

SDG implementation: what are the countries doing?

An assessment of the voluntary reviews submitted to the High-level Political Forum

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In September 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), accompanied by 169 targets and 230 monitoring indicators, covering issues as diverse as poverty eradication, education, health, environmental protection and international cooperation. These SDGs are central to the 2030 Agenda, a roadmap for the development of all states over the next 15 years. A year after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, what assessment can we make of SDG implementation?

This Issue Brief compares the progress reports of the 22 countries participating in the national voluntary reviews, which were submitted during the last session of the High-level Political Forum, held in New York from July 11-20, 2016.¹ Given that the format of these reports is left to the discretion of the participating governments and that the declarations are not verified by third parties, this Issue Brief should be viewed as an initial exploration of the actions declared to be underway to meet the SDGs, which should be examined in greater detail for each country.

1. The voluntary national reviews are one of the monitoring mechanisms for the 2030 Agenda; each government drafts a progress report, which is submitted during a special session of the HLPF. The reports are available online: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/inputs>

KEY MESSAGES

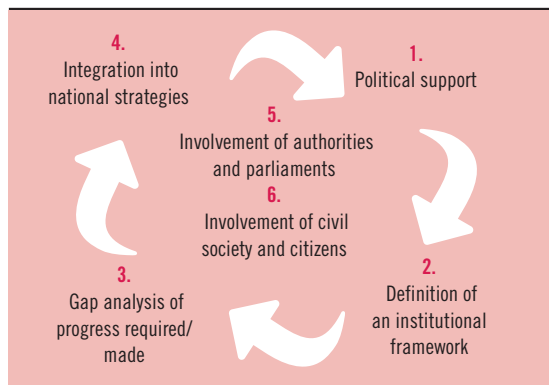
- In many countries, the SDGs receive high-level political support, up to the level of the Prime Minister, and there are real efforts to ensure coherent SDG implementation between the different ministries: Norway is a very good example of this.
- Although the countries often mention in their reports the importance of involving the local authorities and national parliaments—especially via the budget vote—they say little about the modalities of this involvement, or about that of citizens. Like Germany and Mexico, the countries can give a prominent role to associations, unions and companies in SDG monitoring and public decision-making. They also rely on the involvement of these actors “in the field”, as actors of change.
- The countries have as yet made little headway in the use of SDG indicators and targets to assess the progress to be made, to define public action priorities or to monitor progress made over time. Gap analyses are generally limited to inventories of sectoral policies and/or indicators, without any forward thinking about the baseline scenario or the pathway for change.
- The implementation of the 2030 Agenda is just beginning, and it is still too early to take stock of the results of the first efforts made by the countries. However, the analysis provided in this Issue Brief enables us to explore the most promising institutional mechanisms and is therefore in line with the goal of mutual learning between countries underlying the SDGs.

This article has received financial support from the French government in the framework of the programme “Investissements d’avenir”, managed by ANR (the French National Research Agency) under the reference ANR-10-LABX-01.

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SDG implementation in each country is analysed according to six criteria, which are inspired by academic and United Nations recommendations (SDSN, 2015; United Nations, 2016; O'Connor *et al.*, 2016): 1) political support for processes; 2) building an institutional framework to ensure policy coherence; 3) gap analyses to identify shortfalls between goals and progress; 4) the coherence and alignment of national strategies with the SDGs; 5) civil society and citizen involvement; and 6) organising responsibility sharing between public actors. These criteria can be considered as the necessary conditions for a “virtuous circle” of SDG implementation (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Diagram of SDG implementation



1. MAKING THE 2030 AGENDA A POLITICAL PRIORITY

The level of responsibility of the national representatives sent to the HLPF is an indicator of political support. Of the 22 countries having submitted their progress report, 10 were represented by a minister, the Environment Minister in France, for example. Norway was represented by its Prime Minister and Venezuela by the Vice President of the Republic.

The political importance given to the SDGs is also expressed through the steering and coordination mechanisms set up: in 11 countries, the SDGs are under the direct responsibility of the Prime Minister or the President (Table 1), potentially enabling the alignment of the different sectoral policies with the SDGs. In the other cases, a specific ministry has responsibility for the SDGs, which makes it more difficult to ensure they play an integrative role. The situation is sometimes ambiguous: in France, for example, the General Commissioner for Sustainable Development responsible for the SDGs reports to the Ministry of Environment, while being an interministerial delegate for sustainable development under

the responsibility of the Prime Minister, which legitimises her involvement in coordinating the different ministries.

