POLICYBRIEF

The Sustainable Development Goals and Regional Institutions: Exploring their Role in Asia and the Pacific

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Highlights

Policymakers face a variety of challenges in implementing the 2030 Agenda. These include translating the SDGs and targets into national priorities, building on synergies and avoiding tradeoffs across the goals and targets, and building the capacities needed for the follow-up and review process. Regional institutions can play a significant role in responding to these challenges and contributing to the implementation, follow-up, and review process of the SDGs — particularly by:

- Utilizing their convening power to foster regional dialogue and peer learning for policy innovation. Regional dialogue can strengthen approaches for means of implementation in areas where regional cooperation is growing.
- Providing a regional platform to support follow-up and review. The lessons can be shared at the global level, e.g., through the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.
- Coordinating a science–policy interface to strengthen the data and statistical capacities of Member States. This also helps in identifying institutional arrangements necessary to foster synergies and limit trade-offs.

Recognizing Regional Institutions in Implementing the 2030 Agenda

Regional bodies have been recognized as key actors in coordinating the implementation, follow-up, and review process of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The outcome document of the Rio+20 summit, The Future We Want: Our Common Vision, emphasized that "regional and sub-regional organizations, including UN regional commissions and their sub-regional offices, have a significant role to play in promoting balanced integration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development" (UN 2012). The cooperation of regional bodies has also been sought in coordinating peer learning through voluntary national reviews, sharing best practices, and discussing mutual targets during the follow-up and review process at the regional and sub-regional levels. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development encourages "all member states to identify the most suitable regional forum in which to engage" to ensure an inclusive regional follow-up and review process (UN 2015a). The reports of the UN Secretary-General on regional cooperation in the economic, social, and related fields in 2016 revealed that UN regional commissions had begun to upscale and deepen their efforts in support of Member States' implementation of the 2030 Agenda by providing policy advice and technical assistance, providing platforms for political dialogue,

exchange of experiences, and peer learning within regions and with other regions, and strengthening analytical and statistical work (UNECOSOC 2016). The Synthesis Report of the Secretary-General on the Post 2015 Agenda notes that the inclusivity and integrated approach fostered by regional bodies ensures the review process is "public, participatory and broadly accessible" (UN 2015b).

This brief identifies a space for regional institutions in the Asia-Pacific region, focusing on the role of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in addressing challenges implementing the 2030 Agenda.

Challenges to Implementing the 2030 Agenda

Translating the SDGs into National Priorities

While discussions are ongoing on how to track and report on progress made at the national, regional, and global levels, a major issue is how to translate the global goals and targets into national-level action. Capacity needs assessments must be undertaken through both technical analysis and multi-stakeholder consultative processes, to ensure prioritization and alignment of the SDGs into national development plans. This is essential to ensure that the SDGs are reflected in the allocation of budgets and institutional resources, and realise synergies with other national strategies and processes. Translating the SDGs into national settings also requires an assessment of lessons learned from implementing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs; UN 2017). This will help in establishing or strengthening institutional frameworks to ensure coherence and coordination in the implementation and review processes. Furthermore, the universality of the SDGs entails translating global targets into actionable, measurable, and achievable country-specific targets. Countries must develop indicators consistent with internationally agreed standards to review and follow up on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Synergies and Interlinkages of the Goals and Targets

One of the key lessons from the MDGs is that a single-sector focus is not sufficient to promote holistic change. There are arguments, however, that with their 17 goals and 169 targets, the SDGs can seem overwhelming to developing countries with limited resources and capacities. As a result, there have been suggestions for countries to prioritize certain goals. However, the challenges addressed in the SDGs are complex and interlinked, which requires overcoming siloed

approaches to policymaking (Young et al. 2015). Researchers and policymakers are struggling to identify synergies and trade-offs related to the SDGs and their targets. For example, ending hunger and achieving food security may compete with an agenda to tackle climate change. The problem is that policymakers and planners operate in silos, as different government departments often have a monopoly over specific policy issues and related budgets. The policymakers also lack tools to identify which interactions are the most important to tackle, and evidence to show how particular interventions and policies help or hinder progress towards the goals. Therefore, policymakers need support to develop integrated approaches that are mutually reinforcing and minimize trade-offs (Nilsson et al. 2016).

Monitoring, Reporting, and Review

Another important lesson from the experience of the MDGs is the need for follow up and monitoring of the implementation process. Countries have therefore established — or are in the process of establishing — mechanisms for reporting, follow-up, and review. As part of this process, efforts are being made to develop global and national indicators that best reflect national challenges and priorities. Developing these indicators requires a set of data and statistics that is broader, more disaggregated, with greater frequency and shorter lags than those used to monitor development efforts to date. During the Voluntary National Review (VNR) process of the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in 2016, many countries reported significant constraints, in human resources and finances, to improving the quality of data, noting this area as one in which they require capacity-building assistance (UN 2017).

