

Transforming institutions to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals after the pandemic

World Public Sector Report 2023

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UNITED NATIONS WORLD PUBLIC SECTOR REPORT 2023
Transforming institutions to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals after the pandemic

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Department of Economic and Social Affairs

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Foreword

The essential role of public institutions and public administration to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is well recognized. A dedicated Goal (SDG 16) on peace, justice and institutions further underscores the importance of effective governance for sustainable development.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath have highlighted and, in some cases, exacerbated long-term trends and risks affecting the relationship between people and governments. These include the polarization of public opinions, misinformation and disinformation, increased inequalities, the digital divide, and shrinking opportunities for participation. Weaknesses in critical functions of governments such as managing policy trade-offs and risk, preparing for crises, and communicating with the public, have also been exposed. Furthermore, inequalities in access to basic public services such as education, health and justice have been laid bare. Addressing these challenges is now an international priority, as reflected in the United Nations Secretary-General's report, *Our Common Agenda*.

At the same time, critical innovations in the way public institutions operate and interface with people arose out of necessity during the pandemic. In some sectors, drastic changes took place, with both positive and negative impacts. Governments explored new ways of delivering public services through collaboration with non-state actors. Tools were mobilized to maintain or expand transparency and accountability around key actions of governments. The successes and failures of these innovations offer many lessons for the future.

Scaling up and expanding successful innovations is essential to achieve the transformation that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development requires. We must identify those innovations that make public institutions more effective and resilient to shocks, more participatory and inclusive, more forward-looking, and able to steer societal change, as well as more transparent and accountable, as reflected in SDG targets 16.6 and 16.7.

In this context, the *World Public Sector Report 2023* asks how can we leverage such innovations to advance the 2030 Agenda?

I hope that the detailed examples and recommendations here will inspire governments to harness institutional innovations in advancing the 2030 Agenda. Just seven years remain to achieve the SDGs. We must redouble our efforts to align public policies and institutions with the transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda.

LI Junhua
Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs
United Nations

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Abbreviations and acronyms

AI	artificial intelligence
APC	Association for Progressive Communications
A4R	accountability for reasonableness
BEPS	base erosion and profit shifting (project)
BW4SD	Be Wise for Sustainable Development (initiative)
CCT	conditional cash transfer
CEPA	Committee of Experts on Public Administration
CIDE	Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas
CIEP	Centro de Investigación Económica y Presupuestaria
CIMULACT	Citizen and Multi-Actor Consultation on Horizon 2020 (project)
CMP	change-maker project
CMU	Carnegie Mellon University
CoG	centres of government
COP	Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CSO	civil society organization
DHIS2	District Health Information System
DPIDG	Division of Public Institutions and Digital Government
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
eVin	Electronic Vaccine Intelligence Network
FMIS	financial management information system
GDP	gross domestic product
GIFT	Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency
GIRL	Gender Inequality Research Lab
G20	Group of 20
HGG	Hawai'i Green Growth
HISP	Health Information Systems Programme
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
HLFP	High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development
HNWIs	high-net-worth individuals
IAP2	International Association for Public Participation
IATT	United Nations Interagency Task Team on Science, Technology and Innovation for the SDGs
ICEFI	Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios Fiscales
ICMR	Indian Council of Medical Research
ICNL	International Center for Not-for-Profit Law

ICT	information and communications technology
IIR	Income Inclusion Rule
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INFF	Integrated National Financing Framework
INTOSAI	International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions
KU Leuven	Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
K-12	kindergarten through twelfth grade
LGBT	lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender
LGBTQI+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex
MGG Academy	Managing Global Governance Academy
MNEs	multinational enterprises
NASEM	National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine
NHA	National Health Assembly
NHS	National Health Service
NWT	net wealth taxes
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OPSI	(OECD) Observatory of Public Sector Innovation
OTC	over-the-counter
PCR	polymerase chain reaction
PFM	public financial management
PIC/S	Pharmaceutical Inspection Cooperation Scheme
PPI	Policy Priority Inference (research programme)
PS4SD	Public Strategy for Sustainable Development (think tank)
RBAP	(UNDP) Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific
RIS	Research and Information System for Developing Countries
SADP	Sistema de Alta Dirección Pública
SAIs	supreme audit institutions
SARS-CoV2	severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEI	Stockholm Environment Institute
SEPIS	System of Records of the State Sanitary Inspection
SIGMA	Support for Improvement in Governance and Management (programme)
SORMAS	Surveillance Outbreak Response Management and Analysis System
SPI	science-policy interface
SSEC	Smithsonian Science Education Center
STEM	science, technology, engineering and mathematics
STI	science, technology and innovation
STRIP	Systematic Testing using Robotics and Innovation during Pandemics (platform)
TCU	Tribunal de Contas da União
T20	Think 20 (process)
UCLG	United Cities and Local Governments
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

UNDAF	United Nations Development Assistance Framework
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UN DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNGP	UN Global Pulse
UN-Habitat	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNPSA	United Nations Public Service Awards
UTPR	Undertaxed Payment Rule
V-Dem	Varieties of Democracy (project)
VLR	voluntary local review
VNR	voluntary national review
VSR	voluntary subnational review
VSS	Voluntary Sustainable Standards
VUR	voluntary university review
WCED	Western Cape Education Department
WFH	working-from-home
WHO	World Health Organization
WJP	World Justice Project
W-LEAD	Women in the Lead—Leadership, Engagement, Advancement and Development (programme)

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Executive Summary

The *World Public Sector Report 2023* examines the role that the institutional and governance innovations and changes which emerged at the country level during the COVID-19 pandemic can play in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the remaining seven years.

Halfway to 2030, progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has stalled and in some cases been reversed. In the past three years, the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and climate-related disasters have exacerbated the challenges facing the international community and made the SDGs more difficult to achieve in the short and medium terms. In this context, it is crucial to identify opportunities for progress.

While the pandemic exposed the fragility of social contracts, it also sparked rapid innovation in government institutions and public administration. Positive changes were observed in the internal workings of public institutions, in the way they interacted with one another and broader society, and at the interface with people in relation to public service delivery.

Capitalizing on successful institutional innovations undertaken during the pandemic could be a powerful enabler of the type of transformation the 2030 Agenda calls for by making public institutions more effective and resilient to shocks, more participatory and inclusive, more forward-looking and able to steer societal change, and more transparent and accountable.

The *World Public Sector Report 2023* examines institutional changes that were observed in different contexts, sectors and policy processes and explores successful innovations with a positive impact on the achievement of the SDGs that should be sustained beyond the pandemic. It addresses the following three questions:

- How can Governments strengthen public trust and their relationships with society?
- How can Governments assess competing priorities and address difficult policy trade-offs that have emerged since 2020?
- What assets and innovations can Governments mobilize to transform the public sector and achieve the SDGs?

The present report is built around chapter syntheses linked to these three questions as well as 23 short contributions from 38 experts from across the globe. Recommendations put forward by the experts can provide inspiration for all Governments to harness institutional innovations and practices that have emerged since 2020.

How can Governments strengthen public trust and their relationships with society?

In recent years, relationships between people and their Governments have been profoundly altered. Civic space is eroding globally and its nature has changed. High levels of polarization have been observed within societies. Inequalities have widened. The accuracy of information has become a pervasive and contested issue. The rapid move to digital government is reshaping the relationships

between people and the State, with both positive and negative impacts. Restoring trust between people and public institutions is now recognized as a key goal as well as a critical requirement for achieving progress on the SDGs.

Chapter 1 examines trends and opportunities in the areas of governance, democratic values, traditions and institutions, and information integrity.

During the pandemic, Governments imposed restrictions on civic space and granted themselves new powers, subject to fewer checks and balances, that imposed limits on freedom of association, assembly and expression. Some Governments applied guardrails for emergency measures, ensuring their necessity, proportionality, legality and non-discriminatory impact and involving oversight institutions in the review of these measures. Some States facilitated broader participation in their crisis response by inviting public input and feedback on pandemic-related challenges and policies and including civil society representatives in policymaking committees and parliamentary debates. In some countries, protecting freedom of peaceful assembly and safeguarding the right to privacy were important considerations. Civil society played a vital role in monitoring and raising awareness of rights violations, forming networks and coalitions, advocating for the removal of criminal sanctions, supporting the rights and well-being of women, Indigenous Peoples, youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, and other disadvantaged social groups, and challenging emergency measures through strategic lawsuits. Positive examples from the pandemic can inform future actions of Governments to preserve and broaden civic space.

Young people have been disproportionately affected by multiple crises. Trust in government and public institutions has declined among youth, with many feeling that their voices are ignored in decision-making processes. Engaging young people in participatory governance and creating and safeguarding inclusive structures, processes and spaces such as youth organizations, activism, community research, and councils can lead to more effective and sustainable public policy.

Global evidence suggests that gender equality in public administration enhances government functioning, the responsiveness and effectiveness of service delivery, and trust in public institutions. Yet most countries are still far from parity at decision-making levels. To sustain operations during the pandemic, Governments adopted new workplace policies for public employees, some of which had positive effects on gender equality. Adjusting to a “new normal” and refocusing on gender equality in public administration globally will require simultaneous efforts on three fronts: remembering lessons learned prior to the pandemic and reenergizing efforts to adopt and implement good practices in areas such as data and transparency, training and mentorship, and targets and quotas; consolidating positive changes made during the pandemic and integrating them into future gender equality commitments in public administration; and taking bold action to regain momentum to achieve SDGs 5 and 16 by 2030.

The pandemic provided important lessons for Governments regarding effective communication with social actors during crises. A key driver of trust in government is communication reflecting a high degree of intentionality. Some countries enjoyed early success in controlling the spread of the pandemic by engaging in productive collaboration with civil society and other actors. Important factors that influence the success of communication strategies include reliance on evidence-based

information and sound scientific advice, the credibility of spokespersons and the development of compelling and concise messages, and the use of multiple channels of delivery. Consistent messaging across key stakeholders is critical, as is the inclusion of new media tools in risk communications strategies. Taking these into account, Governments should pursue a coordinated approach to public communication that is transparent and rooted in local contexts. Going forward, it is essential to recognize that communications preparedness needs to start ahead of a crisis.

The rise of disinformation and misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic led to mistrust in health authorities, undermined public health responses, and resulted in risky behaviours. In general, addressing misinformation and disinformation is extremely complex. Governments should support the free flow of information during crises, regularly disseminating accurate information, including through campaigns and proactive disclosure, and establishing systems for public access to information. Efforts to combat inaccurate information should include utilizing social media and other platforms to debunk false information and correct it. Rather than relying solely on punitive legislation that restricts freedom of expression, Governments should also focus on improving media literacy (including in schools), expanding access to accurate information through partnerships with local media and private organizations, and undertaking other relevant actions.

Legal frameworks and regulatory reforms have not kept pace with developments in digital technology. During the pandemic, digital technologies and mobile communications were widely used by Governments in their efforts to combat the crisis and deliver a wide range of public services. Major challenges encountered in both developing and developed countries included digital exclusion, limitations on freedom of expression online, digital surveillance, and violations of privacy and data protections, highlighting the disconnection between the protection of human rights online and offline. Efforts are needed at the national and international levels to harness the benefits of digital technologies while upholding human rights.

An important aspect of the relationship between Governments and citizens derives from the availability of effective, transparent and accountable dispute resolution mechanisms. By revealing the vulnerability of justice systems, with their heavy dependence on paper and in-person filing and appearances and lack of interoperability, the lockdowns created the conditions necessary for the swift adoption of e-justice systems. As public institutions move away from temporary, ad hoc adjustments towards sustained modes of operating, there is a window of opportunity for digital transformations that promote rights-centred, rule-of-law-focused justice systems. To exploit this window, it is important to organize transformation efforts around people's experience of conflicts or injustice; to involve judges and human rights defenders in the design of digital solutions; and to embrace legal processes that support early resolution and informal approaches to dispute resolution.

The negative and long-lasting social and economic impacts of the pandemic and the reduced fiscal space facing most countries today have prompted debates on the fairness of taxation systems and what the contribution of different segments of society should be to public financial resources. The taxation of multinational enterprises and high-net-worth individuals is viewed by many as a way not only to increase revenue in a strained economic environment, but also to reduce wealth and

income inequalities, improve perceptions of tax fairness, and build greater trust in government. Experts note that this debate has to go beyond personal and corporate income taxes and encompass whole tax systems. More resources should be provided to tax administrations, especially in developing countries, to achieve higher tax compliance and improve services to taxpayers. Ongoing discussions around reforms of the international tax system have considered these and related issues. In December 2022, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted a resolution on the promotion of inclusive and effective international tax cooperation at the United Nations, which was followed in August 2023 by a report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations on the same subject.

Taken together, these trends point to the need for a comprehensive approach to rebuilding and strengthening social contracts. This is a central focus of the United Nations Secretary-General's report, *Our Common Agenda*, published in 2021. Addressing this need will better position societies to achieve stronger relationships and social cohesion, greater resilience to crises, and accelerated progress towards the SDGs. Governments alone cannot reshape their relationships with other social actors. However, as a crucial first step, they need to create an enabling environment for strengthening relationships. For instance, they can promote transparency, respect for human rights, public engagement, and the exercise of voice. Critically, they can also demonstrate trust in other actors at the same time that they seek greater trust.

How can Governments assess competing priorities and address difficult policy trade-offs that have emerged since 2020?

Progress on the 2030 Agenda and SDGs has been slow and uneven, with the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent crises exacerbating pre-existing challenges and sometimes reversing progress achieved since 2015. Many SDG targets are not on track to be achieved, and progress is insufficient even for those closer to completion. The interdependencies between the SDGs have been affected by the crises, creating new trade-offs and challenges in mobilizing resources for integrated implementation. The impacts of the pandemic and subsequent crises have resulted in shifts in government priorities, budget allocations and public expenditure. Institutions face challenges in delivering consistent and mutually reinforcing policies and actions amid high uncertainty, tight budget constraints, and eroding trust.

Chapter 2 emphasizes the need for Governments to harness SDG synergies more effectively as they move past the halfway point for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. To achieve the SDGs, Governments must prioritize actions that offer synergistic benefits while also managing trade-offs effectively. The chapter emphasizes the importance of understanding the contextual and dynamic nature of SDG interactions. Governments need to act as stewards of complex systems, leading integrated and coherent policy actions for long-term transformative change. Institutional integration and policy coherence are crucial for addressing complexity and normative conflicts across Goals and targets.

Various studies have analysed SDG interdependencies. However, the current methods used are limited in their ability to assess the dynamic and contextual nature of these interactions and how they change over time, as well as their implications for policymaking. Results often lack actionable

insights, which creates a gap with decision-making processes. As a result, enhanced understanding of the interconnections among the SDGs has not always translated into more synergistic actions from Governments.

Prioritizing SDGs and associated targets is necessary in the context of limited resources and diverse development needs. In order to prioritize, Governments must identify entry points for sustainable development and evaluate the impacts of policies on multiple Goals. Different studies suggest various prioritization criteria, and a practical approach involves contextualizing policy prioritization and resource allocation based on the trade-offs and synergies specific to each country. Transparent criteria, processes, and tools for prioritization are critical to promote public buy-in and strengthen the legitimacy of the decisions made by Governments.

Institutional arrangements play a vital role in integrated SDG implementation. Coherent and accountable institutions can help bring multiple stakeholders together, leverage synergies, and address trade-offs. There is a need to enhance coordination mechanisms, align development strategies and budgets, and integrate risk management into cross-cutting processes and institutional arrangements. Impact evaluation tools, regulatory impact analysis, and performance audits can contribute to policy coherence and enhance accountability.

Evidence of how institutional integration and policy coherence play out in different national contexts is limited, and voluntary national review reports have not emphasized this issue. In general, though, Governments have not made significant progress in terms of policy coherence. Inadequate analytical capacities, data constraints, and limited stakeholder engagement hinder policy and planning processes. Barriers such as institutional fragmentation, internal processes within public organizations, and limited political will remain significant.

The scientific community plays a vital role in supporting SDG implementation by synthesizing evidence, translating knowledge into policy options, supporting early warning and risk assessment systems, and facilitating participatory processes. To better respond to policymakers' needs, the co-production of inclusive alternatives and capacity-building efforts are essential. Procedural elements such as a shared understanding of problems, the collaborative framing of issues, the authority to steer implementation, and the strategic use of information are critical. Investments in capacity-building and training for public officials and other stakeholders can facilitate knowledge sharing, strengthen the application of science-based methods and tools, and provide the skills needed to conduct assessments, analyse synergies and trade-offs, and promote policy integration.

Various science-based methodologies and tools, such as strategic foresight and scenario approaches, can support policy coherence and integration for the SDGs. Strategic foresight engages stakeholders, fosters institutional collaboration, and helps policymakers assess risks and identify policy alternatives. Government institutions have started to incorporate strategic foresight into their processes, but there is room for improvement in using the related tools to inform policy design and implementation.

Science-policy interfaces (SPIs) support integrated action on the SDGs. They enable collaboration between policymakers and the scientific community, facilitating the exchange and co-creation of knowledge for informed SDG implementation. They can contribute to policy coherence and

enhance public trust in science. Different types of SPIs have been formalized to enable collaborations that can support inclusive capacity development. There is a need to identify the institutional forms and processes of SPIs that best support policy coherence and integration. While global SPIs produce critical knowledge, their proliferation may contribute to fragmentation.

Resource constraints and threats to fiscal sustainability challenge policy coherence and affect SDG financing. During the pandemic, Governments shifted budget allocations and public expenditures. Some SDG areas, such as education, received less funding. While many countries increased support to health and social protection to address the emergency, half of the world's low- and lower-middle-income countries cut health and social protection spending, resulting in increased inequality. Trade-offs between health and socioeconomic rights were often acute, but in some cases this spurred policy innovation. The work carried out by the United Nations on integrated national financing frameworks (INFFs) provides practical guidance for policymakers to think through these trade-offs and make informed policy choices.