2. BUILDING AN INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK TO ENSURE POLICY COHERENCE

The goal of the 2030 Agenda is to ensure public policy coherence, both within a country—to prevent sectoral policies from adversely impacting on other sectors—and between countries: governments must make sure their domestic and foreign policies do not impede SDG implementation in other countries.

Faced with these challenges, half of the countries chose to assign responsibility for the SDGs to the level of the Prime Minister or the President (Table 1). Only four countries opted for coordination at the ministerial level, at the risk of partitioning the implementation of the agenda. In Norway, for example, although the SDGs are driven by the Prime Minister, all ministers in charge of an SDG must coordinate their action with the other ministries concerned by this SDG. In France, coordination is the responsibility of the network of high-level authorities on sustainable development, under the authority of the General Commissioner for Sustainable Development.

Table 1. Authority responsible for coordinating SDG implementation by country

Level of coordination	Prime Minister or President	Ministerial	Uncertain
Countries	Colombia, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Germany, Madagascar, Mexico, Norway, Philippines, Sierra Leone, South Korea	Egypt, Montenegro, Morocco, Switzerland	China, Samoan Islands, Togo, Turkey, Uganda, Venezuela
	France		

3. GAP ANALYSIS OF PROGRESS MADE AND REQUIRED

What does the ambition of the SDGs actually mean in terms of the efforts to be made by each country? A gap analysis identifies to what extent the SDGs renew national ambitions, by providing quantified targets that did not previously exist, or by setting more ambitious targets, but it especially assesses the status of the countries in relation to each target (Hege *et al.*, 2016).

Overall, the countries have made little progress on these gap analyses. Admittedly, 17 of the

22 countries² have initiated the process by listing their sectoral policies that address the different SDGs, but they have rarely identified existing quantified targets. France, for example, has produced an inventory of its sectoral policies for each SDG, without identifying to what extent the SDGs renew their ambitions. Montenegro has gone a little further, since it has calculated that 60% of the SDG targets are already covered by its national targets.

However, most of the reports are silent on the status of the countries regarding the SDGs and the progress to be made, with the exception of Estonia, Norway and Finland, which have announced efforts to determine priorities that nevertheless remain inexplicit or unjustified, and Sierra Leone, which has provided a quantified progress report on the indicators available and has even set intermediate targets to be met.³

As regards the regular monitoring of progress, the countries say little about what they are implementing, with the exception of periodic reports made by the statistical offices. In many cases, the structures in charge of SDG implementation will be responsible for this monitoring, without further precisions about the way in which it will be organised, and in particular about the role of these regular gap analyses and their appropriation by civil society to ensure government liability for their commitments.

4. INTEGRATING THE SDGs INTO PUBLIC STRATEGIES

The 2030 Agenda encourages the states to “build on existing planning instruments, such as national development and sustainable development strategies, as appropriate”.⁴ In fact, all of the countries intend to integrate the SDGs into existing strategies rather than to create a new one, with the exception of France, whose

2. Those that make no reference to an exercise of this type are China, Germany, Georgia, the Philippines and Uganda. The progress reports are generally vague on this issue and use poorly defined terms, making it difficult to compare the countries.

3. In addition to this work on objectives, eight governments have undertaken to quantify the availability of SDG indicators for their own country. This availability is highly variable depending on the country: while France and Morocco say they can provide data for around half of the 230 indicators, Estonia only has data for 14% of them for the time being. Contrary to what might be thought, the developing countries are not necessarily in the worst situation: Uganda has data for 35% of indicators, compared to 31% for South Korea and 26% for Montenegro.

4. United Nations General Assembly (2015). Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development A/RES/70/1, § 78.

report does not identify any integration option (Table 2).

Although Norway is planning to update its sectoral strategies—such as the biodiversity action plan or the government strategy for children living in poverty—in line with the SDGs, the other industrialised countries intend to use their national strategies for sustainable development (NSSD). The developing countries mostly use their national development plans or growth strategies, although five of them are planning to use NSSD. The relevance of one or the other of these options—which are not mutually exclusive⁵—depends on their capacity to influence public policy and major investments, and this capacity appears to be more promising in the case of general development strategies than in that of NSSD, which have historically had a relatively low impact.

