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SDGs one year on: global stocktake of the High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

Auteur

Julie Vaillé

Senior Research Fellow, Governance and Financing of Sustainable Development

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The meeting of the UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF) from 11 to 20 July in New York was the first since the adoption of the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#), representing a milestone and first test of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Northern and Southern countries. With 17 goals and 169 targets, which are universal and indivisible, [SDGs](#) have been criticized for being overly [broad and encompassing in nature](#). Nevertheless, they are valuable in that they gather together the major global challenges of our times into a single perspective – stopping climate change, reversing the trend of rising

inequality and eradicating extreme poverty. For action to be taken on these issues, SDGs must be integrated into the national strategies of all countries, both in the North and the South. A year after their adoption, what assessment can be made of government ownership of the SDGs?

The key role of national reviews

The monitoring of the 2030 Agenda as defined in the [UN resolution A/RES/70/1, paragraphs 83 to 85](#), includes three components: the first consists in thematic and crosscutting reviews (grouping several SDGs); the second brings together national reviews; and the third is a statistical review. Regarding the latter two, the UN anticipates that States will be sensitive to international comparison, and that this will generate a virtuous circle of knowledge sharing and learning. In this perspective, the [national reviews](#) are expected to play a central role. In July 2016, 22 countries volunteered to present their national SDG implementation report, including 7 developed countries [\[1\]](#) and 15 developing countries [\[2\]](#).

A high-level of representation

From these national reviews, we note the following: the level of representation of Member States was relatively high in general, with the presence of prime ministers, foreign ministers and even presidential cabinet ministers, reflecting the will to give political weight to the commitments made in September 2015. Representation rarely came from environmental ministries, which is a [new trend](#) compared to the monitoring of commitments made at [the Earth Summit in 1992](#) in Rio de Janeiro. Many States have tried to structure SDG monitoring in their governance through coordination bodies at the highest level (President of the Republic for Mexico, Prime Ministers for Egypt, Finland and Sweden). This shows the importance of putting SDGs back at the heart of a very wide scope of action, which goes beyond environmental issues and requires [the crosscutting coordination](#) between public administrations. Most States are in the process of integrating SDGs into their planning: in national development strategies ([Colombia](#)), sectoral or thematic strategies ([Morocco](#), [Madagascar](#)), and even in the budget (Colombia). The question is to what extent do these strategies integrate the long-term perspective and include the definition of means of implementation – budget, policies and programmes. Both [Germany](#) and [Montenegro](#) have broken down the SDGs into measures and sub-measures for the achievement of the objectives.

Uneven mobilization from national civil society

Some countries have launched a consultation by civil society (Germany, [Switzerland](#)), by parliament or the private sector ([Norway](#)), through the launch of online platforms or a more structural involvement ([Finland](#)). The challenge is twofold: to increase knowledge on SDGs and to ensure that actors seize the 2030 Agenda as a political lever. The [Women's Major Group](#) nevertheless found that [only 10% of voluntary national reviews](#) involved civil society at the time of their creation.

Measuring and debating progress towards the achievement of the SDGs are prerequisites for the implementation of effective policies.

Only a few governments have committed to annual reviews (Norway) or reviews every four years

(Germany) to ensure the regular monitoring of progress. Only a few States have defined the differences between the targets and the country situation (Finland), which is no doubt due to the statistical difficulties involved in such an exercise – which has been highlighted by Southern countries. Measuring and debating progress towards the achievement of the SDGs are however prerequisites for the implementation of effective policies. Overall, it appears that the Nordic countries, Germany and South American countries are the most advanced in terms of national ownership of SDGs.

Promotional campaign or critical review?

Some countries were self-critical ([Estonia](#)), however, the most informative and relevant period was during the questions from the audience: States had the opportunity to question each other, within the limits of diplomatic propriety. [International agencies](#) have outlined their vision. [Civil society](#) has been able to challenge members of governments, and to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of national reports. The degree of ownership, at the global level, thus seems to have been achieved, however this does not seem to be the case nationally. Some governments have not assigned it any space, while in rarer cases, civil society organizations have proactively seized the 2030 Agenda (Switzerland, Germany).

Limitation of self-assessment

There is however a limit to self-assessment: it is the national administrations that are producing the report, without external expertise, as can be the case for monitoring climate commitments or reviews by peers conducted by the OECD. The use of external expertise would be a real breakthrough and could guarantee objectivity and the comparability of results. Another downside is the voluntary nature of national reviews: while guidelines are proposed, compliance is optional, which leaves the way clear for pointless enumerations of existing measures. However, the effort is clear. This is not an exercise in self-satisfaction that one might have feared, such as the self-promotional campaigns conducted as part of the defunct [Commission on Sustainable Development \(CSD\)](#), with the exception of a few countries.

[1] Germany, Estonia, Finland, France, Montenegro, Norway, Switzerland. [2] 3 Latin American countries (Colombia, Mexico, Venezuela), 2 countries in North Africa (Morocco, Egypt), 4 countries in sub-Saharan Africa (Madagascar, Sierra Leone, Togo, Uganda), 2 Western and Central Asia countries (Turkey, Georgia), 3 countries of East and South East Asia (China, Korea, Philippines) and 1 in Oceania (Samoa).