Strengthening public financial management systems is critical for improving the efficiency and equity of public expenditure and for the integrated implementation of the SDGs. This includes monitoring the efficiency of budget execution and ensuring that Governments spend according to their approved budgets. Transparent budget information enables civil society to monitor SDG implementation, advocate for change, and hold Governments accountable. Oversight institutions can use budget information to audit the implementation of the budget and its contribution to SDG progress.

Understanding the relationship between public spending and sustainable development outcomes is crucial to inform SDG implementation. Linking the budget to the SDGs and national monitoring frameworks can improve policy coherence and accountability. Through tagging the budget to the SDGs, Governments can better address conflicts or overlaps across budget allocations and enhance the efficiency of public spending. Computational models can help analyse the impact of additional public spending and identify areas where further investment may have a limited impact due to structural bottlenecks. It is important to link public financial management decisions to development outcomes for different groups in society, with consideration given to equity and intergenerational perspectives.

What assets and innovations can Governments mobilize to transform the public sector and achieve the SDGs?

The pandemic drew attention to the key role of the State and effective, accountable, responsive and inclusive public institutions in identifying and developing innovative solutions to respond to crises. To retain public trust and accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, States must continue to innovate and be better prepared to proactively handle future shocks. Governments can leverage innovations developed during the pandemic to serve the needs of society; however, an inclusive approach is necessary to ensure that innovations benefit everyone.

Chapter 3 focuses on how public administrations can integrate successful innovations that emerged during the pandemic into longer-term strategies to achieve the SDGs. This involves pursuing

innovative approaches on two fronts: administrative, organizational, and systemic changes within public administration, as well as transformations in the interaction between Governments and stakeholders, particularly in public service delivery. The chapter highlights key elements that contribute to fostering transformative change within public administration. It identifies public accountability, coherence among different levels of government, enhanced capabilities and professionalism among public servants, and digital transformation as important building blocks for strategies to encourage innovation.

The pandemic seriously disrupted operations within the public sector, forcing public institutions to experiment with alternative approaches, which accelerated innovation. In some cases, more efficient and effective ways to deliver public services were found, potentially leading to permanent changes. However, whether the momentum of innovation can be sustained post-crisis is unclear. One-time, ad hoc innovations triggered by crises may not be sufficient for long-term transformation and the acceleration of SDG implementation. Innovation should be embedded at the core of policymaking and public administration and institutionalized into new models of operation for the public sector. Governments have a key role to play in creating an ecosystem of innovation that fosters collaboration among various organizations and sectors.

Transparency and accountability are essential for the effectiveness of public institutions. The pandemic created challenges for transparency and accountability reforms because the urgent need to scale up service delivery and social protection as rapidly as possible interfered with public oversight to varying degrees. Nevertheless, a number of countries employed innovative approaches to promote access to information, transparency and accountability. Case studies from India, Brazil, the Philippines, and Colombia highlight the success and resilience of participatory oversight reforms, showcasing the effectiveness of hybrid collaborative governance models.

Collaboration and coordination among different levels of government are crucial in crisis management and response. The pandemic exposed the challenges of fragmentation and emphasized the need for cooperation to facilitate multilevel governance approaches. Several countries were pushed by the pandemic to experiment with different arrangements in this regard. Lessons from those experiences should inform reflections on how to improve the vertical coherence of government actions in support of the SDGs, including through multilevel dialogue, coordination, collaboration and funding arrangements.

The capabilities and performance of public officials and employees play a significant role in transformative change. The pandemic showcased the adaptability of public servants, their role in ensuring the uninterrupted delivery of public services, and their openness to innovation and collaboration with other actors. Sustaining this mindset during the post-emergency period may prove to be a challenge as institutions return to pre-pandemic ways of working that may not encourage innovation or foster change. Capacity-building in public administration will be necessary to develop the mindsets, competencies and skills needed to leverage data and tools that can support innovation.

Digital transformation played a vital role during the pandemic, enabling public sector agencies to continue operations and deliver services. Digital technologies enabled the transformation of core

systems and functions and the development of more efficient processes, such as online interviewing for job recruitment. They also facilitated data analysis to inform decision-making and supported the disbursement of social protection benefits that were of critical importance during the health crisis. However, caution must be exercised to ensure the ethical use of data and prevent discriminatory outcomes, and the need for contextual approaches must be acknowledged.

Transformative changes are also needed in interactions between Governments and non-State actors to enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of government policies and improve the quality and reach of public services. Governments are under increasing pressure to provide inclusive and affordable public services, particularly in areas such as health care, education, water and sanitation, nutrition, and social protection. The chapter examines the potential of mechanisms such as engagement, co-production, co-creation, and enhanced service delivery within this context.

During the pandemic, innovative engagement mechanisms were utilized to deliver new or modified services. Co-production—involving collaboration between service providers and users in planning, designing, implementing and assessing public policies and services—was utilized in various sectors before and during the pandemic. The pandemic accelerated co-production efforts in several sectors, including health care, transport and education. The pandemic also highlighted how successful public-private partnerships could be, as evidenced by the collaborative efforts that led to the rapid development of COVID-19 tests, treatments and vaccines. Scaling up co-production approaches will require the adoption of appropriate legislative frameworks, the provision of incentives, and the establishment of mechanisms for transparency and accountability, in addition to ensuring appropriate sharing of risks and benefits between the private and public sectors.

The pandemic accelerated innovations in health-care service delivery, including telemedicine and the use of drones for medicine transport and robots for medical tasks. In education, many countries implemented initiatives to increase opportunities for students and bridge the digital divide through the provision of laptops, connectivity, and digital literacy training. Digital technology played a significant role in transforming service delivery during the pandemic, with examples including telehealth, online schooling, e-governance, and digital portals for accessing public services. Some countries used the pandemic period to accelerate the shift to e-government. However, the move towards digital operations and services also highlighted the need to address digital divides and ensure accessibility for marginalized and vulnerable groups. To ensure a just and inclusive digital transformation, Governments need to consider hybrid models of service delivery that integrate online and offline options. Regulation of digital services is crucial to protect users' rights and ensure security and equity.

In conclusion, the pandemic provided opportunities for innovation and positive changes in public institutions, and Governments should build on these experiences to address future challenges and advance the SDGs through a renewed approach to innovation and transformation. To do so effectively, public institutions must be adequately funded, accountable, transparent, and inclusive. By embracing innovation and fostering engagement with stakeholders, Governments can create a more resilient and effective public sector in the post-pandemic “new normal” to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Introduction

The year 2023 marks the midpoint in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. From 2015 to 2019, the international community paid significant attention to progress made on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The role of public institutions and public administration as essential levers for the transformations required to make progress on all SDGs was well recognized, thanks among other things to the existence of a dedicated Goal (SDG 16) on peace, justice and institutions.

In early 2020, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic caused an abrupt shock in every country and the international community. Even before the pandemic, many SDGs, including SDG 16, were not on track to be achieved by 2030. Beyond the profound initial disruptions caused by the pandemic, which negatively impacted progress on many SDGs, its continuation over a protracted period caused serious setbacks in the prospects for achieving the 2030 Agenda. Among the lasting impacts are deep economic woes, the erosion of trust in Governments and public institutions, and increased inequalities and gaps adversely affecting specific groups in virtually all countries. The pandemic imperiled and even reversed progress in expanding women's rights and opportunities. In addition, basic preconditions for sustainable development such as peace and security have been negatively impacted in many parts of the world.

While at the beginning of 2022 the world was cautiously anticipating a progressive end to the pandemic restrictions, the war in Ukraine, among other impacts, triggered sharp rises in energy and food prices globally, resulting in global inflation. Subsequent geopolitical events have negatively impacted basic preconditions for sustainable development such as peace and security in many parts of the world and have threatened to further derail progress on the 2030 Agenda, making SDG targets more difficult to address in the short and medium terms.¹ In this changed context, it is crucial not to lose what has been achieved so far and to identify opportunities for advancing progress.

In many ways, the pandemic exposed pre-existing long-term trends and risks affecting the relationships between people and their Governments, including the polarization of public opinion, misinformation and disinformation, increased inequalities, the negative impacts of digital divides, and reduced opportunities for participation. It also revealed institutional weaknesses affecting the coherence of policies across sectors and collaboration among levels of government and further underscored the inequalities in access to basic public services such as education, health and justice. The pandemic gave some of those trends and risks higher visibility and salience on the international policy agenda, as reflected in *Our Common Agenda*, a landmark report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations published in 2021.² The pandemic also exposed weaknesses in the critical functions of government, including risk management and crisis preparedness, communication with the public, science-policy interfaces, transparency and accountability.³

At the same time, out of necessity, public institutions across the world had to experiment and innovate during the pandemic. Innovations were observed both in the inner workings of public

institutions and the way they interacted with one another and the broader society, and at the interface with people in relation to public service delivery. In some sectors drastic changes were made, such as the shift to online teaching and learning, with both positive and negative impacts. New ways of delivering critical public services through collaboration with non-State actors were found. Tools were mobilized by a range of actors to maintain or expand transparency and accountability around key actions of Governments, including the use of public funds and policy changes that impacted human rights and civic space. The range of institutional innovations observed during the pandemic was vast and diverse, as no two countries faced exactly the same set of challenges at the same time or had the same institutional landscape. Interestingly, in some sectors and for some types of institutions, there have been efforts to document changes implemented since 2020.⁴ However, this has generally not been the case.

Capitalizing on successful institutional innovations undertaken during the pandemic could be a powerful enabler of the type of transformation that is called for if public institutions are to support the realization of the 2030 Agenda—making them more effective and resilient to shocks, more participatory and inclusive, more forward-looking and able to steer societal change, and more transparent and accountable, as called for in SDG targets 16.6 and 16.7.

Starting from this premise, the 2023 edition of the *World Public Sector Report* represents an effort to examine institutional changes that were observed in different contexts, sectors and policy processes, and to explore the potential for preserving and building upon successful innovations that can have a positive impact on the achievement of the SDGs in the post-pandemic period. The key question guiding the report is this: What role can institutional and governance innovations play at the country level to move the implementation of the 2030 Agenda forward in the coming years?

The report is designed to be forward-looking. Rather than focusing on the challenges, which have been well documented since 2020, it emphasizes opportunities for putting the SDGs at the centre of the policy agenda and making progress on sustainable development between now and 2030.

Scope of the report

The report examines institutional changes at the national level and their potential for the post-pandemic period from three angles:

- How can Governments reshape their relationship with other actors, including the people they serve, to enhance trust and promote the behavioural changes required for more sustainable and peaceful societies?
- How can Governments assess competing priorities and address difficult policy trade-offs that have emerged since 2020 and may emerge in the future?
- What assets and innovations can Governments mobilize to transform the public sector and achieve the SDGs?

These three questions cover key areas of focus of past editions of the *World Public Sector Report*. The 2018 edition looked at institutional integration in the context of the SDGs. The 2019 edition reviewed six key institutional principles encapsulated in the SDGs and their operationalization across the 2030 Agenda and in specific SDG areas. The 2021 edition included a chapter that took stock of institutional changes driven by the pandemic. The reader is referred to those reports for more in-depth information. Of course, the present report focuses on only three of the many potential dimensions of interest that could have been selected. The chosen scope does not include, for example, the topic of public service funding, a longstanding subject of discussion among public administration scholars and practitioners that received considerable attention during the pandemic and has been given even greater attention in its aftermath.

Methodology

The planning and preparation of the *World Public Sector Report 2023* was led by the Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government (DPIDG) within the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA).

The present report follows a model different from that of previous editions, which were integrally written by DPIDG staff. In order to reflect a wide variety of perspectives and explore selected issues in greater depth, the report team chose to solicit short individual contributions (about 1,800 words in length) from a wide range of global experts, who were asked to review institutional developments in specific areas under each of the main chapters. The report presents those contributions, along with overview sections written by UN DESA staff that frame the theme of each chapter and introduce salient questions. Another United Nations report for which this model was used was the *Trade and Environment Review 2013*, published by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.⁵

Once the model for the report had been agreed, the writing team convened an expert group meeting at United Nations Headquarters in New York in August 2022 to support the framing of the report.⁶ The meeting gathered ten experts from academia and non-governmental organizations together with the report team. The discussions covered key issues that should be addressed in the chapter overview sections. It also provided an initial list of subtopics under each chapter that might warrant in-depth examination through targeted contributions from qualified experts.

After the meeting, the team narrowed down and refined the list of subtopics. Experts (including some of the expert group meeting participants) were invited by the lead author of each chapter to address these topics. For each contribution, brief terms of reference were prepared. As a general direction, contributors were asked to highlight whether and how changes had been implemented in public institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic to address or mitigate multiple intersecting challenges related to the implementation of the SDGs. The different contributions present the subtopic, explain its relevance (new or renewed in the context of the pandemic), and highlight its potential for contributing to SDG implementation in the post-COVID-19 period. Depending on the specific subtopic, the contributions focus on innovative practices, tools, institutional processes, or organizational change, and use examples from different country contexts to illustrate the main arguments. Each contribution contains key messages, policy recommendations or action points

that could inspire national Governments, international organizations, and other stakeholders to move forward. The report features 23 contributions by 38 experts (see below).

In reading the report, it is important to keep in mind that the overview sections for the three main chapters are not a summary of the expert contributions. In general, their scope is broader and includes topics that are not addressed in the expert contributions. The latter are intended to complement the former by giving an in-depth view of selected subtopics and suggesting policy recommendations.

Content of the report

In addition to the introduction, the report includes three substantive chapters and a conclusion.

Chapter 1: How can Governments strengthen their relationships with society?

In recent years the relationships between people and Governments have been profoundly altered. Civic space is eroding globally, and its nature has changed. Increasing polarization is observed within societies. Perceptions of corruption have increased. Inequalities have widened, and many have limited access to justice. The accuracy of information has become a pervasive and contested issue. The role of traditional media has declined, while social media have been playing an expanding role in shaping, pushing and manipulating opinions. The traditional channels and trade-offs of “voice” and “exit” seem to operate differently now than they did 20 years ago. The rapid move to digital government is reshaping the relationships between people and the State. These trends were already apparent, but many became more visible or salient during the pandemic period, to the point that restoring trust between people and public institutions is now seen as a key goal as well as a critical requirement for achieving progress on the SDGs.

Against this backdrop, the overview section of the chapter recalls the importance of positive relationships between government institutions and other actors in society for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals and highlights some of the ways in which these relationships are measured and assessed. It then examines governance deficits and opportunities in three key areas: the delivery of responsive and inclusive services, government transparency and accountability for meeting commitments, and the expansion of digital government. The section then reviews some of the post-pandemic opportunities for Governments to reverse adverse trends by supporting democratic values, traditions and institutions, preserving and broadening civic space, and combating disinformation and misinformation.

Expert contributions to this chapter cover the following topics:

- Towards a fair fiscal contract? What do the private sector and high-net-worth individuals “owe” society?
- Gender equality in public administration: a new normal for Governments three years into the pandemic
- Communication with social actors on the COVID-19 pandemic: implications for future crises

- Regulating the use of digital technology by public administration to protect and strengthen human rights
- The appetite for e-justice is a chance to advance Sustainable Development Goals and entrench rights protection
- Civic space and the COVID-19 pandemic
- Youth voice and sustainable public policy: rejuvenating urban democracy
- Combating misinformation as a matter of urgency: an African perspective

Chapter 2: How can Governments assess competing priorities and address difficult policy trade-offs that have emerged since 2020?

The circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the intensity and importance of the interdependencies among the SDGs. Reversals in the implementation of some SDGs may influence the achievement of other SDGs, creating new patterns of interlinkages. Looking forward, policy trade-offs can be expected at different levels in the general context of fiscal hardship and increased public debt, which limit policy space in the long term. How Governments choose to address such trade-offs and how they engage with citizens to identify paths forward and generate support for their policies is likely to depend on both the capacity within the Government and elsewhere to analyse existing and potential trade-offs and the political will and availability of mechanisms to translate analysis into decision-making.

The overview section of this chapter provides examples of changes in institutions that support decision-making by Governments to resolve trade-offs at different levels and in different sectors. It highlights how Governments and public institutions have used tools such as budgets, risk management, science-policy interfaces, modelling and scenarios to analyse trade-offs, frame corresponding policy choices for the public, and make decisions. It explores innovations undertaken to increase policy coherence, coordination across sectors and levels of government, and engagement with non-State actors, as well as changes made to improve preparedness and resilience to shocks. The chapter highlights limitations and opportunities for the future in those areas.

Expert contributions to this chapter cover the following topics:

- Managing policy trade-offs and synergies at the national and local levels as the urgency of Sustainable Development Goal progress and priority-setting rises
- Building synergies for equality and economic recovery: innovation in social protection systems in Sri Lanka
- Strengthening the science-policy interface in order to operationalize sustainable development
- Operationalizing strategic foresight to better support Governments in managing Sustainable Development Goal trade-offs and synergies in the post-COVID context

- The role of transnational networks and professional exchanges in supporting an integrated implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals
- Risk management in the aftermath of COVID-19: its role in improving the assessment of interlinkages and strengthening synergies to support the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals
- Evidence-based resource prioritization for Sustainable Development Goal implementation
- Government expenditure and sustainable development prioritization: lessons from the Policy Priority Inference research programme
- Building legitimacy for difficult policy choices and trade-offs through open, transparent and inclusive government

Chapter 3: What assets and innovations could Governments mobilize to transform the public sector and achieve the SDGs?

The pandemic period witnessed a wave of effective innovations designed to improve accountability, transparency, public engagement, public service delivery, and approaches to inclusion. Beyond changes in legal and regulatory frameworks and policies, innovations encompassed changes to systems, actors and processes within public administration, as well as changes made at the “front line” or interface between Governments and citizens. While some of these changes may be difficult to sustain now that the pandemic has ended, many innovations may be put to use going forward.

