

# POLICY BRIEF

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## Accelerating 2030 Agenda Integration: Aligning National Development Plans with the Sustainable Development Goals

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### Highlights

Achieving the SDGs and the transformation required by the 2030 Agenda hinges on effective national policies. National development plans play a critical role as they are at the centre of the policymaking process. To accelerate localisation of the SDGs national planning must be aligned with the SDGs through improving the policymaking process, removing systemic barriers, and engaging diverse stakeholders to innovate and sustain change.

#### Recommendations:

- Harness the SDGs as an opportunity to promote national goal-setting processes and influence domestic policymaking.
- Use the SDGs as a platform to mainstream sustainable development principles in national policymaking.
- Strengthen national development planning by promoting approaches relevant to the SDGs.
- Position human, social, environmental, economic, and institutional objectives at the same level.
- Ensure inclusive participation and effective stakeholder engagement in implementing the 2030 Agenda and national development plans.

### A New Generation of Development Plans

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development encourages national target-setting and adaptation of the SDGs into national process, policies, and strategies. Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda there has been an increase in the number of national development plans (NDPs) adopted, accelerating a trend over the past two decades. The number of countries with an NDP has more than doubled between 2006 and 2018, from 62 to 134 (Chimhowu et al. 2019). NDPs have increasingly become an essential part of countries' attempts to deal with the complexity of socio-economic and environmental processes at the national and global levels, and more recently, to respond to various international agreements (e.g., the Paris Agreement) and global agendas. An NDP stipulates the strategic direction, development priorities, and implementation strategies for a country, and is often produced through a national consensus process. It provides the institutional framework and foundation for other policy documents, such as budget plans, investment plans, and implementation processes, and for monitoring. Integration of the SDGs at the national level has rarely gone beyond mapping and reporting (Grainger-Brown and Malekpour 2019), and it remains unclear whether these plans can fully reflect the transformative potential of the SDGs. Yet they are a significant step in integrating universally accepted global goals into national development planning.

This policy brief presents findings and recommendations on how the SDGs potentially influence and stimulate new directions for NDPs. Based on UNU-IAS research, it draws insights from NDPs and vision documents (hereafter visions) developed by six countries in Asia and the Pacific, East Africa, and the Middle East (see Note), but the recommendations are also of relevance for other countries and regions.

## The SDGs in National Development Plans: Trends & Issues

### Planning Orientation

NDPs and visions present a broad spectrum of policies to balance economic and socio-environmental objectives. They attempt to reflect the underpinning principle of the 2030 Agenda of balancing the three dimensions of sustainable development — economic, social, and environmental. However, NDPs and visions adopted by these six countries are heavily oriented towards economic objectives. They advance an array of neoliberal policies such as market-oriented reforms and a private sector-led development model in Bangladesh and Egypt, the promotion of competitiveness-led export growth in Tanzania, and economic diversification in the Gulf monarchies of Oman and Qatar. These do not necessarily respond to the ambition of the global agenda for transformative change but rather to economic risks such as volatility in low oil prices, informality, and low economic diversity.

### Public Sector Reform

Participatory governance and structural transformation are two common trends in NDPs and visions. The documents of both Bangladesh and Tanzania attempt to align with the global goals by referencing good governance approaches, such as whole-of-government and the rule of law, and setting out domestic strategies to transform national socio-economic structures. On further examination, however, these public reform strategies (e.g., public-private partnerships [PPPs], devolution to local governments) reflect more the structural transformation of economies and societies that is strongly advocated by the Bretton Woods Institutions, than the whole-of-government approach based on public participation.

The documents of Oman and Qatar explicitly link public sector reform with SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions), aiming to develop and modernise public sector institutions to be more efficient, transparent, and accountable. They call for building a future-oriented, fair,

and just public sector based on efficient, multidimensional, and intersectoral coordination. The mapping of these objectives onto SDG 16 lacks depth, however, as the documents fail to address justice or how the reforms will ensure participatory and representative decision-making at all levels, including local government. They only pursue the structural transformation of economies by focusing on innovation, productivity, and future orientation. Similarly, Egypt's Vision 2030 calls for public institutions with strong analytical capacities but provides little detail on how local governments can be autonomous when they lack data and personnel with sufficient training (El Massah 2016).

### Multi-stakeholder Engagement

Research in OECD Member countries and other European countries points to the importance of participation and democratic institutions for achieving the SDGs (Glass and Newig 2019). Similarly, stakeholder engagement is a key issue in the observed NDPs and visions. Two types of engagement are most prominent. One takes place during the implementation phase, with PPPs the most common form of state and non-state engagement, which underscores the private sector's critical role in driving NDPs forward. The plan adopted by Tanzania emphasises a participatory governance approach for implementation that pays particular attention to citizens' participation, without elaborating on broad and active stakeholder engagement as envisioned in the 2030 Agenda. In Egypt's Vision 2030, it is the private sector's responsibility to execute the majority of the proposed projects. The documents of Oman and Qatar deem the private sector's proactive role as vital for economic diversification, and ultimately the transition to knowledge-based economies. Even so, none of these documents elaborate on the process nor the roles of non-state actors in effective oversight and accountability as envisioned by SDG 16.

The other type of engagement occurs during the planning phase and appears more consultative than a meaningful partnership that could influence the implementation process. The examined NDPs and visions were all prepared through multi-stakeholder consultation processes, including actors such as civil society organisations (CSOs) and academia. In Egypt, Oman, and Qatar, the development of NDPs and visions was a government-owned process, while in Bangladesh, Malaysia and Tanzania, the documents were discussed in and adopted by parliament. Nevertheless, the roles indicated for these actors in the documents are very narrow, limited to consultation or persuasion. The documents adopt the narrative of multi-stakeholder engagement from the SDGs, but implicitly frame it as

interchangeable with the existing approach, which entails narrower means of engagement. NDPs and visions are yet to fully embrace the concept of development as a collaborative process.

