (e.g., in access to education, health and basic services) is as important as doing so through the design of policies that provide access to quality services, goods and benefits in a fair, just and equitable manner for everyone in need.

32. Regardless of the social protection and support policies implemented in countries, it is important to recognize that people are ultimately their own agents of change and empowerment. People will be able to exercise their rights fully only when they can switch from being aid recipients to controlling their own destinies. All people must ultimately have the tools to participate in the decisions, including on socioeconomic matters, that affect their lives.

Inclusive economies

33. Empowering people through the promotion of equitable fiscal policy would strengthen economic empowerment and reduce inequalities. When adequately designed, fiscal policy can act as a tool for mitigating or eliminating disparities. By the same token, raising revenue affects a country's economic activity and allocation of public resources, and tax systems must be fair and efficient in order to increase the level of trust in government, enhance the empowerment of women and other groups and make management of the environment and natural resources more effective, inclusive and equitable.

34. Furthermore, Governments, through tax records, collect large amounts of taxpayer data, including financial and demographic data. By using statistical methods and data analysis, Governments could capitalize on such data to measure progress towards the relevant Goals and use that information for non-tax-related policy recommendations to support the achievement of the Goals.

35. Treating tax records as input for socioeconomic policies could pose conflicts with certain administrative laws and procedures, as it may involve expanding the scope of the use of those records beyond the initial administrative prerogatives. It could involve the transfer of records to institutions, researchers or statisticians that may not abide by the same regulatory frameworks as do the tax institutions. Streamlining of legal frameworks is thus essential.

36. The structures, processes and rules that govern budget creation are key to enabling the prioritization of marginalized and vulnerable groups in public expenditure systems. For instance, gender-responsive budgeting, as part of a national budget process, can promote gender equality and empowerment. A survey by the International Monetary Fund found that effective gender budgeting requires that all relevant ministries take the lead in identifying gender-oriented goals that fall within their purviews.⁴ In a similar vein, budget initiatives related to children or indigenous people, which are new initiatives for many countries, should not be understood as separate from, but as necessary components of, the national budgetary systems.

37. As a means of addressing inequalities, national budget strategies should focus not only on how public resources are collected and budgeted but also on how they are spent. Equitable allocation of resources reorients national and local governments towards programmes that benefit population groups that are prone to being left behind. Moreover, leaving no one behind also means that these groups should be an explicit priority throughout the formulation, allocation, implementation and monitoring of national, subnational and local budget decisions.

VI. Areas where political guidance by the high-level political forum is required

38. There is increasing availability of evidence on what does and does not work regarding effective public programmes. That said, Governments place different degrees of emphasis on data and analytics. Often, Governments favour data collection over publication or dissemination and place even less stress on knowledge-sharing.

39. Efforts to improve data collection and publication have been made by some countries. However, technical assistance and financial resources to strengthen national statistical systems are necessary for monitoring the progress made on the implementation of the Goals. Moreover, Goal indicators are important because they are tools for evidence-based policy-making.

40. Empowerment, at its core, not only involves increasing individual capabilities to exercise agency; it also involves fostering an enabling institutional environment where individuals and groups can transform their choices into actions. Individuals, civil society organizations, the private sector and other stakeholders can act as agents of change only under the right circumstances or in a conducive environment provided by Governments.

⁴ J.G. Stotsky, "Gender budgeting: fiscal context and current outcomes", Working Paper WP/16/149 (Washington, D.C., International Monetary Fund, 2016). Available at www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2016/wp16149.pdf.

VII. Policy recommendations on ways to accelerate progress towards empowering people, ensuring inclusiveness and equality and achieving the Goals

41. Policies and programmes for implementing the Goals should be designed, executed and monitored in a participatory and transparent manner. In order to empower people, it is important to understand their needs. A top-down approach to empowerment, whereby people's interests are predetermined or imposed on them, does not work. Real-time, multilevel and multi-stakeholder strategies with practical methodologies can turn abstract plans into actionable road maps with immediate applicability. Such multilevel action can build on existing innovation/acceleration labs. Pilot projects should be encouraged, and lessons learned should be exchanged.

42. Empowering people necessitates an advanced style of leadership which is only possible when capacity is strengthened. For empowerment to be successful, people, including those working in public administration at all levels, need to have the capacity (that is, the resources, skills and experience) to exert their agency. Empowerment without resources and skills is a recipe for ineffective policy implementation. Therefore, capacity-building should have the highest priority.

43. Securing the means for the implementation of the Goals is essential. Accelerating progress will require mobilizing financial resources and finding innovative ways to obtain public and private financial support and investment oriented towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

44. Reliable and flexible public institutions need to foster an inclusive environment. In order to empower citizens, public servants and institutions, more empirical evidence needs to be shared and disseminated as well operationalized and transformed into a specific course of action.

45. Implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the national and international levels is progressing. Nevertheless, an emphasis needs to be placed on empowering subnational and local institutions, since they are involved in the decision-making processes and in the execution of public policies and sustainable development initiatives. Community-based solutions beyond simple participatory consultations should be preferred whenever and wherever possible.

46. At a sectoral level, Governments should review their fiscal policies to ascertain whether the collection of taxes on basic goods and services negatively impacts the individuals and groups that are left behind and to assess the extent to which tax policy benefits or disadvantages those with different levels of economic resources. Regarding the inter-agency and cross-sectoral use of tax and related data, legal frameworks regulating the treatment of tax records should be streamlined. Such frameworks must also ensure that records are anonymized prior to the mining and treatment of data.