The overview section of this chapter examines the context in which innovation in public administration and public institutions more generally can be understood. It outlines innovations in oversight, transparency and accountability and in multilevel governance, and it highlights the role public servants play in experimenting, innovating and institutionalizing change. The role of digital technologies as a tool for innovation and their expanded role during the pandemic are addressed. The chapter then briefly explores four dimensions of innovation at the interface between Governments and people: innovative and resilient engagement mechanisms; co-production and changes in service delivery; inclusive service delivery; and technology-driven service delivery.

Expert contributions to this chapter cover the following topics:

- Governance reform and public service provision: institutional resilience and State-society synergy
- Uplifting innovation through co-creation: from the local to the global level
- Innovations in health-care service delivery during the pandemic
- Innovative multilevel coordination and preparedness after COVID-19
- Blended learning in medical higher education: new modalities driven by the COVID-19 pandemic and their influence on innovation and performance in a public university in South Africa

- Rethinking the current model of operation for the public sector after COVID-19

At the end of each substantive chapter, a table highlights specific recommendations made by the expert contributors, unfiltered by the report team. The aim is to reflect a diversity of concrete proposals for action that can be taken by national Governments, non-State actors at the national level, and various actors within the international community.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

A short final chapter highlights the report's main findings, going beyond individual contributions to highlight key areas of action that emerge from the three main chapters. The conclusion ends with a short prospective section that outlines a few essential questions that should inform the debate on transforming institutions to support the realization of the 2030 Agenda.

Endnotes

¹ See United Nations, “Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: towards a rescue plan for people and planet: report of the Secretary-General (special edition)”, advance unedited version (May 2023), available at <https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/SDG%20Progress%20Report%20Special%20Edition.pdf>.

² United Nations, *Our Common Agenda: Report of the Secretary-General* (Sales No. E.21.I.8), available at https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf.

³ See United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *National Institutional Arrangements for Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals: A Five-Year Stocktaking—World Public Sector Report 2021* (Sales No. E.21.II.H.1), available at <https://www.un.org/en/desa/world-public-sector-report>.

⁴ Examples include the following: as highlighted in the *World Public Sector Report 2021*, efforts were made to review databases created after the beginning of the pandemic to document changes in access to information laws and their applications; the *World E-Parliament Report 2022: Parliaments after the Pandemic* reflects on the rapid acceleration of the use of digital tools by parliaments during the pandemic and implications for the future; and the report of the 25th UN/INTOSAI Symposium (2021) takes stock of the responses to the pandemic among supreme audit institutions across the world, focusing on both their working methods and their strategic priorities.

⁵ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, *Trade and Development Review 2013—Wake Up Before It Is Too Late: Make Agriculture Truly Sustainable Now for Food Security in a Changing Climate* (UNCTAD/DITC/TED/2012/3) (Geneva, 2013), available at <https://unctad.org/webflyer/trade-and-environment-review-2013>.

⁶ For more information, see United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Inception meeting for the World Public Sector Report 2023”, report of an expert group meeting organized by the DESA Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government and held at United Nations Headquarters in New York on 9 and 10 August 2022, available at <https://publicadministration.un.org/Portals/1/DPIDG%20EGM%20World%20Public%20Sector%20Report%202023%20draft%20for%20OD.pdf>.

Chapter 1: How Can Governments Strengthen Public Trust and Their Relationships with Society?

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 How do positive relationships matter for effective, accountable, transparent and inclusive institutions and the achievement of the 2030 Agenda?

Public administration, from the national to the local level, provides essential services that support the functioning of society. Operating with relative continuity across changing Governments, its work is fundamental to the achievement of all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), from developing and maintaining infrastructure to delivering energy and clean water. In particular, it is captured by SDG target 16.6, which calls upon Governments to “develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels”.

While public institutions exist to serve the public, they also rely on other social actors to fulfil their roles and to thrive (see box 1.1). Their relationships with other parts of society are mutually supportive. Crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the salience of these relationships, which are both affected by crises and influence responses to them. After the pandemic struck, collaboration and coordination between Governments and other actors, including private companies and non-governmental organizations, often facilitated key aspects of the response to the crisis, including the development, approval, and distribution of vaccines and the provision of essential goods and services during quarantine or lockdown periods. At the same time, many countries experienced new or exacerbated social and political divisiveness due to factors such as the spread of false information and growing inequalities, which contributed to missed opportunities to address the crisis and advance sustainable development. Strengthening relationships between Governments and society requires a commitment from all actors, but Governments need to lay the groundwork and strive to earn trust.

Box 1.1. Key social actors and elements of their roles

Governments are themselves social actors. Their obligations derive from national laws and constitutions and international commitments. Governments are broadly expected to protect national security, observe and enforce the rule of law, and protect and uphold human rights. They are looked to for accurate information on both their own operations and other matters of public interest. Governments are responsible for, among other things, the delivery of high-quality and inclusive public services—such as education, health care and social protection—that largely underpin the development of human capabilities. People have an innate general sense of fairness Governments are expected to share, and there are justice-driven principles that they are expected to uphold. Governments have a duty, through these and other means, to enable opportunities for people to realize their potential and to share in prosperity.

While all public institutions, from legislative bodies to supreme audit institutions, serve crucial roles, the main focus of the present publication is on public administration, which primarily provides goods and services to individuals, businesses and other actors that fund it. Taxation is a key means of interaction with public administration. Revenues collected from direct and indirect taxes should benefit all social actors. All individuals and other actors are expected to comply with the law and to uphold their duty of care to one

another. To varying degrees, they are also expected to participate in society, which may entail, for instance, volunteering in one's community, voting, or monitoring the work of different levels of government and demanding accountability when it falls short.

Civil society encompasses a broad assortment of actors, including non-governmental organizations, cooperative organizations, community groups, labour unions, and academic, scientific and research institutions. They play a range of roles that can complement, support or fill gaps in the work of government or that seek to change it in some way. They advance their aims through various means. For instance, they may engage in advocacy and lobbying, striving to uphold or in some cases restrict rights, or they may work to improve livelihoods in ways that are socially just. They are often involved in monitoring government in areas ranging from spending to policing, endeavouring to hold the Government to account for its policies and actions. A number of them are engaged in generating knowledge, expertise and innovation. Civil society organizations also provide goods and services for the public, including marginalized individuals and groups; in some cases, particularly in conflict and humanitarian contexts, they may end up assuming responsibility for critical functions that Governments are unable to perform.

The private sector is an important source of jobs and income, economic growth, goods and services, innovation, and funding for public interest initiatives. Questions arose during the pandemic period about the role of the private sector, in particular about what corporations owe Governments and society in exchange for the provision of basic infrastructure and other assets they use.^(a)

Another key social actor is the media, which should provide information to the public, provoke inquiry and debate, and help hold Governments (and others exercising power) accountable through monitoring and transparent reporting. Donors and intergovernmental organizations are also important actors, as they can provide policy and technical guidance and tools, supply funding, or establish and monitor normative standards. The roles of social actors are not static, as all have the capacity to evolve and innovate.

Source: ^(a) United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Report of the inception meeting for the *World Public Sector Report 2023*", from the expert group meeting held in New York on 9 and 10 August 2022, available at <https://publicadministration.un.org/Portals/1/DPIDG%20EGM%20World%20Public%20Sector%20Report%202023%20draft%20for%20OD.pdf>.

1.1.2 Assessing Governments' relationships with other actors

Assessing the quality of Governments' relationships with different actors is an inherently subjective and imprecise exercise. Such relationships may be evaluated using indicators such as the level of trust in government, the degree of democracy, or the extent of interaction, including people's participation in government processes (see box 1.2). Views on social cohesion or the opportunities available to actors may also factor into this assessment. The present chapter examines a selection of key factors that influence these relationships.

Box 1.2. Tools used to assess relationships between Governments and other social actors^(a)

Various tools can be utilized to shed light on one or more aspects or determinants of the relationships between Governments and other actors and provide an approximate indication of their quality or strength. The illustrative samples presented below are designed to measure trust in government, democracy, good

governance and well-being. They also measure certain aspects of (and gaps in) those areas, including satisfaction with public services, the availability of civic space, the application of the rule of law, and levels of corruption (whether real or perceived). The tools range from perception surveys to indices that aggregate indicators from a range of data sets.

Regional surveys of public opinion such as the Afrobarometer, Arab Barometer, Asian Barometer, Central Asia Barometer, Latinobarometro and Eurobarometer include slightly different variations of questions about trust, asking respondents to indicate how much trust or confidence they have in government (typically on a scale from zero to three).^(b) The World Values Survey and the Gallup World Poll also enquire about trust in government.^(c) The Edelman Trust Barometer measures annual trust in government and the credibility of the Government, media, businesses and non-governmental organizations.^(d)

In 2021, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) conducted a survey of government and public institutions on building trust to reinforce democracy, eliciting responses from 22 OECD countries.^(e) The OECD also produces the Better Life Index, an interactive composite index of well-being that includes an indicator on civic engagement;^(f) it covers all OECD countries as well as four partner countries.

The Chandler Good Government Index measures the capabilities and effectiveness of Governments. In 2022, the Index was based on data from 104 countries.^(g) Assessments are in place for public service delivery at the national and local levels. In the Philippines, the Citizen Satisfaction Index system measures how satisfied constituents are with local government service delivery as well as with public sector performance in general.^(h)

The World Justice Project developed the WJP Rule of Law Index, which was used to evaluate 140 countries and jurisdictions across the world in 2022.⁽ⁱ⁾ The Index measures eight factors, including the extent to which those who govern are bound by the law, the powers of government and its officials in relation to accountability under the law, the status of human rights, and non-governmental checks on government powers.

The Corruption Perceptions Index created by Transparency International ranks 180 countries and territories by perceived levels of corruption in the public sector.^(j)

The Democracy Index compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit offers a snapshot of the state of democracy in 165 independent States and two territories.^(k) The Index assesses indicators in a number of categories, including the electoral process and pluralism, the functioning of government, political participation, the political culture, and civil liberties. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance uses its Global State of Democracy Indices to measure democratic trends at the country, regional and global levels.^(l) The Indices are based on 116 indicators, and data is collected for 173 countries. Democracy is also measured through the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project and the *Freedom in the World* reports by Freedom House.^(m)

There are distinct assessments of civic space as well. The CIVICUS Monitor—a research collaboration between global civil society alliance CIVICUS and more than 20 partner organizations from around the world—measures the extent of protection of the fundamental civic freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly.⁽ⁿ⁾ At present, the Monitor draws on multiple sources of data and information covering 197 countries and territories.

Sources: ^(a) Written by Jessie Kalepa, Junior Professional Officer, DPIDG, UN DESA; ^(b) Relevant details may be obtained from the websites for Afrobarometer (<https://www.afrobarometer.org/>), Arab Barometer

(<https://www.arabbarometer.org/>), Asian Barometer (<https://www.asianbarometer.org/>), Central Asia Barometer (<https://www.ca-barometer.org/en>), Latinobarometro (<https://www.latinobarometro.org/lat.jsp>), and Eurobarometer (<https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/screen/home>); ^(c) see the World Values Survey (<https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>) and Gallup (<https://www.gallup.com/home.aspx>); ^(d) see the Edelman Trust Barometer (<https://www.edelman.com/trust/trust-barometer>); ^(e) OECD, *Building Trust to Reinforce Democracy: Main Findings from the 2021 OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions*, Building Trust in Public Institutions (Paris, OECD Publishing, 2022), available at <https://doi.org/10.1787/b407f99c-en>; ^(f) OECD, Better Life Index, available at <https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/>; ^(g) Chandler Institute of Governance, *Chandler Good Government Index 2022* (Singapore, 2022), available at <https://chandlergovernmentindex.com/wp-content/uploads/CGGI-2022-Report.pdf>; ^(h) Philippines, Citizen Satisfaction Index System, available at <https://csis.dilg.gov.ph/>; ⁽ⁱ⁾ World Justice Project, WJP Rule of Law Index, available at <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/>; ^(j) Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index, available at <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022>; ^(k) Economist Intelligence Unit, “Democracy Index 2022: frontline democracy and the battle for Ukraine”, available at <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2022/>; ^(l) International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *Global State of Democracy 2022: Forging Social Contracts in a Time of Discontent*, Global State of Democracy Initiative, available at <https://idea.int/democracytracker/gsoi-report-2022>; ^(m) see Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), available at <https://v-dem.net/>; see also Freedom House, *Freedom in the World*, available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world>; ⁽ⁿ⁾ CIVICUS Monitor, available at <https://monitor.civicus.org/>.

The matter of trust warrants particular attention. Trust in public institutions is widely recognized as a key indicator of how well people think government is performing and responding to their needs and how they interact with government, yet trust is also important for achieving effective governance; in effect, it both contributes to and results from good governance. Trust in public institutions is also influenced by broader social, economic and political trends beyond the actual performance of a current Government or leader, such as shifts in global energy prices or major advances in science or technology.¹ Trust in government is especially crucial during crises, when public compliance with policy measures is necessary to minimize risks to public safety. Behaviour during the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic period reinforced previous research indicating that where trust in government is higher, so is compliance with public rules and guidelines relating to healthy behaviours such as handwashing and social distancing.² Higher trust in government was also associated with reduced rates of infection and increased vaccine uptake. While much research addresses public trust in government, trust on the part of government in citizens and other social actors is also critical to strong relationships.

A 2022 report that assessed a large global data set of country surveys on trust in central or federal government found that, among democracies, trust appears to have increased in recent years following a period of overall decline from 1995 onward and particularly after the global financial and economic crisis of 2007/08.³ In democracies, average trust or confidence in government rose several percentage points between 2020 and 2022 and has largely held at approximately 42-43 per cent—a level that slightly exceeds that of 2015. The report posits that trust may have increased as a direct result of the pandemic, given that government action constituted the only means of implementing and enforcing the rules needed to effectively reduce the spread of the virus. There may have been a sustained “rally ‘round the flag” effect, whereby societies increase support for public institutions or political leaders around major shared challenges. Despite this apparent rise,

trust remains nearly 10 percentage points below 1995 levels in democratic countries. This illustrates that trust is not rebuilt quickly, and that even partial gains may be fragile.⁴

The relationships Governments have with other social actors are inextricably linked to the fundamental notion of a social contract, described by the United Nations Secretary-General as “the understanding within a society of how people solve shared problems, manage risks and pool resources to deliver public goods, as well as how their collective institutions and norms operate”.⁵ It concerns what is expected from or owed by all social actors, including public administration (be it unwritten or reflected in one or multiple documents). In 2021, the Secretary-General observed that “there is a growing disconnect between people and the institutions that serve them, with many feeling left behind and no longer confident that the system is working for them”.⁶ This lack of confidence undermines solidarity and cohesion—an effect particularly susceptible to crises. As the pandemic took hold, fear, uncertainty and disruption contributed to a deeper questioning of duties to one another, society and nature. This disquiet has been compounded by other crises, including climate-related disasters and the war in Ukraine. Yet crises are when a social contract is most vital. Renewed social contracts, with trust constituting a foundational element, are therefore crucial if societies are to meet today’s compounding challenges, respond to those that are likely to arise, and still achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. In adopting the 2030 Agenda, Governments explicitly committed to working with all parts of society in realizing sustainable development.

1.1.3 The socioeconomic landscape of relationships between government and society

Many trends predating the pandemic had already eroded relationships between Governments and other social actors. Several have been made worse by the crisis or have assumed greater importance because of it.

Most critically, the pandemic put an end to 25 years of steady progress in reducing poverty.⁷ In 2020, it erased more than four years of improvement, and little ground has been regained since. It significantly exacerbated hunger and food insecurity, efforts against which even before the pandemic were affected by factors such as climate change effects, conflict and economic shocks. Persistent inequality had also been at play and in many cases may have been exacerbated.⁸ Educational gaps that have accrued among children and youth, especially those adversely affecting low-income households, may put intergenerational mobility further out of reach. When people do not feel that their circumstances can improve or that their children will have more opportunities than they have had, their faith in government may erode.

While the pandemic disproportionately harmed lower-income countries, economic and food insecurity and hunger also affected wealthier countries; however, the latter were better equipped to expand and complement already existing social protection programmes which provided support for those in need. In 2020, just 46.9 per cent of the global population was effectively covered by at least one social protection cash benefit.⁹ The absence or weakness of many protections and worsening gaps in well-being may have left many people, especially the most vulnerable, feeling unsupported by and disconnected from government. At the same time, the pandemic triggered an “unprecedented yet uneven global social protection response”,¹⁰ demonstrating the scale and speed of change Governments could effect, at least for the short term.

Despite the importance of social protection underscored by the pandemic, many countries have been shifting to austerity mode. Governments are grappling with growing deficits and debt brought on by the costs of managing the pandemic and its socioeconomic effects, by reduced tax revenues, and by the effects of intersecting crises (such as those related to food and fuel). An analysis of expenditure projections carried out by the International Monetary Fund in 2022 indicates that most Governments started to cut public spending in 2021 and that more are expected to do so through 2025—with an average contraction that is larger than that from previous periods of austerity.¹¹ By 2023, austerity is likely to have affected 6.7 billion people. Many of the measures being considered or implemented—including those intended to raise revenue in the short term, such as increasing fees for public services—further disadvantage those who are already most disadvantaged.

Several other options are available to Governments to increase their fiscal space, including tackling illicit financial flows and implementing tax reforms rooted in the principle of fairness. Costa Rica has raised its top income rate by 10 percentage points, and Argentina and Bolivia have instituted wealth and solidarity taxes that apply to their wealthiest citizens.¹² Spain will improve the fairness and sustainability of its pension system by increasing contributions mainly from the highest earners and their employers.¹³ The issue of fair taxation, including at the international level, is explored in depth in the contribution by Jeffrey Owens and Ruth Wamuyu later in this chapter.

Against this backdrop, the remainder of the chapter examines another set of relevant trends and opportunities relating to governance, the accuracy of information, and democratic values, traditions and institutions. While briefly describing those trends, the chapter also explores opportunities to address them by looking at successful or promising institutional or policy changes made since the pandemic that can be leveraged to help public administration be more responsive and accountable to multiple stakeholders in order to build trust and strengthen relationships—and thereby restore and accelerate progress towards the SDGs.