### Linkages with the Global Goals

NDPs and visions link with the global goals to varying degrees. A common element is mapping the SDGs against pre-determined objectives based on national priorities. One key trend observed is the adoption or use of the SDGs to legitimise existing domestic approaches and narratives of national interests. In countries that explicitly integrate the SDGs into national development goals, the linkages between goals and indicators are defined, as well as the role of the NDP in mainstreaming the SDGs. Oman and Tanzania are using the SDGs as a framework for development that advances domestic agendas and as a catalyst to strengthen specific initiatives — such as economic diversification policy in Oman and poverty reduction initiatives in Tanzania.

## Policy Recommendations

Based on these observed trends, the following five recommendations are provided for national stakeholders, such as policymakers and planning practitioners. Each is of equal importance.

**1. Harness the opportunities that the SDGs provide in terms of promoting national goal-setting processes and influencing domestic policymaking.** Current approaches to national development planning are characterised by the setting of medium to long-term strategy and national priorities. This is particularly evident in the NDP of Bangladesh, which focuses on goals and targets that resonate with the national vision and objectives, such as SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production), and less on environmental sustainability, which is mainly referred to as conservation of natural resources and pollution control. Harnessing the 2030 Agenda in the national planning process by adopting its key elements (goals, targets, indicators, means of implementation, the principles of universality, integration, and leaving no one behind) can provide valuable guidelines to strengthen long-term goal-setting within and beyond 2030 and encourage multi-stakeholder policymaking processes. NDPs and visions cover medium and long-term planning; thus, integrating the SDGs could also provide a blueprint for policymakers and stakeholders to initiate and sustain domestic policymaking efforts towards sustainable development across electoral cycles.

**2. Use the SDGs as a Platform to Advance Sustainable Development in National Policy-Making.** The SDGs enable flexibility for plans to continue with pre-set goals and policies while offering a platform for domestic discourse of sustainable development. NDPs and visions could use the flexibility inherent to the SDGs to adapt to economic concerns such as economic diversification, industrialisation, sustainable economic growth, and investment, and social concerns such as inequality, poverty, and well-being. Policymakers can utilise the SDGs as a platform to open and balance the discussion on contested issues such as climate change, by emphasising the importance of sustainable economic growth while balancing it with environmental sustainability. Linking SDG targets and NDP instruments can provide a basis for inter-sectoral partnership during implementation. Plans can also take advantage of a systems approach to the SDGs, providing means for multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral conversations, knowledge, and a rationale for an integrated approach to policy development.

**3. Strengthen National Development Plans by Promoting Approaches Relevant to the SDGs.** This includes harnessing the potential of evidence-based decision-making, policy coherence for sustainable development, and budgeting for the SDGs. Countries are yet to apply these approaches to strengthen their national development planning, despite progress on specific reforms such as the transition to e-government, which can advance localisation of the SDGs. Applying these approaches could help overcome challenges facing public sector reforms such as complex bureaucracies and a legacy of state-led development. For example, policymakers can enhance NDPs by assessing coherence across policies, programmes, and budgets to promote synergies, address trade-offs, and provide a broader scope of development and implementation.

**4. Comprehensively Mainstream the SDGs to Position Human, Social, Environmental, Economic, and Institutional Objectives at the Same Level.** Aligning with and integrating the SDGs is necessary for implementing NDPs, and places equal importance on human, social, environmental, economic, and institutional dimensions. Closer alignment with the 2030 Agenda could accelerate efforts on environmental sustainability, aligning national environmental and climate objectives with national policies. This entails using the SDGs to redefine institutional frameworks, guide investments, and redirect resource allocation. It can be supported by integrating SDGs into annual and medium-term budget policies. Policymakers may opt to identify budget initiatives across and within each SDG area or map SDG targets' policy areas against the NDP and its budget programmes.

Achieving NDPs requires inclusiveness and sustainability considerations to be incorporated into macroeconomic policies and financial regulations, budgeting, trade and investments, economic diversification, and domestic resource mobilisation. NDPs that can be used for global reporting and policymaking need proper monitoring and adequate reporting; which relies upon effective national planning systems for implementing national development priorities and the SDGs. At present, horizontal accountability in such systems remains very limited and efforts are needed to enable involvement of parliaments, supreme auditing institutions, and national human rights institutions (Breuer and Leininger 2021).

**5. Ensure Inclusive Participation and Effective Stakeholder Engagement in Implementing NDPs and the 2030 Agenda.** In the process of aligning with the 2030 Agenda, adopting a whole-of-society approach, engaging CSOs, local communities, people in vulnerable situations, and the private sector, could help to effectively localise the SDGs into subnational planning and implementation and establish a governance framework that aligns the national and sub-national levels. This will facilitate sharing of experiences and knowledge as well as improving transparency. Broader stakeholder engagement through innovative direct participatory processes such as e-governance and participatory budgeting could help ensure effective implementation of cross-cutting goals and targets.

Meaningful, safe, and effective stakeholder engagement may also help NDPs capture the complexity of the SDGs by building understanding and consensus among stakeholders. Collaborative rational process (Innes and Booher 2010) is a potential strategy to be implemented within national development planning as it tends toward a more horizontal rather than hierarchical approach to the planning process.

#### Notes

This policy brief is based on UNU-IAS research examining NDPs and vision documents from Asia and the Pacific, East Africa, and the Middle East that were produced and released after 2016. The plans of six countries were analysed: Bangladesh (2016), Egypt (published 2016, updated 2018), Malaysia (2016), Oman (2019), Qatar (2018), and Tanzania (2016).

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