Some countries, such as Georgia, are seizing the opportunity of a renewal of their strategies to reflect on how to integrate the SDGs into them. Others are far more proactive: Montenegro, for example, has aligned its NSSD assessment schedule with that of the international negotiations on the SDGs.

Table 2. Strategic documents used to integrate the SDGs

	Industrialised countries	Developing countries
National strategy for sustainable development	Estonia, Finland, Germany, Montenegro, South Korea, Switzerland	Egypt, Morocco, Samoa Islands, Togo, Uganda
Development/growth plan	X	China, Colombia, Georgia, Madagascar, Mexico, Philippines, Sierra Leone, Turkey, Uganda, Venezuela
Sectoral strategies	Norway, Switzerland	Georgia, Philippines, Turkey
Not specified	France	

5. ORGANISING RESPONSIBILITY SHARING WITH THE OTHER PUBLIC ACTORS

As a legislative body that controls government action, parliaments have an important role to play in SDG implementation. Their involvement is nevertheless variable depending on the country: in some cases (Togo, Sierra Leone, Egypt), they are consulted periodically during the drafting or adoption of strategies; in other cases (Finland), they play an active part in discussions on the

5. Uganda is planning to integrate the SDGs into its NSSD, but also its national development plan. Moreover, several countries, in addition to Norway, also highlight the need to work on integrating the SDGs into sectoral policies.

governance and monitoring of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda; and in Germany, Mexico and the Philippines, existing parliamentary commissions are responsible for this monitoring.

In addition to consultation, the role of parliaments depends to a large extent on the mechanism in which the SDGs operate. Thus, leverage may be very high if the SDGs structure the drafting process and debate on the budget vote (Demailly *et al.*, 2015), as is the case in Norway, where every minister responsible for an SDG must provide a progress report for the targets attached to that SDG in their budget proposal. These reports are then compiled by the finance minister in the annual budget proposal submitted to parliament.⁶

Sharing responsibilities between the different political levels (international, national, subnational) is a challenge that some countries have attempted to address, like the government of Colombia, which has identified the relevant levels (State, regions, municipalities) for each target and has specified those that require private sector commitments.

6. INVOLVING CIVIL SOCIETY AND CITIZENS

With the exception of China and the Samoan Islands, all of the reports mention actions to involve civil society. This involvement nevertheless takes varying forms and degrees, which has a considerable impact on SDG implementation.

A first level of participation consists in consulting civil society on an ad hoc basis for the preparation of national voluntary reviews (as is the case for Togo, Morocco and Turkey). We can question the impact of these consultations, insofar as they take place rather late in the process. Other countries involve civil society in a more permanent manner. In Sierra Leone, for example, the SDG steering committee includes representatives of associations and companies. Germany has even granted some

of its speaking time at the HLPF to associations and companies, thereby submitting before its peers to pressure from its own civil society.

A third and final level of participation consists in setting up platforms for joint action, as is the case in Mexico, where the government has created an SDG platform that includes 80 companies (Sustainability Alliance). In France, the environment ministry is planning to create a participatory web platform that will be open to all actors, with the aim of sharing good practice and mobilising coalitions.⁷

The issue of public communication on the SDGs appears in only nine reports. In Sierra Leone, one of the first actions undertaken by the government was to prepare a simplified presentation document on the SDGs in order to raise awareness among stakeholders and the general public. The Philippines and Mexico have created or will create a website to monitor indicators. Finally, Norway is planning to include the SDGs in its school curricula. ■

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7. <http://www.developpement-durable.gouv.fr/Les-objectifs-de-developpement,47591.html>, consulted on 28 October 2016.

6. With the exception of Norway, eight other countries are planning to ensure closer links between SDG monitoring and the budget vote process: Egypt, Finland, Madagascar, Mexico, Montenegro, the Philippines, Sierra Leone, and Uganda. In France, bill n° 2015-411 of 13 April 2015, known as the Eva Sas Bill from the name of the Member of Parliament who introduced it, requires the government to submit for every budget year a report on 10 indicators of wealth, which differ from those proposed by the SDGs, but are nevertheless relatively aligned, and which could in fact be harmonised.