1.2 Governance deficits and opportunities

To varying degrees, Governments around the world rose to the challenge of addressing the COVID-19 pandemic in some ways and failed in others. For the most part, the governance gaps that undermined better responses were challenges with which Governments had long struggled—with the pandemic placing them under a harsher light and introducing much higher stakes. The extreme hardship and urgency characterizing this period shook the foundations of society but also gave rise to innovation, including in public administration.

1.2.1 Delivering responsive and inclusive services

The pandemic disrupted the functioning of government, including the provision of basic services, which is how public administration primarily interacts with individuals and other stakeholders and is therefore a key entry point for influencing relationships (see chapter 3).¹⁴ The delivery of accessible, affordable, high-quality, inclusive and responsive public services to all is a persistent challenge for all Governments, but during the recent health crisis, institutions had to rapidly adapt and devise new ways to meet evolving needs on the ground.

Agility in public administration, including in its partnership arrangements, is essential. In Ireland, the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme provides funding for poverty and social exclusion to be addressed through local engagement and partnerships among disadvantaged persons, community organizations and public institutions.¹⁵ When the pandemic arose, the Programme implementers, multisectoral Local Development Companies, had the flexibility to devise innovative ways to support local communities and build their resilience. The Programme shifted its focus to respond to food insecurity, mental health challenges and digital exclusion, with different Companies responding to specific local needs; for example, some worked to enhance food security by delivering food parcels and meals to disadvantaged families and older persons, while others supported local food production and the sale of fresh produce.

Representation within public institutions is another factor influencing public service provision. Public administration that reflects the public is better able to serve it; this has particular resonance at decision-making levels.¹⁶ Women, despite making up 46 per cent of the public administration workforce on average, hold just 31 per cent of top leadership positions and 30 per cent of senior manager positions.¹⁷ Even in areas of public administration where they constitute the majority, women occupy a minority of decision-making positions. Across regions, their representation generally decreases as seniority increases. During the pandemic, particularly early on, public administration responded much like other workplaces. Changes such as the shift to remote and hybrid work and the greater attention to work-life balance in many cases proved vital to the retention of women workers. These and other changes have sparked new thinking about means of promoting gender-equal representation and inclusion, which may be key to tapping their unrealized gains for public administration to deliver more inclusive, responsive and resilient public services. This issue is explored in more detail in the contribution by Müge Finkel and Melanie Hughes in this chapter.

1.2.2 Transparency in operations and accountability for commitments

People's trust in public institutions relies on transparency and accountability—including during crises, when these principles are hardest to uphold. Effective management of the pandemic required keeping the public apprised of the roles and actions of government bodies and providing access to reliable information, including facts about the virus and public policies adopted to respond to the health emergency, as well as the assumptions and scenarios on which pandemic-related decisions were based.¹⁸ Amidst multiple crises and threats to sustainable development, it is essential for Governments to seize opportunities to enhance transparency and communicate with society more effectively.

The *World Public Sector Report 2021* highlighted various communication strategies and mechanisms adopted by Governments at the start of the pandemic,¹⁹ including the provision of information about COVID-19 on national web portals and mobile apps and through social media platforms, official briefings, and outreach to community leaders. Many information channels were developed through multi-stakeholder collaboration. Some Governments also ensured that the right to information was upheld, and many made efforts to adapt and enhance access to information for disadvantaged social groups. For instance, the Government of Mexico developed accessible communication guides for persons with disabilities.²⁰ Examples of risk communication and its role

in strengthening Governments' relationships with other actors are shared in the contribution by Torsha Dasgupta, Mirza Shadan and Kaushik Bose.

Transparency is also crucial for accountability. Non-State actors need to trust that Governments act in good faith and uphold their commitments. This requires that all stakeholders have the ability to monitor and evaluate the performance and actions of Governments and hold them to account. The pandemic put strain on accountability systems in various respects, though in many countries, accountability institutions such as supreme audit institutions and access-to-information and privacy oversight bodies have been monitoring and disseminating information about the impact of policies and regulations adopted to address the crisis. Reports from legislatures and supreme audit institutions evaluating the performance of Governments in responding to the pandemic offer important lessons for enhancing the preparedness and resilience of Governments for future crises. It is important that Governments act on the recommendations of these reports.²¹

Corruption severely undermines trust in government and is most harmful in emergency situations. In addition to the cost to taxpayers, corruption weakens institutional capacity and resilience. Amidst the massive and rapid increase in spending to respond to the pandemic, opportunities for corruption increased. The risk of corruption was heightened by the prevalence of pandemic-related government decrees and orders, overreliance on cash-based measures, the limited role and involvement of many national anti-corruption authorities during states of emergency, inadequate transparency, and the limited engagement of non-State actors.²² Governments faced difficult trade-offs in delivering the urgent, large-scale responses needed while also endeavouring to uphold principles of good governance—a dynamic countries increasingly need to be prepared for amidst compounding crises and uncertainty.²³ In spite of such challenges, a number of countries managed to reduce the risks of corruption. In some countries, civil society organizations were involved in the committees responsible for monitoring the implementation of pandemic relief measures. In the Maldives, the Anti-Corruption Commission published and monitored the implementation of guidelines on integrity and on preventing and reducing fraud and corruption risks during the pandemic. Benin and Pakistan created information systems to complement their financial management information systems in order to improve the monitoring of pandemic funds.²⁴ Such measures support good governance, improve the reputation of government, and have the potential to foster stakeholder engagement and collaboration.

Prior to the onset of the pandemic, trust in Governments was already strained by their failure to respect and protect the full spectrum of human rights enshrined in national and international human rights law. In particular, legal frameworks and regulatory reforms have struggled to keep pace with digital technology developments and their implication for people's rights. Generally developed by companies, digital technologies are increasingly being used by virtually all social actors, including those in the public sector, for an ever-expanding range of purposes. In many ways—by facilitating legal identity and the delivery of social protection services, for example—they support the SDGs and help enable the fulfilment of some rights. At the same time, there is evidence that they are used either intentionally or unintentionally by different actors in ways that put other rights at risk, including the rights to privacy, information, freedom of expression and non-discrimination. For instance, frequent data breaches expose individuals' private information, data sets can be faulty

and biased, and the use of artificial intelligence in a range of contexts in public administration to inform or make decisions that affect people's lives may be discriminatory. Some States use digital technology to surveil or target individuals and groups, for example, in the name of identifying fraud in systems of social protection and assistance (an issue which at times receives disproportionate attention, yet the magnitude of which is often overstated),²⁵ or for political purposes such as the unjust quelling of dissent or censorship of information.²⁶ These intrusions into individuals' lives and violations of rights undermine public trust and sound relationships between Governments and constituents and other actors. This takes place in the context of complex and rapidly evolving relationships between Governments and technology companies.

As explored further in the subsection below, the pandemic rapidly accelerated the shift to digital governance, enhancing efficiency but also increasing violations of and risks to human rights. Governments made wide use of contact tracing applications to collect location data and other identifying information, along with other technologies, in an effort to manage the virus as quickly as possible. Governments also expanded social protection schemes, some of which required the use of digital tools and the sharing of personal information on the part of individuals. There is a critical need for proper safeguards and oversight—especially within public administration, given its strong influence and impact on people's lives. A number of Governments have taken steps to develop or strengthen relevant measures or mechanisms, with some assigning priority to expanding data rights protections. By mid-April 2020, privacy enforcement authorities in 12 OECD countries, including Canada, France and Slovakia, had published general guidance for data controllers and processors on the application of their privacy and data protection laws during the pandemic.²⁷ At the global level, a process is under way to develop the United Nations Global Digital Compact, the aims of which include “providing people with options as to how their data is used [and the] application of human rights online”.²⁸ Digital technology regulation in the public sector is explored further in the contribution by Valeria Betancourt.

1.2.3 The expansion of digital government

In the first few months of the pandemic, numerous digital initiatives were developed within the public sector to establish digital policies and partnerships, facilitate information sharing, and support activities and the delivery of services relating to health (such as telehealth, contact tracing and virus tracking), social assistance, public participation, and business and education (including working and learning from home).²⁹ To address poverty during the pandemic, the Government of Togo engaged in a multi-stakeholder partnership to utilize artificial intelligence enabled by mobile data and satellite imagery to ensure the swift and efficient distribution of social protection payments via mobile phone to 600,000 residents in urban areas.³⁰ Notwithstanding the potential risks identified earlier, the shift of government information and services online has enabled greater transparency and accountability and has afforded many individuals, organizations and businesses increased convenience, greater access to information and services, and substantial time savings in communicating with the Government. The shift has been positive in terms of supporting service continuity and improving interactions. Still, there is wide variation in e-government development among regions and countries, and while vulnerable social groups have benefited from progress, digital divides remain significant and may increasingly contribute to other socioeconomic

inequalities. Currently, 2.7 billion people—or around one third of the global population—are still offline, among whom women, people living in poverty, older persons and other disadvantaged and marginalized groups are disproportionately represented.³¹ For instance, 69 per cent of men use the Internet, whereas the corresponding figure for women is 63 per cent, and while 75 per cent of youth (aged 15 to 24 years) use the Internet, 65 per cent of the rest of the population do so.³² Where one lives also matters; only 26 per cent of people use the Internet in low-income countries compared to 92 per cent of people in high-income countries, with usage rising steadily by country income group, and there remains a large and persistent urban-rural gap.

Some sectors experienced rapid shifts online, in particular education and to some degree health (see chapter 3). In many places, digital transformation also occurred in the justice sector, which is pivotal in government relationships with people. A recent report estimated that about 1.5 billion people have a criminal, civil or administrative justice problem they cannot resolve.³³ The use of digital technologies in judicial services has the potential to both accelerate progress towards “equal access to justice for all” and enhance the effectiveness and inclusiveness of judicial institutions, in line with SDG 16. At the same time, there are challenges and risks. Some Governments are taking steps to develop e-justice systems in ways that respond to these challenges, such as by incorporating assessments of key hindrances to effectiveness and inclusion in their design. The development of e-justice systems since the pandemic is examined in the contribution of Sarah McCoubrey in this chapter.

1.3 Opportunities to reverse adverse trends in the post-pandemic period

1.3.1 Supporting democratic values, traditions and institutions

In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Governments envisage a world “in which democracy, good governance and the rule of law, as well as an enabling environment at the national and international levels, are essential for sustainable development”.³⁴ These ideals are mutually reinforcing. The belief among citizens that Governments will listen to them and take actions that reflect their opinions and input can strengthen civic engagement and trust, which are essential for inclusive, responsive and accountable governance.³⁵

By all major accounts, the world has become less democratic in recent years.³⁶ Movement away from democracy has been outpacing movement towards it.³⁷ Even belief in the importance of democracy is declining, while views of autocratic leadership have become more favourable. Norms and standards—including tolerance of opposition, the fairness of electoral processes, and systems of checks and balances—are increasingly in question.³⁸ Safe spaces and resources for opposition parties are diminishing, thereby sustaining elite capture.

The overall decline in indicators of democracy from 2015 onward accelerated after the onset of the pandemic.³⁹ One important reason behind the pandemic’s adverse impact on democracy was the institution by Governments of emergency measures aimed at reducing the spread of the virus. Restrictions such as social distancing requirements affected the rights of citizens, in particular the right to assemble, as well as the functioning of government oversight institutions.⁴⁰ In 2022, after many Governments lifted such restrictions, the gains accrued to democracy in the form of restored

freedoms were still outweighed by other developments, such as violent conflict and polarization.⁴¹ Social and political polarization has been undermining many countries' democratic systems and their ability to respond to crises and challenges. The consequences have been dire, as political polarization has been linked to higher COVID-19-related mortality.⁴² Polarization is fuelled by distrust and fuels further distrust.⁴³ It may be driven by economic anxieties, unfavourable views of government, class divides, disinformation and uncertainty.⁴⁴ Populism and ethnonationalism are related to polarization and exclusion and in many cases have contributed to democratic decline through the erosion of checks and balances and of minority protections.⁴⁵ Over the first 1.5 years of the pandemic, however, support for populism appeared to have declined globally, and in most democracies political polarization also seemed to have weakened.⁴⁶

Some countries have managed to restore losses in measures of democracy, in part due to the cessation of pandemic measures. In Chile, progress in strengthening democracy in 2022 was additionally related to lower levels of political polarization.⁴⁷ This has been linked to movement by the President towards the political centre following a process of constitutional reform that produced a proposal which would have significantly expanded rights, but which voters ultimately rejected. For instance, the President overhauled his Cabinet to broaden the Government's coalition and supported a second process to draft a new constitution, which may have had a moderating effect.⁴⁸ In 2023, the country embarked on that process, which has a different institutional design that includes a 12-point set of principles and the formation of new bodies that will participate in the drafting and review of the new constitution. In general, addressing polarization is fraught with challenges, and efforts to change the social contract take time.

1.3.2 Preserving and broadening civic space

Citizen engagement and trust in government can be mutually reinforcing.⁴⁹ An essential element of democracy, civic space encompasses the environment that enables people and groups to participate and exercise their civic freedoms and constitutes part of social contracts.⁵⁰ Formal and informal channels that allow people to contribute to policymaking and decision-making processes, including accessing information, engaging in dialogue, and sharing views, are key to supporting civic space.⁵¹ Governments condition the degree to which civic space is open or closed, and regulations affecting civil society organizations have tended to be enacted and enforced to suit the current aims of the Government.⁵² Around the world, civic space has been on a steady decline, widening the gap between Governments and civil society. Given the contribution of civil society to advancing the SDGs, this can have adverse consequences for realizing the Goals.⁵³

The COVID-19 pandemic was pivotal in altering both the context of and risks to civic space. When the pandemic struck, many countries issued emergency declarations and adopted other measures affecting expression, assembly and privacy.⁵⁴ While many measures were important to protect public health, some lacked provisions for sustaining the important contributions of civil society or were used to take advantage of the crisis to stifle dissent and limit civic freedoms. A number of countries imposed COVID-19 restrictions that did not include exemptions for civil society organizations to provide essential services, limited access to information about the virus, banned gatherings (with no exemption for socially distanced peaceful protest), and shifted power to the executive branch such that systems of checks and balances were weakened.⁵⁵ The CIVICUS

Monitor, which tracks the state of freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression around the world, found that between 2019 and 2021, the proportion of the world's population living in countries rated as closed, repressed or obstructed rose from 83 to 88.5 per cent.⁵⁶ Activists and journalists in particular were subject to detainment, intimidation and harassment, attacks, and surveillance. Certain groups—including women, environmental rights groups, labour rights groups, the LGBTQI+ community, young people, and Indigenous rights defenders—were disproportionately affected. The stifling of voice leads to frustration and alienation, especially among youth. The pandemic highlighted and in certain respects may have exacerbated many of the challenges undermining good governance and social justice—such as declining government accountability, increasing inequality and discrimination, and the weakening of workers' rights—that public engagement often seeks to address. It is thus not surprising that the pandemic also served as an impetus for enhanced interest in civic engagement.

In spite of the challenges, civil society continued to operate within and sometimes beyond the boundaries set, endeavouring to navigate the pandemic as well as measures to address it, as exemplified in box 1.3.⁵⁷ In fact, after a brief lull, the number of anti-Government protests around the world surged.⁵⁸ In many countries, stakeholders engaged in strategic litigation to address the adverse effects of disproportionate pandemic-related restrictions on human rights.⁵⁹ Civic space largely moved online, though digital divides certainly hampered such movement. Electronic forms of expression, journalism and organizing expanded. In Argentina, the organization Directorio Legislativo created an online map of crisis-related regulations instituted across Latin America and the Caribbean and initiated a social media campaign focused on protecting democracy.⁶⁰ In Lebanon, digital rights organizations reviewed how the Government used digital technology to address the pandemic and provided detailed feedback to the Ministry of Public Health.⁶¹ Young people around the globe volunteered to organize information campaigns on COVID-19 safety measures and shared pandemic coping strategies, experiences and ideas online.⁶²

Box 1.3. The fight for Indigenous rights during the pandemic in Brazil^(a)

Inequality and discrimination are barriers to civic participation, yet disadvantaged groups have a disproportionate stake in healthy civic space that facilitates advocacy for their rights and for issues important to them. In Brazil, civil society actors called attention to the inadequate health care received by Indigenous Peoples early in the pandemic.^(b) They called for changes in policy at the Special Secretariat of Indigenous Health, which had halted service to Indigenous Peoples in urban areas and which, they asserted, had implemented inadequate COVID-19 procedures and protocols that did not adhere to World Health Organization guidelines and recommendations.^(c) According to research carried out by Cultural Survival, the “test and return home for domestic isolation” protocol in particular increased the likelihood of community exposure to the disease, as domestic isolation was impossible in most Indigenous communities, where living conditions and sanitation were conducive to the spread of infection and where ill-equipped family members were left to care for infected individuals without personal protective equipment.

Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil, the largest umbrella organization representing Indigenous Peoples in the country, filed a historic lawsuit against the Government in the Supreme Federal Court after months of inaction on the protection of Indigenous health. At that time, the death rate from the virus among Indigenous Peoples (9.6 per cent) was more than double that among the general population (4 per cent).^(d)

The August 2020 decision in the case recognized the legitimacy of Indigenous Peoples representing themselves and “granted immediate effect” with regard to the following measures: “planning with the participation of communities; actions to contain invaders in reserves; the creation of sanitary barriers in the case of Indigenous People in isolation or those recently contacted; access by all Indigenous people to the Indigenous Health Subsystem; and the elaboration of a plan to confront and monitor Covid-19”.^(e)

Sources: ^(a) Written by Kiana Schwab, an intern working with DPIDG, UN DESA; ^(b) Civic space in Brazil is designated as “obstructed” by the CIVICUS Monitor (as at March 2023); see <https://monitor.civicus.org/>; ^(c) Cultural Survival, “Open Letter to Jair Bolsonaro: Brazil is failing to protect the health of indigenous peoples during the #COVID19”, 10 June 2020, available at <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/open-letter-jair-bolsonaro-brazil-failing-protect-health-indigenous-peoples-during-covid19>; ^(d) Edson Krenak Naknanuk, “Indigenous peoples vs. Brazil: Supreme Court unanimously rules Bolsonaro is violating indigenous rights to health during pandemic”, Cultural Survival, 17 August 2020, available at <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/indigenous-peoples-vs-brazil-supreme-court-unanimously-rules-bolsonaro-violating-indigenous#:~:text=By%20Edson%20Krenak%20Naknanuk,Federal%20Court%20on%20their%20own>; ^(e) *ibid.*

Some Governments have taken legal, policy and other measures to protect and expand civic space, including by ensuring the regular review and limitation of emergency powers. In Austria, special regulations issued by the Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection required parliamentary approval within a period of 10 days to four weeks in order to be extended.⁶³ Countries have also taken action to uphold and guarantee freedom of expression and media freedoms, uphold and enhance protections for journalists and activists, facilitate civic organizing and assembly, expand civic education, partner with civil society, and foster digital literacy and engagement. Such measures are explored in depth in the contribution by Elly Page and Alexandra DeBlock.

