

# POLICY BRIEF

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## Governance and National Implementation of the 2030 Agenda: Lessons from Voluntary National Reviews

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### Highlights

Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) show marked progress by countries as well as challenges in their respective pursuit of implementing the 2030 Agenda. Countries across the globe need to ramp up their efforts to learn from each other in strengthening their governance to accelerate progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

#### Recommendations:

- Develop robust vertical and horizontal governance mechanisms to enable national and local governments to address cross-cutting and complex sustainability issues.
- Create links across sectors and actors to strengthen interlinkages between SDGs and targets, and with other agendas, to enhance synergies and minimise trade-offs.
- Integrate the SDGs into national and local budgetary processes to improve policy coherence.
- Link SDGs monitoring and evaluation processes to existing local and national monitoring mechanisms.

### Global Progress on Strengthening Governance for the SDGs

Four years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in 2015, the majority of countries have developed foundational governance arrangements for implementation. They have completed mapping of policies related to the SDGs, prioritised and adapted targets, and initiated work on indicators at the national level. The process of adopting the shared vision of the 2030 Agenda in national development plans and strategies is still underway in 16 countries that submitted VNRs in 2018.

This policy brief draws out key areas of progress and other insights from 99 VNRs submitted between 2016 and 2018 (see Notes), particularly in relation to national governance structures for implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The brief provides recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders who are working to accelerate the implementation process.

Comparing the VNRs in 2018 to those in 2016 and 2017, there are positive trends in public participation and the involvement of broader stakeholders in the consultation process for SDGs mainstreaming and VNR preparation at the national level. However, only 17 countries in 2018, eight countries in 2017 and six countries in 2016 appeared to be

making concerted efforts to meaningfully enhance multi-stakeholder partnerships to collectively implement the agenda (e.g., Belgium, Denmark, and Switzerland). At the same time, initiatives undertaken by civil society and the private sector at various scales have begun to materialise across regions.

## Governance Trends & Practices

Promising governance reforms and practices are emerging across countries and regions. The picture remains mixed, however, and countries can learn much from each other relative to their development context and experience in implementing global agendas.

### Governance & Coordination Mechanisms

Establishment of a governance structure for implementation was one of the first actions carried out by all of the countries observed, with the lead body located within a specific ministry or directly under the head of government. Several countries, such as Armenia and Australia, have assigned multiple lead bodies. Some countries have used existing platforms for coordination, including those established for the MDGs (e.g., Kenya and Malaysia) or for sustainable development (e.g., Belgium and Sweden). Others have modified existing platforms by broadening their roles and responsibilities (e.g., Mexico and Uruguay), including more organisations, or relocating the organisational focal point (e.g., Indonesia). Establishing new platforms specifically for coordinating implementation of the 2030 Agenda is a shared feature of countries in the Americas and the Asia-Pacific. Globally, there is a positive trend towards building new platforms, growing from six countries (2016) to 23 countries (2018).

The inclusion of local governments in the national consultation process has been consistent at around 50% throughout the 3-year period. However, only a few countries have formally included them in the national governance structure for SDGs implementation and monitoring. For instance, Paraguay has established the “Commission of SDG Paraguay 2030”, a governance structure that combines national–local intergovernmental mechanisms and non-governmental involvement. This innovation shows progress towards establishing integrated, mutually reinforcing vertical and horizontal institutional mechanisms.

The involvement of parliaments, young people, and the private sector varies across regions. Between 2016 and 2018,

youth involvement has shown a positive trend, increasing from 20% to 40%, while the involvement of parliament (50%) and the private sector (20%) has remained steady. In general, in European countries there has been more engagement of the private sector and local governments in the implementation phase, while in the Americas countries have fostered interactions between the government and the parliament. Innovative approaches to engagement have included the formation of groups comprising ministries, young people, academics, local authorities, and the private sector — as evident in the Netherlands.

### Mainstreaming the 2030 Agenda into National Frameworks & Policies

Ninety-one percent of countries that submitted VNRs in 2018 have undertaken SDGs mapping and alignment of their national frameworks and policies, improving from 87% in 2017 and 73% in 2016. Mainstreaming the SDGs into existing development or sectoral plans is a common trend for countries across the regions — with the exception of Northern and Western Europe, which have instead developed new plans to specifically address the SDGs.

Eight countries in 2018 and seven countries in 2017 were taking into consideration interlinkages between goals and targets (e.g., Australia, Costa Rica, and Denmark). In total, 43 countries, including Finland, Luxembourg, and Norway, assessed policy coherence as a part of the mainstreaming process. The trend to apply policy coherence is mainly driven by European countries, where the Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD) mechanism promoted by the OECD is commonly applied at the national and local levels. However, only a quarter of countries refer to key global agreements on climate change, disaster risk reduction, and the New Urban Agenda in their VNRs.

Integration of the SDGs into national and local budgeting processes remains in its infancy. Nineteen countries in 2018 and 14 countries in 2017 reported that efforts had commenced to integrate the SDGs into their national budgets. Some countries, such as Colombia, Panama, and Uruguay, have identified budgets that can contribute to the SDGs, offering an overview of financing for each goal. Argentina and Honduras in particular have been working to identify all government initiatives with specific SDGs. While most countries have made a commitment to identify public sources of funding, fewer have calculated the cost of implementation to achieve the SDGs, identified non-public funding opportunities, or established a framework to boost private-sector financing for the SDGs.

## Policy Recommendations

Notwithstanding limitations associated with the preceding analysis, such as changes to the formatting of VNRs between 2016 and 2018, this policy brief aims to provide insights for collectively charting a future path for realising the SDGs. The following four recommendations are of equal importance.

