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The SDGs a year on: where are we now?

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The first anniversary of the entry into force of the Sustainable Development Objectives (SDGs) was celebrated on 1 January 2017. To mark this occasion, IDDRI has drawn up an initial review of the initiatives taken in response to this new international sustainable development agenda. As a first step in this exercise, this text focuses on the implementation of SDGs by national governments.

Transformative, universal, interconnected and holistic: these are the main attributes of the 17 goals and 169 targets of the SDGs. With such a high level of ambition, the task ahead for national governments, essential actors in SDG

implementation, is sure to be challenging. How are they attempting to respond to this new agenda? On which issues are governments advancing the most, and which ones are they finding the most difficult? To answer these questions, IDDRI has studied the [progress reports](#) of the 22 countries involved in the voluntary national reviews exercise, which were made available at the last session of the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), and analyzed in a previous [post](#) ([SDGs one year on: global stocktake of the High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development](#)).

SDGs: the positive points

Without political support from the highest levels of state representation, there is little likelihood that SDG implementation processes will influence national policies. From this point of view, the last session of the HLPF showed encouraging signs, as countries were represented by high-level political leaders: of the 22 countries that submitted progress reports, 10 were represented by a minister, for example the Minister of the Environment in France; also present was the Norwegian Prime Minister, as well as the Vice President of the Republic of Venezuela.

The political importance attributed to the SDGs is also reflected by the national coordinating entities: in half of the countries, SDGs are under the direct responsibility of a Prime Minister or President. This high level of coordination promotes, at least in theory, the coherence of public policies. It should indeed be remembered that the key principles of SDGs are universality and indivisibility. Practically speaking, it is necessary to avoid a situation where one sectoral policy has negative effects on other sectors (agricultural policies on biodiversity for example), or on the achievement of SDGs in other countries. Assigning responsibility for SDG implementation to the heads of governments rather than to specific ministries meets this requirement for overall coherence

Aspects on which countries are least advanced

SDGs are not just issues for governments. Civil society, businesses, local authorities and parliamentarians are all stakeholders in the implementation of this agenda, both as transformative actors – the achievement of the SDGs requires the efforts of all – and as catalysts for collective change: NGOs thus have a fundamental role of surveillance and advocacy to encourage governments to assume their responsibilities. However, while countries in their reports generally state the need to involve different stakeholders, the modalities of this involvement vary widely. In the case of NGOs, for example, some countries, such as Togo, Morocco and Turkey, only consult them on an ad hoc basis, usually downstream from government discussions. While other countries integrate NGOs in a more permanent way, as has been the case in Sierra Leone, a country that has set up a steering committee comprising representatives of associations. The same is true for parliamentarians, the role of which rarely exceeds that of consultation. Although Norway has undertaken a very promising initiative that structures budget development and discussion around the SDGs, which gives parliamentarians an important role in their follow-up.

Moreover, a national assessment of the distance away from achieving a goal, known as a gap analysis in SDG terminology, is a prerequisite for each country to meet the aims of the SDGs. A gap analysis aims to identify the way in which SDGs renew national objectives (do SDGs go beyond national targets?), but also, and above all, to assess the state of progress of a country in relation to each target. In general, countries are not well advanced in the realization of these gap analyses (for a gap analysis example see the IDDRI publication: [will France pass the SDGs test?](#)). Most countries have initiated the process, but very few (Estonia, Norway, Finland, Sierra Leone) have made a real report on progress. Finally, the consideration of mechanisms for governments to monitor progress and commitments are still at an embryonic stage.

SDGs: uncertainties remain

This first voluntary national review exercise at the HLPF showed that many uncertainties remain with regard to SDG implementation. For example, 6 of the 22 countries that have conducted this national review exercise have not yet defined the body responsible for coordination and steering, namely China, Uganda, Samoa, Togo, Turkey and Venezuela. In the case of France, the situation is ambiguous insofar as the Commissioner-General for Sustainable Development in charge of SDGs is attached to the Ministry of the Environment, while being an interministerial delegate responsible for sustainable development under the responsibility of the Prime Minister.

In addition, while almost all countries – with the exception of France – have identified the strategic documents used to integrate SDGs (mainly national sustainable development strategies and national development plans), nothing has been said about the way in which the SDGs will transform them, or about the ability of such strategies to influence public policy and major investment. This issue is all the more important given that national sustainable development strategies have historically been given relatively low political importance. How can the SDGs improve the situation? This central question is currently being evaded.

States are at the very beginning of SDG implementation; it is much too early to draw up a final assessment. But while some elements are encouraging, others suggest that there is much work to be done and that many uncertainties remain. Furthermore, the SDGs will only have an impact if all actors – businesses, NGOs, trade unions, parliaments, communities and others – seize the opportunities they offer, and use them in their strategies. What stage are these stakeholders at? This issue can be followed in IDDRI's "SDGs series"!

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