Some Governments engaged in concerted outreach efforts to create opportunities for civic actors to participate in discussions and decision-making surrounding pandemic responses.⁶⁴ They enabled and enhanced public participation in policymaking and put in place feedback channels through, for instance, virtual consultations, dialogues and surveys, and utilized online feedback platforms, crowdsourcing, open calls, and challenges to address pandemic-related problems. In Brazil, for example, the Senate deliberated legislative responses to the pandemic put forth by citizens through the e-Citizenship Portal.⁶⁵ In some countries, civil society representatives were included in presidential task forces and government committees.⁶⁶

Many Governments recognized the particular importance of youth engagement in policies and programmes related to the pandemic and to sustainable development more broadly. A number of Governments administered questionnaires and conducted surveys with young people on their experiences during the pandemic to guide youth policies and interventions, organized virtual hackathons, held virtual consultations with young leaders and youth organizations, and collaborated with young people on various initiatives.⁶⁷ Examples of meaningful youth engagement are explored further in the contribution by James Sloam.

1.3.3 Combating disinformation and misinformation⁶⁸

The spread of misinformation and disinformation has accelerated in recent years and is linked to social and political polarization, armed conflicts, and mistrust in public elections. Once the pandemic struck, the world experienced an infodemic—“too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak”.⁶⁹ The spread of false information in this context was highly visible given the shared experience of the crisis across countries and the acceleration of online communication. The volume and reach of false information and its impacts seriously undermined government responses to the pandemic, making it more difficult to reach people with the accurate information needed to protect public health and convince the public to comply with regulations.

Assorted instruments, tools and approaches are needed to address disinformation and misinformation, drawing on lessons from the past as well as from innovation. Governments must regulate their own practices and fulfil their duty to guard against human rights abuses by third parties.⁷⁰ They need to have clear legislative and regulatory frameworks in place that prevent infringements of rights and civic freedoms. Regulatory approaches that focus on transparency hold particular promise for tackling disinformation.⁷¹ Whether digital platforms can and should be held legally responsible for their content is still a matter of debate; however, some Governments are employing regulatory tools that require such platforms to become more transparent in their operations so that more independent audits can be conducted of companies’ services and operations. The Digital Services Act adopted by the European Union in 2022 requires, inter alia, that digital platforms become more transparent (especially with regard to the nature and use of recommendation algorithms) and that larger platforms provide researchers access to data.⁷²

Another part of the European Union framework is the Code of Practice on Disinformation, which sets out principles and commitments for online platforms and the advertising sector to address disinformation.⁷³ Signatories pledge to take a range of actions, including to help demonetize disinformation, to label political advertising more clearly, to empower users and researchers, and to share information about manipulative and malicious behaviours utilized to spread disinformation on platforms and regularly update and implement policies to respond to them.

All actors can contribute to combating disinformation and misinformation. During the pandemic, Translators without Borders, a global community of language volunteers, helped get accurate information to people in languages and formats they understood through the use of chatbots, translations and pandemic glossaries; the organization also engaged in language data collection and mapping to help guide COVID-19 communications at the global level.⁷⁴ One particularly effective tool for preventing the spread of inaccurate information is media literacy.⁷⁵ In Finland, which ranks highest in resilience to misinformation among European countries in the most recent Media Literacy Index,⁷⁶ media literacy is part of the national core curriculum and starts in preschool.⁷⁷ One study found that more than half of the people surveyed across countries worry about their ability to distinguish real news from fake news online.⁷⁸

Responses to disinformation and misinformation should be proactive, transparent and accessible. Fact checks have been shown to be effective for countering misinformation across country

contexts, and their effects last for some time.⁷⁹ Fact checkers encountering misinformation should respond promptly, providing a clear explanation of what is false and why, and ensure that the updated factual information is made accessible and visible to those most likely to be misinformed.⁸⁰ They should also seek or require corrections. Fact-checking organizations such as Africa Check and Chequeado do critical work in this regard. Pre-empting disinformation is another strategy. The Government of Spain has informed the public of “scientific advances and possible hoaxes and rumours that may arise” based on advice from experts.⁸¹ The Governments of most OECD countries have also debunked prominent misinformation; dedicated crisis or disinformation units lead such efforts in Austria, Belgium and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Accountability for disinformation is crucial. The Federal Court of Accounts, the supreme audit institution in Brazil, investigated whether public resources were being used in advertising campaigns associated with fake news.⁸² One of the outcomes of its work is a requirement that the Ministry of Communications direct all arms of federal administration to include in contracts into which they enter clauses that encourage the identification and prevent the placement of advertisements in digital media associated with fake news.

While Governments should lead efforts to provide accurate information to society and counter false information, greater effectiveness and legitimacy is often achieved in this area when carried out through partnerships. For instance, the electoral authority of Argentina signed a memorandum of cooperation with Facebook committing to amplifying official electoral information and reducing the visibility of false information.⁸³ Examples of relevant partnerships in Africa are provided in the contribution by Naledi Mashishi.

Box 1.4. A framework for the United Nations Code of Conduct for Information Integrity on Digital Platforms

In an effort to promote integrity in the realm of public information, the Secretary-General of the United Nations proposed in his landmark report, *Our Common Agenda*, that a global code of conduct be explored with States, media outlets and regulatory bodies, facilitated by the United Nations.^(a) He then set out the framework for the United Nations Code of Conduct for Information Integrity on Digital Platforms around nine principles, including respect for human rights, user empowerment, and enhanced trust and safety.^(b) The framework puts forth recommendations for various stakeholders from which the Code of Conduct may draw; among these are the following:^(c)

- All stakeholders should “refrain from using, supporting, or amplifying disinformation and hate speech for any purpose” and should form broad coalitions on information integrity to help “bridge the gap between local organizations and technology companies operating at a global scale.”
- Member States should adopt “regulatory measures to protect the fundamental rights of users of digital platforms, including enforcement mechanisms, with full transparency as to the requirements placed on technology companies”, and should “guarantee a free, viable, independent and plural media landscape with strong protections for journalists and independent media”.

- Digital platforms should ensure transparency and “safety and privacy by design in all products ... alongside consistent application of policies across countries and languages”. They should “invest in human and artificial intelligence content moderation systems in all languages used in countries of operation” and ensure that content reporting mechanisms have “an accelerated response rate, especially in conflict settings”.

Sources: ^(a) United Nations, *Our Common Agenda*, report of the Secretary-General (Sales No. E.21.I.8), available at https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf; ^(b) United Nations, “Our Common Agenda policy brief 8: information integrity on digital platforms”, June 2023, available at <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/our-common-agenda-policy-brief-information-integrity-en.pdf>; ^(c) *ibid.*

1.4 Reflections

The pandemic served as a reminder that tackling major challenges and achieving major goals require contributions from all stakeholders. Governments alone cannot reshape their relationships with other social actors. However, as a crucial first step, they need to create an enabling environment for strengthened relationships. For instance, they can promote public transparency, engagement, respect for rights, and the exercise of voice. Critically, they can also demonstrate trust in other actors even as they seek greater trust.

The persistent and emerging issues examined in the chapter that influence trust in public administration and the strength of government relationships with society—pertaining to governance, democracy and information integrity—are clearly interrelated. Efforts to address these issues must be equal to the challenges they represent, with care taken not to lose sight of their dynamic connections. A sound, comprehensive approach is needed to rebuild and strengthen social contracts in countries around the world so that societies will be better positioned to achieve greater trust, stronger relationships and more cohesion—which can in turn make them more resilient to crises and accelerate progress towards the SDGs. The expert contributions comprising the remainder of this chapter provide inspiration for realizing these aims.

A summary of the key recommendations from the expert contributions is presented later in Table 1.A.

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Expert contributions to Chapter 1

Towards a Fair Fiscal Contract?

What Do the Private Sector and High-Net-Worth Individuals “Owe” Society?

*Jeffrey Owen and Ruth Wamuyu*¹

Three consecutive crises—the 2007/08 financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war in Ukraine—have interrupted the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), most notably disrupting three decades of progress in the steady eradication of poverty and leading to an increase in the number of people living in poverty for the first time in a generation.² In actual fact, these crises only impeded progress in SDG implementation that was already slow and exposed the fragility of the advances made. A review of the targets notes that approximately half are “moderately or severely off track and over 30 per cent have either seen no movement or regressed below the 2015 baseline”.³ Consequently, there is growing concern that without urgent action, countries will not be able to meet the SDGs by 2030.

At the same time, Governments are under pressure to do more with less, and the cost of servicing public debt absorbs a higher proportion of revenues than ever before. This is compounded by high inflation rates in both developed and developing countries; though rates have eased gradually in 2023, they are expected to remain above central bank targets, which has led to interest rate hikes and exposed further debt vulnerabilities, especially in developing countries.⁴ Citizens are increasingly concerned that the costs and benefits of globalization are not being fairly shared, evidenced by the growing inequities in the distribution of income and wealth. Real wages are falling, and household expenditure budgets are under strain. All of this has intensified existing populist ideologies and led to a greater political focus on whether different segments of society are paying their fair share of taxes, which in turn has prompted the emergence of new international initiatives to tax multinational enterprises (MNEs) and a reassessment of the way Governments go about taxing high-net-worth individuals (HNWIs).

In the wake of the pandemic, media scrutiny has reinforced pressures to quell growing income inequalities. The pandemic created approximately one billionaire every 30 hours as energy, pharmaceutical and technology companies responded to the crisis.⁵ Media coverage during this period led to growing support for the introduction of policies to bridge the wealth gap, including increases in taxation in some countries.⁶ Among Governments and international organizations, the taxation of MNEs and HNWIs is now seen not only as a way to increase revenue in a strained economic environment, but also as a means to reduce wealth and income inequalities. While many of the issues discussed apply to both developed and developing economies, the solutions available to most developing countries are limited by the capacity constraints in their tax administrations and the political environment.

Why is fairness important?

Modern tax systems rely on the vast majority of taxpayers voluntarily complying with the rules. Attitudes towards compliance depend on a range of factors. Are Governments providing citizens with the services they need in an efficient and uncorrupt manner? Are taxpayers’ perceptions of the fairness of the distribution of the tax burden positive, or do they feel that the rich and larger MNEs are avoiding their fiscal obligations? Is the tax administration free of corruption and ensuring that the treatment of all taxpayers is consistent and transparent? Attitudes to compliance are also shaped by the effectiveness of tax controls and auditing systems and the ability of the tax

administration to identify non-compliance and to prosecute those engaged in tax evasion and aggressive tax planning. Put another way, what is the likelihood of getting caught? This is the backdrop against which Governments are reviewing their approaches to taxing MNEs and high-net-worth individuals and to mobilizing their domestic resources, which are mainly made up of tax revenues.

Taxation of multinational enterprises

MNEs have the capacity and opportunity to adopt tax planning strategies that take advantage of mismatches and gaps in international tax rules to “artificially shift profits to low or no-tax locations where they have little or no economic activity” in order to reduce their tax liability.⁷ This risk is heightened in the wake of digitalization, which proactively facilitates and expands opportunities for tax avoidance/evasion, as the assets and activities of digital firms are highly mobile. Profit-shifting is estimated to cost countries \$100 billion to \$240 billion in revenue losses annually.⁸ More importantly, it undermines the fairness and integrity of the tax system and negatively impacts tax morale as MNEs that have such tax planning strategies gain a competitive advantage over domestic companies. Countries have also seen decreases in corporate tax rates; for instance, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries saw headline tax rates decline from 32.3 per cent in 2000 to 23.1 per cent in 2022, while countries in Africa saw a decline from 34.2 per cent in 2000 to 25.8 per cent in 2022.⁹ Globalization gives MNEs the ability to seek out locations that minimize production costs and maximize profits, and to the extent that tax is seen as a cost, countries have been engaged in a race to the bottom through reductions in the corporate tax rate and incentives intended to lower the effective tax rate—further reducing the revenue collected.

A number of global initiatives have been adopted to respond to these challenges. Following the 2007/08 financial crisis, the OECD base erosion and profit shifting (BEPS) project was launched by the Group of 20 (G20) to limit opportunities for profit shifting by addressing the mismatches in international tax rules. The OECD/G20 Inclusive Framework on BEPS includes 15 action plans that provide recommendations and guidance for Governments to tackle tax avoidance. This initiative represents one of the earliest concerted efforts undertaken to ensure that profits are taxed where economic activities take place and where value is created. Although it is too soon to measure the actual success of the BEPS recommendations, there has been a shift in attitude on the part of the MNEs, which now recognize the reputation risks attached to aggressive tax practices.

In 2021, a new two-pillar plan (BEPS II) was incorporated within the OECD/G20 Inclusive Framework to keep pace with the emerging challenges deriving from the development of the digital economy.¹⁰ Pillar I involves the reallocation of taxing rights to market jurisdictions for taxable entities with or without a physical presence, and Pillar II aims to curb tax competition by introducing a global minimum effective tax rate of 15 per cent on income from large MNEs within their respective market jurisdictions. The minimum tax is implemented through the adoption of two main rules at the domestic level: (a) the Income Inclusion Rule (IIR) requires an ultimate parent entity to pay a top-up tax in its resident State on its share of the income of any low-taxed constituent entity¹¹ in which it has an ownership interest; and (b) the Undertaxed Payment Rule (UTPR) acts as a backstop to the IIR, providing an adjustment mechanism that takes care of any remaining top-up tax on the profits of a constituent entity that is not captured under the IIR.

It is too early to determine whether this new framework is fit for purpose and whether it will achieve the desired results. The greatest beneficiaries from Pillar I may be the larger market

jurisdictions, which will receive a larger portion of the profits, while the impact on smaller market jurisdictions is expected to be minimal. Under Pillar II, developed countries may be the main beneficiaries, as a large number of ultimate parent entities are located in these countries, which are responsible for charging the top-up tax under the IIR. To mitigate potential revenue loss, developing countries have the option to introduce a qualified domestic minimum top-up tax, though this may create new challenges for administrations that already have limited capacity. In addition, the new framework may introduce constraints on countries' ability to design their corporate income tax systems in ways that are best adapted to their economies, particularly when it comes to the use of incentives and a requirement to eliminate digital services taxes.

Beyond tackling digitalization and tax competition issues, increasing compliance among MNEs is important. New technologies afford opportunities for tax administrations to improve the collection, management and sharing of data and to increase overall efficiency. Clearer tax laws, more efficient tax administration, and robust dispute resolution settlement mechanisms would enhance tax certainty, which would encourage voluntary compliance among MNEs. In recent years, a number of countries have set up cooperative compliance programmes that are intended to provide greater predictability and certainty for MNEs.

Taxation of high-net-worth individuals

In spite of the significant progress made in strengthening tax transparency and the exchange of information between countries, there remain gaps and loopholes that allow HNWIs to employ offshore and onshore tax planning strategies to minimize their tax payments. It is estimated that offshore wealth as a share of gross domestic product (GDP) ranges between 5 and 40 per cent depending on the region under review.¹² The countries of the Middle East and North Africa are at the higher level, with estimates of 40 per cent, while estimates for Southern Asia are closer to 5 per cent.¹³

Countries continue to experience difficulties in getting access to information on who owns and controls offshore vehicles such as holding companies or trusts. This is why there is a growing political consensus that Governments should reassess the use of net wealth taxes, inheritance and gift taxes, taxes on capital gains, and excise taxes on luxury products and services.

Organizations as diverse as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and Oxfam have called upon countries to introduce annual net wealth taxes (NWT). Oxfam estimates that an annual graduated tax on the rich could raise approximately \$2.5 trillion a year, which could be used to help countries recover from the economic crisis and as a tool to address wealth inequalities.¹⁴ NWT, combined with more effective inheritance, gift and capital gains taxation, could make a substantial contribution to revenue mobilization and—of equal importance—could influence perceptions of tax fairness and build greater trust in government.

At this point, it is worth asking why so few countries use NWT. Part of the answer is that they fear this would lead to an exit of HNWIs to low-tax jurisdictions. Another explanation is that such taxes have traditionally been difficult to administer and, in practice, have not always yielded much revenue. However, in today's more transparent environment—where tax administrations have unprecedented access to information, especially on assets held offshore—it is far more difficult to hide wealth. In addition, new technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning and blockchain offer administrations new ways to collect, store and use data to track assets. These two developments provide a more conducive environment for operationalizing NWT and other

taxes on capital and property. In addition, they enable up-to-date asset valuation (outdated valuations constitute a common problem with such taxes).