Policy Recommendations

Regional institutions can play a significant role in responding to the challenges outlined above. They can support both countries that are starting to identify means to translate the goals into national priorities, and those with institutional arrangements already in place to implement the 2030 Agenda. Therefore, the convening power and platforms provided by regional bodies, together with regionally coordinated science–policy interfaces, support countries at various stages of the SDGs cycle — which includes implementation, and the follow-up and review process.

1. Utilize Convening Power

Regional bodies can utilize their convening power to foster regional dialogue and peer learning whilst enhancing multi-stakeholder partnerships and policy innovation.

ESCAP convenes the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) annually, as an inclusive forum bringing together Member States and other stakeholders, including from civil society and the private sector. This regional platform supports countries in implementing the 2030 Agenda through the exchange of knowledge and best practice. The platform also facilitates peer learning on issues such as trade policy and finance for development. The exchange of knowledge and peer learning is further enhanced by factors such as geographical proximity, cultural similarities, and shared political cultures and religions among the region's Member States. These shared socio-political identities manifest in regional megatrends such as urbanization that can only be addressed through exchange of knowledge within multi-stakeholder partnerships. Furthermore, transboundary challenges such as climate change, energy security, and natural disasters require effective regional dialogue as a precursor to important institutional development initiatives. For example, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has led dialogue aimed at developing methods to estimate the fiscal implications of meeting the SDGs, and pilot applications of the methods.

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Regional platforms such as the APFSD can also be useful in strengthening approaches for means of implementation, particularly in areas such as trade and economic integration in which regional cooperation is growing. Regional cooperation on means of implementation can be a focus for important policy innovations. For example, a regional tax reform could support Member States in aligning taxation systems with sustainable development. The policy innovations and norm-setting that result from dialogue and peer learning facilitated by regional bodies often promotes new approaches to implementing the 2030 Agenda. For example, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Policy Partnership on Food Security (PPFS) was established in 2011 to strengthen public–private cooperation for addressing food security issues in the region.

2. Coordinate a Science–Policy Interface

Regional bodies can coordinate an effective science–policy interface (SPI) that engages academics, policymakers, and other stakeholders, for regional norm-setting and capacity building to develop evidence-based policy options. An SPI is a social process that allows for exchange, co-evolution, and joint construction of knowledge by scientists and policymakers, with the aim of enriching evidence-based decision making (van den Hove 2007). Such interfaces are vital to facilitating the establishment, expansion, or strengthening of regional networks of academic institutions and think tanks working on the SDGs. The combined inputs of multiple stakeholders assist in determining appropriate institutional arrangements that would be most conducive to integrated cross-sector policymaking. This should include mapping links between goals and targets, and help to identify solutions with high synergies and low trade-offs. Regionally coordinated SPIs should utilize analytical frameworks such as network analysis developed by academics to identify integrated approaches that seek to scale up the synergies and mitigate the trade-offs. This allows regional SPIs to support countries in setting up country-specific dashboards that indicate potential synergies and tradeoffs. These dashboards can be used as tools to guide national planning and joint implementation. In doing so, the regionally coordinated SPI also overcomes the inherent tension between prioritizing certain SDGs and implementing the 2030 Agenda as an integrated approach.

The interfaces should also support member states in the follow-up and review process, particularly in developing SDG indicators. To augment the statistical needs of Member States in this process, regional commissions — through SPIs — could support regional harmonization of statistics and national capacity development efforts to improve data and statistics collection, processing, dissemination, and use for evidence-based decision making. This can be done by working with regional conferences on statistics and providing capacity and technical assistance to national institutes of statistics. ESCAP, in partnership with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), has established an expert group comprising statisticians and disaster risk reduction experts to develop a regionally agreed set of basic disaster statistics, as well as a disaster-related statistics framework that identifies the capacity needs of Member States.

3. Serve as Regional Platforms for Follow-up and Review

Regional bodies provide platforms to carry out the follow-up and review process. For example, APFSD is now the most inclusive intergovernmental regional platform for follow-up and review in the Asia-Pacific region. Regional fora bring together Member States and other stakeholders, including regional and sub-regional partner organizations, civil society, and the private sector, to promote peer learning and cross fertilization of best practices and approaches, particularly on integrated and cross-sectoral approaches. This will help countries to learn from peers on how to overcome the inherent tension between prioritizing certain SDGs and taking an integrated approach to implementation. Dialogue through regional platforms also promotes policy coherence and optimization of efforts and resources, while addressing specific regional priorities and challenges. Regional commissions can also join inter-agency networks supporting Member States in monitoring the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. As another example, the Asia-Pacific SDG Partnership between ESCAP, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is an important regional initiative for tracking SDGs progress and advocating for action on the goals. ESCAP is also supporting the development of indicators at the sub-regional level in the Pacific among countries with special needs. Lessons from this regional follow-up and review process can be shared through the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development to allow peer learning at the global level and encourage south–south cooperation.

Note

This policy brief is based on research conducted for the UNU-IAS project Governance for Sustainable Development. It also draws on conclusions of an *SDG Dialogue* public event held on 13 October 2016.

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