### 1. Develop robust vertical and horizontal governance mechanisms that enable the government to address cross-cutting and complex sustainability issues

Such mechanisms are critical for enabling governments to work on wide-ranging strategies and cross-agency issues. The role of the central government apparatus, such as lead bodies and platforms for coordination, should be strengthened to mobilise collective expertise from across levels and sectors. High-level political support for such lead bodies and platforms, along with regulatory provisions and political mandates, can help to guarantee engagement beyond their current administrative jurisdictions and remits — a particular need in countries such as Colombia and Indonesia, due to the fluid and unpredictable political environment. Further, a whole-of-government approach that entails the sharing of information among public agencies is key to uncovering emerging challenges early, as evident in Australia, Malta, and Singapore.

Along with the inclusion of an unprecedented range of stakeholders in policy development and implementation, promoting cross-sector partnerships within and across levels is equally important (Sunam et al. 2018). Countries with a long history of forming cross-sectoral partnerships such as the Netherlands have a solid track record of involving non-governmental actors in policymaking to tackle cross-cutting challenges in areas such as water and energy. Awareness-raising efforts, such as those implemented in the Netherlands, are needed to strengthen partnerships, in which a wide variety of actors can contribute according to their strengths. Similarly, it is critical for governments to ensure supportive institutions for cross-sector partnerships that go beyond consultation — such as Germany's Platform for Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships at the national level, and Japan's Public Private Partnership Platform at the local level for its SDGs Future Cities.

### 2. Create links across sectors and actors to strengthen interlinkages between SDGs and targets, and with other agendas, to enhance synergies and minimise trade-offs

Some countries have identified these interlinkages and synergies to pursue in accordance with their national

priorities to strengthen management of trade-offs — for example, between energy, water, and food in Australia and between agriculture, tourism, and culture in Greece. The academic community should be encouraged to facilitate informed discussion of interlinkages, allowing for transparent aggregation and the flow of information from science to policymaking, a strategy applied in Greece. It is equally important to secure the political commitment across sectors and across actors that is vital for developing coherent policies (OECD 2018).

Another opportunity is to ensure that national and local processes for the SDGs operate in close connection with other global efforts (Young 2017). At the very least, this requires operationalising the SDGs to engage those working on other key global agendas such as disaster risk reduction, climate change, and the New Urban Agenda.

### 3. Integrate the SDGs into national and local budgetary processes to improve policy coherence

The SDGs, as a management tool for resource allocation and arbitration, have the potential to serve as holistic criteria to comprehensively evaluate and improve the coherence of budgetary processes (Hege and Brimont 2018). As some countries, such as Argentina and Colombia, have mapped how their budgets are linked to different SDGs, the next step should be to integrate this effort into planning and policy evaluation to enable the assessment of synergies and trade-offs between different programmes. Mexico has initiated a process to evaluate the effectiveness of public budget spending on its contribution towards achieving the SDGs, in order to reorient public spending accordingly. Some countries have involved the national court of audit (e.g., Austria, Canada, and Sudan) and simplified laws and procedures (e.g., Italy) to improve effective, accountable, and transparent institutions for the SDGs.

Incorporating the SDGs into existing budgetary processes at all policy stages and levels is critical. National and local plans that operationalise national and local priorities and their indicators can provide a starting point for integrating the SDGs into budgets. In some countries, this requires modifying planning laws to incorporate the 2030 Agenda into national and local planning, as implemented by Mexico. Early involvement in the mainstreaming process by the finance ministry, and by the agency in charge of the budget at the local level, is important to ensure that the SDGs are incorporated into both the upstream and downstream components of the budgetary processes. Denmark is one example where the finance ministry coordinates

the national implementation of the SDGs. Given that budgetary processes are complex political and technical exercises, engaging parliamentary, governmental, and non-governmental stakeholders is crucial for integrating the SDGs into budgets. Using gender budgeting as a starting point, Italy has identified main priority areas to engage all actors — including defining a general methodology for reporting by building upon the budgetary reporting experience of local authorities, testing budgeting for the evaluation of the different impacts, and reporting to the parliament.

#### 4. Link SDGs monitoring and evaluation processes to existing local and national monitoring mechanisms

While national statistics offices play a significant role, and governments must be committed to their improvement, greater efforts are needed to ensure quality monitoring and evaluation. Linking SDGs monitoring and evaluation processes to existing mechanisms at the national and local levels is critical to foster transparency and accountability — as Spain has done with its parliamentary oversight process, and Hungary with its national ombudsman. SDGs indicators and targets can also be integrated into the national and local government key performance indicators — as implemented by Bhutan. Another innovative approach is to develop an integrated, flexible, national–local monitoring system that can accommodate context-specific indicators. It is also important not to limit monitoring and evaluation processes to the government. Involving experts from civil society organisations, the private sector, municipalities, academia, and other stakeholders through partnerships can enhance knowledge on the quality of the data and improve the monitoring framework, as implemented by Denmark.

#### Notes

This policy brief is based on analysis of 99 VNRs (45 submitted in 2018, 39 in 2017, and 15 in 2016). A total of 111 VNRs were submitted during this period (United Nations 2019); for countries submitting multiple VNRs, only the latest VNRs were analysed. Initially an exploratory review of academic literature was completed to identify 31 key approaches to implementing the 2030 Agenda. This was followed by a critical review of VNRs using a coding scheme to differentiate approaches that had been completed, applied, or planned for future application.

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