Within this new context, the IMF and the World Bank recently advocated a rethinking of wealth taxes as a way to finance the cost of the pandemic and to finance assistance programmes for low-income households, which have seen their real incomes decline because of price increases in energy and other basic goods and services.¹⁵ Argentina introduced a one-time levy on citizens with assets over \$2.5 million dubbed the “millionaire’s tax” to pay for medical supplies and relief measures during the pandemic.¹⁶ In Colombia, a bill was recently approved that establishes a permanent annual “equity tax” charged to individuals with a net worth above approximately \$600,000.¹⁷

Taking the debate forward

Governments have the power to change perceptions of the fairness of the tax system, which in turn can strengthen their relationship with the public. In an age of tax transparency and with the technologies now available, Governments can broaden the tax base by reviewing and revising the way they go about taxing MNEs and HNWIs. This debate has to extend beyond personal and corporate income taxes. It has to encompass value-added and goods and services taxes as well as other taxes on consumption, with particular attention given to luxury products. Governments need to review the way they tax wealth and capital, especially immovable property. More resources must be provided for tax administrations to strengthen tax compliance through better enforcement and the improvement and expansion of taxpayer services. New technologies such as AI, machine learning and blockchain can play a key role here, but this must be accompanied by a review of taxpayers’ rights in the digital age.

Building a political consensus for change is vital. One of the best investments Governments can make—especially in developing countries—is enhancing the capacity of tax administrations to enforce the tax rules fairly. This would include, among other things, the training of tax administration staff and legislative reform to allow the sharing of information and the digitalization of tax administration. More generally, Governments need to promote a “win-win” approach to taxation, especially in their relationship with MNEs, moving away from the zero-sum “you lose, I win” mentality. This is the rationale behind cooperative compliance programmes.¹⁸ Stronger, assertive action is needed to counter all forms of illicit financial flows, which not only undermine the revenue base but also erode confidence in the Government.

Throughout this process, the United Nations represents the only truly inclusive forum and can play a leading role in developing standards that work for developing and emerging economies, intensifying capacity-building programmes, and providing a collaborative space where Governments, business communities, academics and civil society can come together to design a tax system which promotes fairness and contributes to the achievement of the SDGs.

Endnotes

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Gender Equality in Public Administration: A New Normal for Governments Three Years into the Pandemic

Müge Finkel and Melanie Hughes¹

Women's full and effective participation in public administration is the bedrock of the whole-of-government approach to gender equality. Accumulating global evidence suggests gender equality in public administration enhances government functioning, the responsiveness and effectiveness of service delivery, and trust in public institutions, strengthening the relationship between Governments and the publics they represent and serve.² Recognizing the importance of gender equality across all levels and sectors of public administration, countries committed to realizing this goal within the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to measuring progress towards its achievement as articulated in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicator 16.7.1. However, by 2020, only one third of the world's countries were at or near gender parity at decision-making levels in public administration; on average, women comprised 46 per cent of public administration employees but only 31 per cent of the top leaders and 30 per cent of the senior managers.³

As has occurred during other major crises, the pandemic revealed and even exacerbated pre-existing gender inequalities. For instance, the pandemic drew attention to the dearth of women in public health leadership. Women make up 70 per cent of the health-care workforce and were disproportionately represented on the front lines of early COVID-19 response, but in public health administration women account for only 34 per cent of the decision makers.⁴ Watchdog groups suggest that the pandemic may have worsened gender disparities in public health leadership,⁵ despite the widely publicized successes attributed to women national leaders in mitigating the spread of COVID-19 and saving lives.⁶

Periods of crisis destabilize existing institutional structures and create new leadership possibilities. During the recent pandemic, however, Governments often missed opportunities to promote women. One example is the failure to include women equitably on COVID-19 task forces (executive branch institutions designed to lead government pandemic responses). In 2021, men made up 76 per cent of COVID-19 task force members and held 78 per cent of the leadership positions.⁷ Although the commitment to gender equality was sidelined in many countries, there were some notable exceptions; Saint Lucia, for example, formed a task force with equal numbers of women and men in membership and leadership capacities.⁸

Times of crisis also create windows of opportunity for policy change.⁹ To sustain operations during the pandemic, Governments implemented new or modified workplace policies for public employees. Countries such as the United States of America expanded existing telework programmes, while others, such as the Philippines, Portugal, and Spain, adopted flexible work policies for public employees for the first time. The Philippines began allowing both remote work and flexible schedules, including the option of a four-day workweek.¹⁰ Given women's disproportionate share of care work and household labour, such policies were instrumental in

keeping women in the workforce during the pandemic, and they continue to be seen as useful policies for promoting work-life balance and institutional inclusiveness.

Adjusting to a “new normal” and refocusing on gender equality in public administration globally will require simultaneous efforts on three fronts: remembering lessons learned prior to the pandemic and re-energizing efforts to adopt and implement good practices; consolidating positive changes made during the pandemic; and taking bold action to regain momentum to achieve SDGs 5 and 16 by 2030.

On the first front, the following three areas assigned priority in pre-pandemic efforts should constitute key components of future policies and practices so that gender equality commitments can be met:

- *Data and transparency.* Immediate attention needs to be directed towards SDG indicator 16.7.1b, which aims to measure representation with regard to age, sex, disability status, and population group in positions of public institutions, including the public service, and to assess the correspondence between such representation and the proportions of those groups in society as a whole. Reporting on this indicator has the potential to expand gender-disaggregated data availability, target public administration sectors and levels that require additional attention, and improve cross-country learning. Sharing and integrating relevant data in a transparent and accessible job placement platform can increase government accountability. The Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Dashboard in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Sistema de Alta Dirección Pública (SADP) in Chile exemplify how quality public administration employment data can be integrated into transparent hiring and promotion practices to promote a diverse and inclusive public service.¹¹
- *Training and mentorship.* Providing women with training and mentoring is important not only for upgrading skills and building capacities, but also for improving the visibility of employees eligible for promotion and creating opportunities for networking.¹² Going forward, new leadership and managerial training programmes should prioritize women civil servants and other marginalized population groups. Effective examples of career development initiatives targeting women include the State Leads Equally (*Staten leder jämt*) programme in Sweden¹³ and the Women in the Lead—Leadership, Engagement, Advancement and Development (W-LEAD) programme in Ireland.¹⁴
- *Targets and quotas.* Governments have adopted leadership-focused quotas, targets and temporary special measures to address the underrepresentation of women at senior levels of public administration. While their design must be carefully considered and their impact assessed, a number of examples can help guide forward-looking discussions, including the affirmative action plans targeting the promotion of women in the public sector and the gender binding targets included in the Federal Equal Treatment Act in Austria; the 2013 Sauvadet Law in France, which introduced a progressive 40 per cent quota for all nominations to top civil service positions; the Quota Law (Law 581 of 2000) in Colombia, which mandates a

minimum of 30 per cent women in decision-making positions; and the 2019 “parity in everything” reform in Mexico, which establishes gender parity in all government sectors.

On the second front, positive changes adopted during the pandemic need to be carefully studied and intentionally integrated into future gender equality commitments in public administration. The gendered implications of flexible work arrangements, especially those involving telework exclusively, need to be first on the list.¹⁵ As these arrangements are incorporated into the lives of public employees, they stand to have the most positive impact if gender equality concerns are intentionally integrated and mainstreamed through the development of the necessary infrastructure and the provision of training, information technology access, mechanisms for the evaluation of telework for promotion and retention purposes, and health and safety guidelines for home offices. Adaptability is important, as a flexible system that includes variable work hours or a hybrid system that combines telework with office work may be preferred to full-time telework.

Governments can promote gender equity in a telework environment by encouraging men to assume an equal share of unpaid care and domestic responsibilities, including “by means of targeted employee engagement and creative initiatives, such as role-modelling of good practices by male managers, social-media campaigns, internal blogs or photos, videos, etc.”.¹⁶ One example of positive role modelling comes from Japan; in the past, few men took advantage of their available paternity leave, but participation rose from 14 to 40 per cent in the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare after former minister Yasuhisa Shiozaki publicly identified himself as a man who took part in caring for his children.¹⁷

In order to ensure that the benefits of virtual and hybrid work environments can be accessed by everyone equally, public institutions need to invest in managerial training to intentionally cultivate a leadership approach characterized by greater gender awareness and equity and more balanced representation.¹⁸ Efforts such as those undertaken in Spain, where human resource managers and other key administrators are offered an advanced 25-hour gender equality training course—can strengthen managerial buy-in to gender equality.¹⁹

With the growing social and economic pressures surrounding the COVID-19 crisis, mental health emerged as an urgent priority in many settings—including the public sector. Latvia and the Netherlands, for example, began offering mental health services in response to the increased emotional burden placed on public servants during the pandemic.²⁰ This heightened focus on the mental well-being of public administration employees should be made a permanent feature of government employment. Mental health support, while increasing the appeal of public employment for all, could be especially beneficial for women employees, who have reported higher levels of stress linked to managing their work-life balance within the context of flexible work arrangements. Targeted action in areas such as these contribute to gender equality in the long term.

On the third front, bold action must be taken to get countries back on track to meet sustainable development objectives. To restore the momentum needed to reach SDGs 5 and 16 by 2030, decision makers must put gender equality at the centre of present and future recovery efforts. The COVID-19 pandemic served to re-emphasize the reality that even in sectors where women constitute the majority of workers and serve on the front lines, they are not included equally in

policy development and decision-making. Moving forward, it is crucial that women be fully integrated into permanent bodies of crisis response and management across all sectors.

Endnotes

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Communication with Social Actors on the COVID-19 Pandemic: Implications for Future Crises

Torsha Dasgupta, Mirza Shadan and Kaushik Bose¹

The COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, tumultuous geopolitical affairs, and widening inequities are reshaping public policies, diplomatic postures, and the global economy. Even the public is experiencing disenchantment, and their trust in established institutions shows signs of erosion. Now more than ever, Governments and public institutions need to re-evaluate their relationships with other social actors to coalesce action to achieve the Goals embodied in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The time is ripe to strengthen the social contract that underpins a social dynamic that is both intricate and delicate.

To navigate these uncharted waters, Governments need to focus on regaining and sustaining public trust in order to strengthen and preserve the legitimacy of public institutions. A key driver of that trust is communication that reflects a high degree of intentionality. The pandemic ushered in innovations in how information is shared; there is now a stronger emphasis on transparent, inclusive and purposeful communication.

Employing effective communication strategies becomes vitally important during prolonged crises, which can be characterized by urgency and unpredictability, a high degree of newsworthiness, and the capacity to change certain aspects of human behaviour. Typically, all of these descriptors apply to disease outbreaks of epidemic or pandemic potential. First, such outbreaks are, by nature, urgent and require rapid decision-making, treatment and prevention response, and prompt follow-through by health professionals and the general population. However, this is made difficult by the second characteristic of outbreaks: they are highly unpredictable. As witnessed during the recent pandemic, there can be sudden surges in cases due to (even minor) lapses in infection control, mutations in the pathogen, or increased exposure through shifts in travel patterns or contact protocols. Third, outbreaks such as COVID-19 are alarming and create significant anxiety within the public sphere. This anxiety can prompt people to behave in highly irrational and even dangerous ways, including rioting. Outbreaks have the potential to cause considerable social disruption and substantial economic losses, possibly out of proportion to the actual risk. Fourth, as illustrated here, outbreaks cause serious upheavals in society, making them highly newsworthy. Excessive media attention can potentially exacerbate public anxiety and fear, especially if official information is absent or inadequate. Last, given that pathogens are infectious, human behaviour is a key factor in determining the severity of an outbreak. Thus, any information circulated among the public acquires the status of a control intervention.

Shifts in communication: pandemic-era innovations

Over the course of the pandemic, Governments designed risk communication strategies aimed at facilitating and expediting the dissemination of accurate information to everyone virtually everywhere. Tailoring these strategies to the needs of the population helped combat fearmongering, decrease elevated public stress levels, and counter false information. While all countries suffered significant socioeconomic fallout from the pandemic, some experienced early success in controlling the spread of COVID-19 by adopting the types of innovative approaches explored below.²

- *State-society synergy.* In Taiwan, Province of China, the Government collaborated extensively with civil society to effectively address COVID-19-triggered uncertainties. Almost from the start, the Government opted to communicate openly, transparently and regularly with the public about dynamic developments. A number of unique strategies were employed to connect with the public; a dog was fielded as the COVID-19 public communications ambassador to increase engagement on social media posts containing public health messages, and the Government engaged civic hackers and professional comedians to help quell misinformation, embracing “humor over rumor”.³
- *Social marketing and technology innovations.* The Government of the Republic of Korea received high praise for its efficient risk communication techniques, which included the use of social media, text messages, and other technology-based approaches to quickly disseminate information on the pandemic and to offer updates on the most recent developments. The Government utilized these digital tools intelligently to improve crisis communication, organize massive public health initiatives and supply chains, and promote the widespread adoption of preventive measures, including social seclusion and mask use, in collaboration with broadcast and social media entities.
- *Driving scientific communications.* At a time when information about the virus and its risks was scarce, the Government of India enlisted the support of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) to empower the scientific community to take informed action. In addition to stewarding research, ICMR communicated evidence to the general public in real time, participating in high-level daily press briefings, publishing and disseminating guidelines on testing and face masks, providing consistent communication on social media channels, and increasingly engaging with at-risk communities to emphasize the importance of healthy behaviours. This open communication was instrumental in building the confidence of the population in public health measures—especially masking, testing and vaccination.
- *Localized communications and help from the arts community.* Senegal refined and localized its communication strategies to drive transparent and consistent public messaging. The Government analysed granular data to identify public consumption patterns relating to various channels of communication, including radio, newspapers, and television, and used the findings to guide the dissemination of information at the community level. This approach enabled public health officials to deliver the right information at the right time to the right population to derive the greatest impact.⁴ The country’s artists also played a role in amplifying the Government’s health messages. Graffiti artists created visually compelling murals showing the use of sanitizers, face masks and hand etiquette to reach educationally deprived populations within the country.⁵

The approaches highlighted above reflect the different considerations that influence the success of communication strategies. Among the key factors driving this success are compelling and concise messaging, the selection of appropriate channels of delivery, the expertise of spokespersons, the ability to identify and meet the needs of the audience (and to understand their limitations), strategic timing, constructive interplay between actors (both within and outside the public sector), trust in the Government, the active involvement of the scientific community, a culture of innovation, and strong political motivation. Where such factors are given consideration, Governments are better able to pursue a coordinated approach to public communications—one that is rooted in the local context and honours transparency and harmonization among different actors. It is recognized that

withholding, underplaying or concealing vital information from the public contributes to the longevity of global health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the ground, countless good Samaritans, aid agencies, non-profit entities and religious institutions pooled their accumulated high trust capital to drive social good during the pandemic. Examples abound of non-governmental actors communicating risks attached to COVID-19 to vulnerable communities. Liaisons between local government and religious leaders had a multiplier effect in elevating the risk readiness of communities. In Sri Lanka, the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement facilitated a whole-of-society response to the pandemic.⁶ In other cases, social actors played key roles in health protection without direct collaboration with the Government. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, faith-based organizations across denominations sensitized and mobilized communities to adopt public health measures. Religious leaders integrated anti-COVID-19 messages into their services and encouraged their faith communities to adopt measures decreed by the national Government.⁷

Future-proofing communications: actions to take

The innovations highlighted above illustrate the need for Governments to be smarter and sharper in the way they develop and implement public communications strategies. Experience from past health emergencies, including the 2003 SARS outbreak, the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, the 2014 Ebola outbreak, and the 2019 COVID-19 pandemic, has shown that the failure to provide accurate and timely information can have a devastating impact—even on the most well-resourced countries. Misinformation and rumours mushroom in disordered information environments, further burdening fragile health-care systems. Some of the key lessons learned from past outbreaks are elaborated below, as they can help Governments identify and address potential shortfalls that impede effective communication.

- *Consistent messaging across key stakeholders is critical.* In times of crisis, owing to the involvement of multiple authorities, messages run the risk of becoming unclear and even contradictory due to conflicting institutional perspectives and priorities. Mixed with heightened public emotions during crises, inconsistent messaging often results in panic and hinders adherence to crisis mitigation measures. Ideally, though circumstances may differ depending on the nature of the crisis, one authority should assume the lead early on and exercise convening powers. The Government of Australia addressed the extraordinary circumstances by forming a national cabinet made up of the Prime Minister and all state and territory first ministers to coordinate the response to COVID-19 in the country.⁸ This aided in streamlining internal communications across different departments, levels (national, subnational and local government), and other stakeholders (including technical bodies and experts) and ensured that the key messages were clear, concise and consistent.
- *Reliable spokespersons positively shape outcomes.* A person or institution that possesses the requisite knowledge, recognizes the gravity of the situation, provides accurate information, is articulate and transparent, and takes accountability can be considered an exemplary crisis communicator. In demanding times, heads of State must address the public consistently and empathetically to generate public trust in emergency response and increase compliance. In New Zealand, former Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern proved the efficacy of this approach by building a strong rapport with her people. Technical experts can help demystify the science behind the crisis for audiences, as demonstrated by the work of Dr. Maria Van Kerkhove, COVID-19 Health Operations and Technical Lead for the World Health Organization.

- *Utilizing a combination of traditional and modern media tools in developing and implementing risk communication strategies is essential.* Institutions that fail to evaluate their information dissemination strategies and adapt to emerging realities find it hard to gauge or achieve success in their communication campaigns. Given the rapidly changing nature of information consumption, the integration of new media tools is becoming increasingly important in information delivery. However, newer media must supplement and not replace traditional channels of communication. Governments need to craft comprehensive information dissemination strategies that incorporate the use of differentiated channels to reach diverse audiences (including older persons, youth and Indigenous Peoples). It is important to strengthen the capacity of technical experts in using social and digital media to ensure the effective real-time dispatch of critical information. Investing the necessary resources in improving traditional channels, especially those offering information in local languages, is equally essential to ensure that no one is left behind.
- *Communications preparedness needs to start ahead of a crisis.* Communication activities become unsustainable in the absence of a solid foundational infrastructure. Governments must lay the groundwork for suitable communication mechanisms well in advance. When a crisis hits, communication systems and protocols must already be in place to allow for immediate activation. At an institutional level, investments are needed to develop resources that work not only for crisis management but also for crisis aversion. First, dedicated knowledge resources must be created and routinely updated to train personnel on risk and crisis communications. Second, monitoring tools must be built to identify, track and bust rumours; Mercy Corps in Puerto Rico set an example by launching an innovative and cost-effective rumour tracker tool with the support of community leaders.⁹ Third, institutions must proactively conduct outreach to their audience, especially vulnerable and marginalized communities, using multiple channels. Lastly, systems that enable public access to government decisions and rationales (especially those impacting freedoms) must be reactivated, well publicized, and protected through regular oversight.

