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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Translating the 2015 commitments into domestic debates and actions

The sense of ownership of the 2015 international goals held by the political community of the countries involved is highly variable. This ownership is particularly lacking in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which provide an excellent case study of the challenges of the "domestication" of international commitments. It seems that two scenarios are emerging for the future of SDGs at the national level. The first considers the SDGs in a purely statistical sense, i.e. where states respect their commitment to report to the UN on the potential progress they have made towards the 2030 objectives, measured on the basis of hundreds of monitoring indicators. The second gives them a political dimension, paving the way for a strategic use of SDGs to induce political decisions that are more favourable to sustainable development, today and tomorrow. Who are the political champions of SDGs today? What national coalitions are currently emerging or are likely to emerge in future? What modalities for the involvement and accountability of civil society and national private stakeholders are appearing within some of the SDGs, from which other SDGs can draw inspiration?

1. CONTEXT

The implementation of the 2015 commitments within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development framework, including climate issues, raises extremely diverse difficulties that vary according to the goals and countries.

At the risk of oversimplification, we can say that today's national debates on monitoring and reporting mechanisms, on the distribution of roles between the different stakeholders mobilised within these mechanisms, and more upstream, on the nature of the policies to be implemented, are significantly more advanced in terms of climate than for the other 16 SDGs.

The climate issue, which is subject to a separate negotiation process that for five years has been included within a national context through the use of intended nationally determined contributions (INDCs), has been addressed through a bottom-up approach, while the other 16 SDGs have been subject to an intergovernmental negotiation process carried out with vigour, but without being linked to the debates on society and economy within countries, unlike the links to energy transition that accompanied the INDCs. The pedagogy of the SDGs has still to be diffused within many administrations, companies and local authorities. In between the text concluded in New York and the citizen appropriation of SDGs through online consultations such as MyWorld, there is a missing level: that of the nation.

This level is essential for at least two reasons. The first is that it is able to bring an economic coherence to transformations that affect all sectors—education, health, food security and hygiene, industry, biodiversity, access to energy, to name just a few SDGs—even more so if we consider that all these changes will be intensive in terms of public policy and budget consumption. The economic feasibility of the transition to multi-sectoral SDGs is more easily established at the national level, simply because of the availability of data and a coherent macroeconomic framework at that level. The second reason is that only the UN Member States are *de jure* accountable for commitments taken on their behalf, even if these commitments have been designed in close collaboration with civil society and economic stakeholders.

It is therefore necessary and urgent to transform SDGs into politics and policies—unless we consider that they have little relevance to the richest countries, these countries being characterised by their relative performances, measured in terms of the 169 targets associated with the 17 SDGs, which are highly correlated with their income levels.

2. ISSUES/SOLUTIONS

The level of ownership of SDGs—except for climate—amongst the political community in OECD countries is highly variable, and even on the average extremely low if we consider that ownership is related to the number of public statements issued on the subject. The overall picture is only a little more nuanced when we examine the level of ownership by administrations, with foreign affairs administrations, in charge of negotiations, preserving the memory of it, while the environment administration seizing it.

It seems that two scenarios are emerging on the basis of this finding. The first considers the SDGs in a

purely statistical sense, i.e. where states respect their commitment to report to the UN on the potential progress they have made towards the 2030 objectives, measured on the basis of hundreds of monitoring indicators shared amongst national administrations, and collected within a report presented in New York in front of peer Parties. The second gives them a political dimension, paving the way for the strategic use of SDGs by society to induce political decisions that are more favourable to sustainable development, today and tomorrow.

A first challenge, common to both scenarios, is the simplification and the prioritisation of the 2030 commitments as well as the identification of the means envisaged to achieve the priority targets selected, without which the monitoring will be limited to measures that do not obtain intelligence on the causes and will miss its target. Such prioritisation is not easy. It is diplomatically sensitive to the extent that some countries, including France, have insisted on the indivisibility of the agenda—without being challenged in its principle, indivisibility must accept some prioritisation. What bets must be placed and what obstacles must be overcome to achieve the targets that the business as usual scenarios put out of reach?

In the framework of the 2030 Agenda, countries have already been invited to develop their own national strategies for sustainable development and to conduct reviews with the involvement of civil society in order to assess, in particular, the implementation progress. If not part of a legislative perspective, as seen in several European countries for example with the law on the beyond GDP indicators, the fine tuning of these strategies will only partially meet this first challenge of the development of a monitoring system that is conducive to policy reform and to the learning process.

A second challenge, that is more specific to the scenario related to the "policy implementation" of the international commitments made in the 2030 Agenda framework, focuses on the redefinition of responsibilities and forms of accountability of the different public and private actors who are both involved in and stakeholders of the implementation. Should civil society, for example, focus on warning and assessment activities? By what means can it demand accountability? The civil society in Switzerland intends to create an "SDGs Watch", a mechanism that would monitor national progress of the indicators and targets of the SDGs, which plans to draft a "shadow report" to counterbalance that of the government—in anticipation, no doubt, of the latter lacking intelligibility, which brings us back to the first challenge. What responsibility framework should be defined for businesses? What logging and monitoring methods need to be renewed or invented? Without answers to these questions, policy implementation will remain a declaration of intent.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE SESSION/QUESTIONS

– What formal policy "support" do we observe in the countries most involved in the SDGs negotiations? What national coalitions are emerging? Who are, in short, the political champions of SDGs today?
– What lessons can be drawn from national strategies for sustainable development? What have the reports produced? Under what conditions could their impact be increased?
– What new arrangements for the involvement and accountability of civil society and national private actors are emerging within some SDGs, which could be good examples for other SDGs?
– Is the writing of "shadow reports" relevant and promising for the "policy implementation" of the 2030 Agenda?

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