The COVID-19 experience offered a sobering lesson on the importance of building and maintaining a strong relationship between the Government and society. As the globe straddles the halfway mark of the 2030 Agenda, there is a renewed urgency to resume the pursuit of critical developmental aspirations and recover lost progress. For progress to be made, there needs to be open and transparent dialogue between societal actors and an environment that supports and sustains the conversation. Governments must focus on the silver lining—which may appear somewhat blurred at present—and strive for the resilience and agility that will allow the public sector to deal effectively with future crises. Hopefully, strong and successful communication will contribute to building a safer, healthier and more inclusive world.

Endnotes

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² While particular approaches may have worked in certain geographical areas or among specific communities, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. As the success of communication strategies depends heavily on the local context, it is advisable to customize approaches according to the sociodemographic profile of the targeted population(s).

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⁶ Ezekiel Boro and others, “The role and impact of faith-based organisations in the management of and response to COVID-19 in low-resource settings”, *Religion and Development*, vol. 1, No. 1 (online publication: 16 June 2022), pp. 132-145, available at <https://doi.org/10.30965/27507955-20220008>.

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Regulating the Use of Digital Technology by Public Administration to Protect and Strengthen Human Rights

*Valeria Betancourt*¹

The COVID-19 pandemic made established and emerging structural challenges related to inequality, discrimination, exclusion and violence more palpable and highlighted tensions around the continuum between the exercise of human rights online and offline.

Governmental initiatives to combat the pandemic were deployed worldwide after the emergency was officially announced. Most were characterized by the accelerated use of digital technologies and mobile communications to detect and report COVID-19 cases, monitor the spread of the virus, investigate its behaviour, organize vaccination processes and track their status, and collect information to inform decision-making.

Research undertaken during the pandemic suggested that neither developed nor developing countries were immune to new threats to freedoms and rights, and that there was a need to address the risks and potential benefits of digital technologies collectively with fresh vigour and adherence to international human rights law, acknowledging that the crisis—and the associated rights violations and exacerbation of structural deprivations—was disproportionately affecting marginalized, oppressed and vulnerable groups. Some government responses illustrated the potential of digital technologies to advance rights and to serve as a basis both for mitigating the medium- and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and for catalysing positive approaches in the handling of future crises.

This contribution builds on analytical research led by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and published in the 2021-2022 edition of the Global Information Society Watch report, which explored digital futures for a post-pandemic world.

Key risks and challenges

Research undertaken by specialized civil society organizations working at the intersection of digital technologies and human rights shows that a range of rights protected by instruments endorsed by States around the world were affected by measures adopted by Governments during the pandemic.² In general, new or tighter restrictions on people's rights derived from the following: prevailing digital exclusion; a lack of clarity and transparency around the objectives, limits and principles on which digital technology-based responses were designed and implemented; the absence of clear and comprehensive regulatory, technical and governance frameworks and robust institutions for personal data handling and protection; and gaps in the establishment of enforcement and oversight mechanisms aimed at limiting abuses of power, including by Governments wanting to control who had access to the Internet and how it was used, and by companies whose business models remained rooted in the surveillance and exploitation of people and their data. The major challenges, threats and risks that were observed are explored below.

Digital exclusion

The lack of meaningful Internet access for marginalized communities and groups remains a key concern. The many dimensions of digital exclusion revealed by the pandemic, including the gender digital divide,³ showed the interdependence between access to digital technologies, particularly the Internet, and the enjoyment of a wide range of human rights. People without a stable and affordable Internet connection were unable to work (in jobs that could be performed remotely) or to access education, life-saving information or government services, including health care. Amidst a lack of affordable Internet access and relevant digital skills, e-government initiatives created layered exclusions for marginalized groups, especially in Africa and Latin America. In the realm of education, for instance, the digital divide combined with pandemic restrictions produced a learning divide, with long-term socioeconomic consequences. The pandemic illustrated how fundamental meaningful Internet access and digital skills are to sustainable development and human rights.

Freedom of expression

Freedom of expression online came under threat during the pandemic as new and existing legislation and regulations were used to limit and criminalize legitimate expression in the name of combating hate speech and the spread of false information. In some cases, regulations contained provisions that targeted criticism of government efforts to contain the virus or that compelled technology companies to remove content or block access to content and users. *Intentional disruptions to Internet access and digital communications in different parts of the world interfered with people's freedom of expression⁴ and access to essential information and services.⁵* Control over media reporting on the pandemic, arrests of journalists, and shutdowns of media entities critical of the Government further curtailed free expression online. The monitoring of social media and the harassment of users by Governments and government supporters resulted in censorship (including self-censorship) and the spread of hate speech.

Public interest technologies, surveillance, privacy and data protection

The solutions adopted by Governments during the pandemic required the collection of enormous amounts of personal and sensitive data and the subsequent analysis and sharing of such data⁶ in contexts without proper privacy safeguards, clear privacy regulations, or mechanisms for enforcement and oversight. Public interest technologies⁷ such as contact tracing apps and vaccine passports, in tandem with expanded health regulations to monitor people's mobility and behaviour, were used to strengthen State surveillance mechanisms and the ability to profile individuals. Lack of transparency in the development of these technologies enabled a failure to uphold the principles of necessity, proportionality and legality. This had an impact on people's informational self-determination,⁸ restricting their ability to exert control over the use of their personal data. There were cases in which the right to access information was conditioned on the provision of certain personal data, and because of their indivisibility and interdependence, the rights to freedom of movement, association and peaceful assembly, as well as the right to work, were also affected.⁹

The protection of human rights online: opportunities, responses and promising measures

The increased visibility of the vulnerabilities and risks associated with the acceleration of digital transformation during the pandemic created an opportunity to put human rights at the centre of the configuration of the world's digital future.

The Internet and other digital technologies are an essential part of crisis response and an emerging source of resilience, but they are not sufficient on their own; holistic strategies are also needed to address structural inequalities, strengthen democracy, and reinforce the safeguarding and enjoyment of human rights. The Internet needs to be protected as a global public resource, and human rights must be upheld both online and offline in any short-, medium- and long-term crisis response measures, taking into account that people are affected in different ways both during and in the aftermath of the crisis.

Context-based responses are needed, but equally important are global responses based on true multilayer, multidisciplinary, multi-stakeholder collaboration guided by principles of inclusion, transparency and accountability. Internet governance, as a central element of broader global digital governance and global digital cooperation ecosystems, is part of those necessary responses oriented towards ensuring compliance with international human rights law and the preservation of the public core of the Internet at all levels. Processes such as the development of the Global Digital Compact¹⁰ and the World Summit on the Information Society +20 review¹¹ offer valuable opportunities to place human rights at the centre of the development, deployment, utilization and regulation of the Internet and other digital technologies.

Some of the contextual responses by Governments illustrate rights-respecting approaches taken during the pandemic and serve as models for handling future crises. In Brazil, for example, the Supreme Court affirmed that the protection of personal data represented a fundamental constitutional right. The Supreme Court's action prevented telecommunications companies from implementing a presidential order to share the personal data of users, resulting in a formal amendment that "effectively included the fundamental right to data protection in the Constitution". Decisions such as these link individual rights to collective rights,¹² social well-being and human dignity.¹³

Despite decades of communications infrastructure deployment, the growth of mobile phone penetration has slowed over the past decade, showing that the predominant strategies employed to extend affordable connectivity have a limit. With this loss of momentum and the need to address digital exclusion to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, it is crucial to support the realization of people's right to meaningfully shape and use the Internet and other digital technologies to meet their specific needs and realities through approaches that complement those provided by Governments and corporations. Alternative approaches may include small-scale local initiatives or community-owned communication networks built, operated and used by communities in a participatory and open manner to respond to the information and communication needs of unconnected or poorly connected groups. Two examples illustrate positive efforts in that regard: the Communications Authority of Kenya adopted a licensing and shared radio spectrum framework for community networks following public consultation and a process for the development of the framework that was undertaken in partnership with multiple stakeholders;¹⁴ and in Argentina, significant steps were taken to enable small operators to provide telecommunications services and

Internet connectivity with support from the country's Universal Service Fund, one of the mandates of which is to support community networks in unconnected or underserved communities in both rural and urban areas.¹⁵

A development-oriented digital future can only be enabled where offline and online environments respect rights.

Recommendations

On alignment with established human rights standards to strengthen rights online

- Adopt a human rights-based approach as the standard for the design and use of digital technologies in accordance with the standards of international human rights bodies and instruments.
- Undertake human rights impact assessments of digital technology-related policies, acknowledging the local contexts and realities of vulnerable and marginalized groups within society.
- Create robust frameworks for multi-stakeholder decision-making and oversight that support the development of innovative technological responses to future crises and the shaping of a free, open and secure digital future.

On digital inclusion

- Reform policy and regulatory environments so that they are favourable to the development of complementary models for the provision of connectivity, including community networks and small and medium-sized cooperative service providers or operators.
- Ensure the participation of communities in policymaking concerning access to digital technologies and digital inclusion.

On privacy and data protection

- Define data governance frameworks and strengthen oversight and accountability mechanisms to increase scrutiny and transparency.
- Adopt comprehensive legal and regulatory frameworks that preserve privacy and regulate State-sponsored surveillance in line with the principles of necessity and proportionality.

On freedom of expression

- Repeal laws that unnecessarily and disproportionately limit online freedom of expression.
- Refrain from disrupting Internet access.

Endnotes

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² Association for Progressive Communications and Swedish International Cooperation Agency, *Global Information Society Watch 2021-2022: Digital Futures for a Post-Pandemic World*, Alan Finlay, ed. (APC, 2022), available at <https://www.giswatch.org/2021-2022-digital-futures-post-pandemic-world>.

³ A more comprehensive characterization of the digital divide includes multiple determinants, such as race, age, education, class and geographic location, all of which have an impact on the differences in access between men and women and people of different sexualities and genders and between women in different economic, social and cultural circumstances.

⁴ For an overview of global Internet shutdowns in 2021 and 2022, see Access Now, “Internet shutdowns in 2021: the return of digital authoritarianism”, 28 April 2022 (updated 17 March 2023), available at <https://www.accessnow.org/internet-shutdowns-2021>; and Access Now, “Weapons of control, shields of impunity: Internet shutdowns in 2022”, 28 February 2023 (updated 24 May 2023), available at <https://www.accessnow.org/internet-shutdowns-2022>.

⁵ Human Rights Watch, “End Internet shutdowns to manage COVID-19”, 31 March 2020, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/31/end-internet-shutdowns-manage-covid-19>.

⁶ Jamila Venturini, “Between urgency and surveillance: an analysis on the use of technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic in Latin America”, article II, *Internet Sectoral Overview*, No. 4, year 13 (December 2021), p. 12, available at <https://cetic.br/media/docs/publicacoes/6/20211217114412/iso-year-xiii-n-4-privacy.pdf>.

⁷ Framing these digital technologies as “public interest technologies” offers a useful framework for the holistic evaluation of the impact of their deployment by Governments in terms of both benefits and harms; see Paola Ricaurte Quijano and Jacobo Nájera, “Getting ready for the next pandemic: public interest technologies in Latin America”, in *Global Information Society Watch 2021-2022: Digital Futures for a Post-Pandemic World*, Alan Finlay, ed. (APC, 2022), available at <https://www.giswatch.org/regional-report/latin-america-0>.

⁸ Informational self-determination is the right of individuals to choose without interference the circumstances in which information about themselves is exposed and the extent of that exposure.

⁹ Jamila Venturini and others, *Informe Observatorio Covid-19 del Consorcio Al Sur: Un Análisis Crítico de las Tecnologías Desplegadas en América Latina Contra la Pandemia* (Consortio Al Sur, June 2021), available at <https://www.alsur.lat/sites/default/files/2021-06/Informe%20Observatorio%20Covid-19%20del%20Consortio%20Al%20Sur%282%29.pdf>.

¹⁰ United Nations, Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Technology, Global Digital Compact page, available at <https://www.un.org/techenvoy/global-digital-compact>.

¹¹ David Souter, “Inside the digital society: WSIS+20 is closer than you think” (APC, 6 July 2020), available at <https://www.apc.org/en/blog/inside-digital-society-wsis20-closer-you-think>.

¹² There are human rights generally recognized as exercisable by collectives (or groups of individuals) and not reducible to the individual, including the right to self-determination and the right to development.

¹³ André Ramiro and Mariana Canto, “New pathways for advocacy on personal data following a Supreme Court ruling during COVID-19”, in *Global Information Society Watch 2021-2022: Digital Futures for a Post-Pandemic World*, Alan Finlay, ed. (APC, 2022), available at <https://www.giswatch.org/en/country-report/brazil-0>.

¹⁴ Kathleen Diga and others, “Advocacy for community-led connectivity access in the global South”, in *Global Information Society Watch 2021-2022: Digital Futures for a Post-Pandemic World*, Alan Finlay, ed. (APC, 2022), available at <https://www.giswatch.org/en/digital-rights-internet-advocacy-meaningful-access/advocacy-community-led-connectivity-access>.

¹⁵ More details on the Argentina initiative are available on the APC blog at <https://www.apc.org/en/blog/seeding-change-community-networks-flowering-argentina-during-challenging-times> and <https://www.apc.org/en/blog?destination=blog%3Fpage%3D15&page=1>.

The Appetite for E-Justice is a Chance to Advance Sustainable Development Goals and Entrench Rights Protection

*Sarah McCoubrey*¹

Accelerated, rights-centred digital transformation offers a window to strengthen trust in justice institutions and deliver more equitable, development-focused legal services; however, the window may be narrow. Action needs to be taken quickly.

While education, health care, financial services, media and commerce have all experienced a transformation in recent decades, justice systems have continued to rely on in-person appearances, physical record-keeping and analog processes. COVID-19 lockdowns provided the disruption that this slow-to-adapt sector needed, setting in motion digital transformation in the justice system.

The trust between Governments and the people they serve relies on effective, transparent and accountable dispute resolution. Justice system responses to the COVID-19 lockdowns strengthened that trust in some cases—and broke it in others. Courts and legal services shut down across the globe in 2020. Some adapted quickly, resuming operations using digital solutions to maintain the administration of justice, while others are still struggling to return to previous operations, facing extensive backlogs and many unmet legal needs.

The lockdowns revealed the vulnerability of justice systems heavily dependent on paper and in-person filing and appearances. The lack of interoperability between courts, police, lawyers, prosecutors and judges constituted a critical barrier rather than simply an inconvenience. Judges, lawyers, and human rights advocates faced steep learning curves as they scrambled to move their services online.

The global pandemic also revealed the extent to which a healthy, efficient and reliable justice system is critical for the day-to-day well-being of society. Fair and effective dispute resolution protects jobs, prevents unreasonable evictions, and provides emergency benefits and access to critical services, including health care. During the pandemic, people who were already vulnerable to rights infringements—whether because of their status as refugees, undocumented workers or prisoners or because of the increased reliance on complex data collection and surveillance—looked to justice mechanisms for protection. In some countries, the courthouse doors remained closed.

Viewed optimistically, the crisis-driven adaptation that has taken place over the past few years has effectively provided a test case for new ways of delivering justice services and has forced people and institutions to experiment with new technologies. As public institutions shift from temporary service modifications to sustained modes of operating, there are new opportunities for digital transformation. Governments and citizens have a new appreciation of how a trusted, effective justice system underpins progress on many of the Sustainable Development Goals (including SDGs 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 10, 11 and 16). The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted established patterns,

System vulnerability + disruption + attitudinal change = justice sector appetite and urgency for change

creating the conditions for rights-centred, rule-of-law-focused e-justice adoption. This is the opportunity for digital transformation of justice. The subsections below highlight critical starting points, providing a closer look at the emergence and evolution of digital justice services.

Appearing virtually

The use of video appearances to bridge periods of lockdown during the pandemic proved to be a viable, though not perfect, alternative to in-court appearances. As courts have reopened and people have eagerly returned to familiar ways of operating, institutions have had to assess the efficacy of temporary fixes and retain practices that incorporate the advantages of remote appearances. The possibility of testifying by video dramatically increases access to justice in rural and remote regions, making it possible for people in underserved areas to access higher courts or specialized lawyers and experts. Vulnerable witnesses, including children, women experiencing violence, or witnesses under protection, can opt to testify from safe locations without the cost, difficulty, fear or intimidation associated with coming to the courthouse. These gains must not be lost in favour of the convenience of the court or the lawyers.

Updating archaic legislation

Rules and legislation relating to technology, types of evidence, prisoner transport, records storage and many other seemingly mundane aspects of the administration of formal justice systems have long been seen as barriers to technology-facilitated justice services. Some of these barriers to modern operations are found in centuries-old legislation or rules. During the pandemic, many countries made quick, temporary changes to allow electronic signatures, virtual appearances, electronic filings, or judge-alone trials.² These legislative changes allowed courts to try out new technologies, refine their approaches and bring greater experience to discussions about permanent changes to court operations. Not only can these experiments be retained, but they can also serve as the basis for broader justice sector innovations such as mobile courts.³

Working together

The pandemic lockdowns also revealed the siloed nature of the justice sector, with each institution maintaining separate records on incompatible systems. This approach to the handling of sector data wastes time and is susceptible to human error, loss or damage. More importantly, the lack of accessible data about people's legal issues and use of services prevents justice systems from truly understanding public needs or identifying opportunities to improve the system. Without integrated data systems, it is difficult to provide evidence-based legal training, make data-driven hiring or scheduling decisions, or focus improvements where they will have the greatest positive impact for the public. Building interoperability across institutions—the police, prosecutors, defence counsel, courts, prisons, financial institutions, family counsellors, workplace investigators, civil registries and social services—creates a people-centred approach to justice services in terms of both access and privacy. By addressing the gaps and dependencies revealed in the past few years, Governments have the opportunity to strengthen public trust in the justice system.

Wary but not risk-averse

Converting from analog to digital systems or integrating justice data with those of other public services involves potentially serious risks, but these can be managed. In addition to the privacy and data security concerns that come with any digital tool, e-justice initiatives require extra vigilance to ensure that case data are fully segregated from government data, with strict prohibitions against government access. In criminal cases, when citizens challenge government decisions or fight for a right or benefit, they argue against the Government in the courtroom. Public trust in the courts will erode if political and bureaucratic actors are able to access the details of court files. The independence of the judicial system is key to maintaining public trust.

The increasingly significant role of artificial intelligence (AI) in digital operations presents a difficult challenge for the justice system. AI evolves by learning from the data it is fed. When those data sets include past decisions of judges and government officials, the AI embeds the bias of those historical decisions into its algorithms—but the resulting decisions have the appearance of digital neutrality. Not only must the data foundation of legal AI be scrutinized for bias, but judges will increasingly be expected to adjudicate on cases where public services rely on AI. The role of judges as experts in protecting rights and detecting bias is critical to public trust in digital tools.

Addressing the risks that come with digitalization is critical to ensure not only that privacy rights are protected, but also that those experiencing literacy, geographic, economic or demographic barriers are not excluded. Ensuring that digitalization aims to leave no one behind will mitigate against the harms of the digital divide and improves access to justice for those who need it most.

Future-proofing

E-justice is primarily focused on modernizing the justice system and bringing it up to speed with other public services, but e-justice also represents a strategy for future resilience. Adopting robust digital tools, designed around the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic, will help make justice systems resilient to future disruptions. Against the backdrop of increasingly frequent climate events, political and civil conflicts, and future public health emergencies, continuity of justice services will be required regardless of physical, geographical or logistical challenges. Maintaining access to independent, stable and trusted dispute resolution mechanisms in such periods of uncertainty will minimize political instability and support civic well-being in times of crisis. This is already evident in Ukraine, where e-justice systems developed in 2018/19 to provide access to courts for people living in regions occupied by the Russian Federation were quickly expanded during COVID-19 lockdowns to extend access to dispute resolution across the country. Now, during the war, these e-justice tools are helping maintain the rule of law and security of records as individuals displaced by the conflict struggle to prove eligibility for benefits or ownership of property.⁴ The e-justice initiatives adopted in Ukraine have already been tested twice, demonstrating the system's relevance and resilience.

In Myanmar, where political turmoil has created opportunities for land grabbing and made it difficult to prove property rights,⁵ apps are being used to map existing and historical claims to property to create a reliable, publicly accessible record. Used now to help mediate neighbour

disputes through informal justice mechanisms, this digital tool may be used as an evidentiary record in future for more formal determinations of property and political rights.

Digital technology is being used by the justice sector in Morocco to address discrete challenges. A new app is being developed to facilitate the timely payment of child and spousal support to women after the courts recognized that they were not collecting the payments owed to them. Women may be able to use the app to provide proof of economic stability when registering a small business or applying for a loan. This is part of a larger initiative to support the digital transformation of the country's justice system that includes a digital strategy and new communication technologies and tools that allow instant access to justice services.⁶

Caribbean countries are designing comprehensive electronic case management systems that integrate data collection and data sharing protocols across institutions and are building regional information technology expertise to address current backlogs and delays in criminal cases.⁷ Paper-based courts that were already experiencing delays closed during pandemic lockdowns. Police investigations that relied on witness statements rather than forensic or digital evidence collection slowed. Lawyers could not access court or office files. Legislative and infrastructure constraints precluded virtual court hearings in some countries. The delays in case processing resulted in overcrowding in prisons as people waited even longer for their trials. Having experienced the negative impact of analog systems on access to justice and operational effectiveness, those working across the justice system articulated the need for change. This transformation will facilitate ongoing and future improvement of the legal system while addressing current backlogs and delays in criminal cases.

Each of the e-justice initiatives highlighted above addresses a current development goal, prioritizes the protection of human rights, and increases the relevance and public accountability of legal services while also building future capacity for transformation.

People-centred e-justice

Building or rebuilding public trust in the administration of justice requires thinking about how people experience conflict, the consequences of legal disputes in their lives, and the outcomes that matter most to their health, safety, security and well-being.

E-justice is sometimes viewed as simply moving existing justice processes online. Instead, it can be harnessed as a transformative tool. Rather than focusing on how to modernize the tasks of judges and lawyers, it is time to ask what people expect from their justice systems. The current

Recommendations for exploiting this window of opportunity

- Organize transformation efforts around people's experience of conflicts or injustice rather than adhering to conventional categorizations of legal disputes or current jobs within the system.
- Involve judges and human rights defenders—as guardians of rights—in the design of digital solutions.
- Embrace legal processes that incorporate preventive, early resolution and informal approaches to dispute resolution, integrated through e-justice tools for consistent, seamless results.

appetite for change represents an opportunity to design digital tools to transform outdated legal processes by focusing on rights-respecting priorities that build public trust.

This is an unexpected, though welcome, moment where the glacial pace of justice system modernization is accelerating, and there is an openness to cross-institutional cooperation to prioritize development goals and human rights protections. The transformative potential of this moment will be lost if e-justice is treated as an infrastructure upgrade. Consistent, transparent justice is critical to maintaining a stable legal foundation for economic and physical well-being. Increased public expectations of fairness and enforceability of administrative and civil justice decisions requires justice systems not just to modernize but to transform themselves through the integration of people-centred digital tools.

Endnotes

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Civic Space and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Elly Page and Alexandra DeBlock¹

Around the world, Governments responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in ways that constrained civic space, exacerbating existing obstacles and creating new challenges for civil society. Adopting emergency and other exceptional legal measures, Governments granted themselves new powers and restricted civic freedoms, including the freedom of association, assembly and expression.

Many Governments prohibited public protests and demonstrations or significantly limited attendance at such gatherings. Some imposed new restrictions on speech that was critical of the State, with such limitations often framed as targeting disinformation or “fake news” about the pandemic. Some impeded the flow of information in other ways, including by criminalizing commentary from journalists, health-care workers, human rights defenders and others on the State’s pandemic response. Worldwide, Governments adopted new powers to surveil the public in the name of tracking contagion and deployed surveillance technology and systems in ways that significantly interfered with the right to privacy. Frequently, Governments designed, adopted and implemented these measures without providing opportunities for civil society consultation or participation.

While COVID-19 responses by Governments had a largely negative impact on civic space, many Governments demonstrated that it was possible to safeguard civic space while effectively countering the threats and risks surrounding the virus. The pandemic also served to reinforce the value of civil society in emergency response. Civil society played a critical role in gathering and amplifying accurate information about the spread of the virus, assessing community needs, reaching marginalized communities, and delivering essential services—even when doing so often involved the risk of contagion. The oversight role played by civil society was likewise important during the pandemic, as it worked to protect human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law against government overreach. In the subsections below, good practices are highlighted and successful approaches and initiatives adopted by both Governments and civil society to protect civic space are further explored.

Positive practices by Governments

Applying guardrails for emergency measures. According to the COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker,² 112 countries formally declared a state of emergency or other exceptional legal state that enabled the Government to restrict rights and freedoms. As required by international law and in line with good practice, some formally notified relevant treaty bodies of derogations in response to COVID-19; from January 2020 to April 2022, 24 States submitted over 110 notifications of states of emergency and related derogations.³ Some took additional steps to ensure that their emergency measures aligned with their obligations under international law by continually assessing the measures’ necessity, proportionality, legality and non-discriminatory impact. Opportunities were created for the oversight and review of emergency measures by relevant institutions, including legislatures, courts and international bodies. In Portugal, the Parliament reviewed and debated the state of emergency, extending it 15 days at a time, and eventually

allowed it to lapse. Rather than using the COVID-19 emergency to expand State power, some Governments invoked grants of emergency authority that were narrowly drafted and included an expiration date.

Enabling public participation in crisis response. Engaging the public in the design, implementation and review of crisis response measures proved critical to effectiveness in the COVID-19 context. Some States successfully integrated public participation into their COVID-19 response even as they sought to move quickly. In Kenya, the Parliament invited public submissions regarding key issues relating to the pandemic and considered this input in the drafting of a pandemic response and management bill. In Belize, civil society representatives were included in the Government's COVID-19 policymaking committee and allowed to participate in parliamentary debates over COVID-19 measures.⁴ In Guatemala, the Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance partnered with Indigenous midwives to provide accurate information to rural communities and encourage vaccination.⁵

Facilitating the flow of information. During a crisis, the free flow of information is crucial to ensure that responses are evidence-based, to facilitate public understanding of the situation and cooperation with response measures, and to hold Governments accountable for measures that may infringe rights. Rather than restricting information flows during crises, Governments should take affirmative action to support public access to information through independent media outlets and online platforms. This includes the dissemination of accurate information about the status of the crisis and the steps being taken in response. They should publicize official documents describing their responsive measures, mandate proactive disclosure of official information, provide for virtual public meetings with government representatives, and establish systems for individuals and groups to request information from public bodies. The Government of Ireland obliged officials to continue to comply with the Freedom of Information Act, publicized its National Action Plan in response to COVID-19, and created hotlines for individuals to access information. New Zealand issued guidance to agencies and the public urging greater transparency and access to official information even while the country was under a state of emergency.⁶ Governments also took steps to increase the accessibility of COVID-19-related information. Japan and Austria both published information about COVID-19 measures in multiple languages.⁷

Protecting freedom of peaceful assembly. Excessive restrictions on public assembly—for example, those characterized by the lack of an expiration date or exceptions for socially-distanced peaceful protests—cut off an important channel for public expression and participation during the pandemic. By contrast, the COVID-19 restrictions on gatherings in Denmark exempted “opinion-shaping assemblies” such as demonstrations and political meetings, though the Government encouraged participants to socially distance and follow other health guidelines.⁸

Safeguarding the right to privacy. Some Governments that introduced digital surveillance tools in an effort to curb the spread of COVID-19 took steps to ensure that the privacy rights of individuals were not infringed. A COVID-19 contact tracing app in Norway, for instance, shared individuals' movement data with authorities but anonymized it first, and users received clear information about the purpose, storage and nature of the data collected. The app was also voluntary, and users could delete it and their data at any time. Governments considering similar technology based on personal

data in response to future crises should prioritize privacy, transparency and public consultation and impose narrow limits on these initiatives.

The role of civil society

Civil society pushed back against COVID-19-inspired restrictions on civic space in a number of ways. Across the globe, civil society organizations played a critical monitoring and awareness-raising role. In Indonesia, a human rights foundation monitored the impact of emergency measures on rights and freedoms and carried out a public awareness campaign via social media.⁹ Civil society representatives formed networks and coalitions and found new strength in numbers. A human rights lawyer in Poland established a new pro bono network to defend individuals who were targeted for engaging in anti-government protests during the pandemic after dozens of protesters demonstrating in support of a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) activist were arrested for violating COVID-19 restrictions.¹⁰ In other cases, civil society leveraged direct advocacy to push back; human rights defenders in Tunisia, for example, were able to lobby the Government to remove criminal sanctions—including prison sentences of up to two years—for violations of COVID-19 movement restrictions.¹¹ A civil society coalition in Ecuador successfully pushed the Government to engage Indigenous communities in the design of their vaccination campaign.¹² Civil society organizations also used strategic lawsuits to challenge the validity of COVID-19 emergency measures that infringed rights and constrained civic space. In Israel, such organizations successfully challenged limits that a COVID-19 regulation placed on public demonstrations, including a requirement that an individual could only participate in a demonstration within 1,000 metres of his or her residence.¹³ In Brazil, after the President suspended deadlines for responses to requests for public information, the Bar Association successfully challenged the constitutionality of the measure, arguing that it violated the right to access information and restricted the constitutional rights to information, transparency and disclosure.¹⁴

Policy recommendations

Stakeholders seeking to safeguard civic space in future crises should strive to ensure adherence to the following principles:

- Emergency measures should be limited in duration and should be subject to extension only upon legislative approval.
- Restrictions on assembly and movement should include reasonable exceptions.
- Governments should disseminate accurate information about emergencies and responsive measures through a variety of accessible platforms and in multiple languages.
- Governments should publicize official documents describing their responsive measures, mandate proactive disclosure of official information, establish systems for individuals and groups to request information from public bodies, and enforce existing access to information frameworks.

- Governments using digital surveillance technology based on personal data should prioritize privacy, transparency and public consultation and the imposition of narrow limits on these programmes.
- Governments should establish procedures to review emergency measures affecting civic freedoms in consultation with civil society and to relax and remove those measures as soon as they are no longer necessary.

Endnotes

¹ Elly Page is a Senior Legal Advisor and Alexandra DeBlock is a Research Officer at the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL).

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Youth Voice and Sustainable Public Policy: Rejuvenating Urban Democracy

*James Sloam*¹

Introduction

Young people across the world have borne the brunt of successive global crises and expanding existential threats, including the 2008 financial crash and subsequent cuts in public spending, the adverse effects of climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic. In many respects, those hardest hit have been young people living in urban areas, which are home to well over half the world's population.² The huge inequalities of wealth and poverty found in cities have been exacerbated by these crises and threats,³ making progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) more problematic.

Although the immediate health threat of COVID-19 was greatest for older generations, young people were also affected by the pandemic in ways that would have both immediate and long-term repercussions. The public policy challenges surrounding young people are relatively complex and long-lasting, as strategies need to be developed to address the economic scarring, loss of education, negative effects of isolation on mental health, and other consequences of the recent health crisis.⁴ If public policy is to become more future-oriented and sustainable in the long run, it must begin to focus more clearly and intentionally on the interests and voices of younger generations. The answer lies in better and more inclusive governance.

There is a long way to go to achieve the sort of participatory governance that will generate sustainable public policy. Young people across the world were losing trust in Governments even before the onset of the pandemic⁵ as countries struggled to deliver for future generations while also meeting the needs of the ageing population and dealing with the increasing costs of health care.⁶ The decline in trust in public institutions has accelerated since 2019, and young people feel that their voices are being ignored. In 2022, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) surveyed 151 youth organizations in 71 countries and found that only 15 per cent felt that their Governments had “considered young people’s views when adopting lockdown and confinement measures”, and more than half believed young people’s views had not been incorporated into support schemes or infrastructure investment responses to the pandemic.⁷

There is mounting evidence that the voices of community residents of all ages—with their local knowledge and long-term, vested interest in improving their neighbourhoods—are essential for rebuilding after the pandemic and securing a sustainable future. Elinor Ostrom, a recipient of the Nobel Prize in Economics, contends that “there is no reason to believe that bureaucrats and politicians, no matter how well meaning, are better at solving problems than the people on the spot, who have the strongest incentive to get the solution right”.⁸ A recent OECD publication highlights the importance of “embedding the perspectives of all age groups in [post-pandemic] response and recovery measures”.⁹

How might this work in practice? Are civic authorities willing to dare more democracy—to commit to more messy participatory policymaking processes—on the pathway to sustainable

governance? How can they create inclusive structures to facilitate the participation of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds?

This contribution explores the ways in which young people can reshape public institutions and public policy as the world engages in a green and equitable COVID-19 recovery process that focuses on making cities better places to live. It examines the factors that drive youth participation in urban democracy and explores what cities across the world are doing to engage young people and the common lessons that can be drawn from these efforts.

The argument is that improving the quality of interactions between young people, local authorities and public services through the creation of civic spaces and the nurturing of local knowledge can generate more effective and sustainable public policy. The mechanisms through which this might be achieved include the setting up of civic spaces for deliberation and community research and the institutionalization of youth participation in policymaking.

Pathways to youth voice and engagement: from the ballot box to the town square to the Internet

Over several decades, younger generations have turned away from political party membership and other formal political mechanisms towards less institutionalized types of civic and political engagement that carry more meaning for their everyday lives. As voter turnout has declined in many democracies, youth activism around social movements and causes has proliferated. The pervasive use of new communication technologies and the growing prevalence of “digitally networked action [have] enabled a ‘quickening’ of youth participation” as issues that resonate with younger generations can emerge and spread with great speed.¹⁰ Two recent examples are the Global Climate Strike (#FridaysForFuture) and Black Lives Matter movements. While COVID-19 containment policies reduced the prevalence of mass demonstrations during the pandemic, they spurred an increase in online participation among young people, as evidenced by the rapid upsurge in the use of web and mobile app platforms by activist networks.¹¹

It is important to draw attention to the promise of urban democracy. Cities offer a number of favourable venues for youth participation in local democratic processes. The close proximity of residents to one another makes community-led action more practicable in urban than in rural spaces. There is also evidence showing that young people from less-well-off backgrounds—those who suffered the greatest losses from the pandemic—are as eager as young people from more prosperous backgrounds to get involved in local democracy. In the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Hansard Society’s Audit of Political Engagement found that 46 per cent of 18- to 24-year olds wanted to be more involved in decision-making in their local areas; among youth without a college degree, the proportion was 55 per cent.¹²

Young people are continually reinventing politics through youth-led civic and political activism across continents and different planes of governance, engaging in activities ranging from local urban activism to coordinated international initiatives that can inform and influence public policy.

International programmes can play a key role in supporting and promoting the adoption of good practices at the local level. One example is the Students Reinventing Cities competition launched in 2020 by the C40 global network of mayors working together to tackle the climate crisis. It asked

students to “share their vision for transforming city neighbourhoods to deliver a green and just recovery from the Covid-19 crisis” and presented the competition winners with opportunities to participate in live regeneration projects, supported by city authorities. In Bhalswa (Delhi), India, student activists successfully challenged prevailing housing and waste management practices in collaboration with the C40 and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (a C40 member). The students’ efforts resulted in the development of youth-led solutions, including a network of eight affordable housing blocks and community facilities such as clinics, shops, a childcare centre and public toilets.¹³

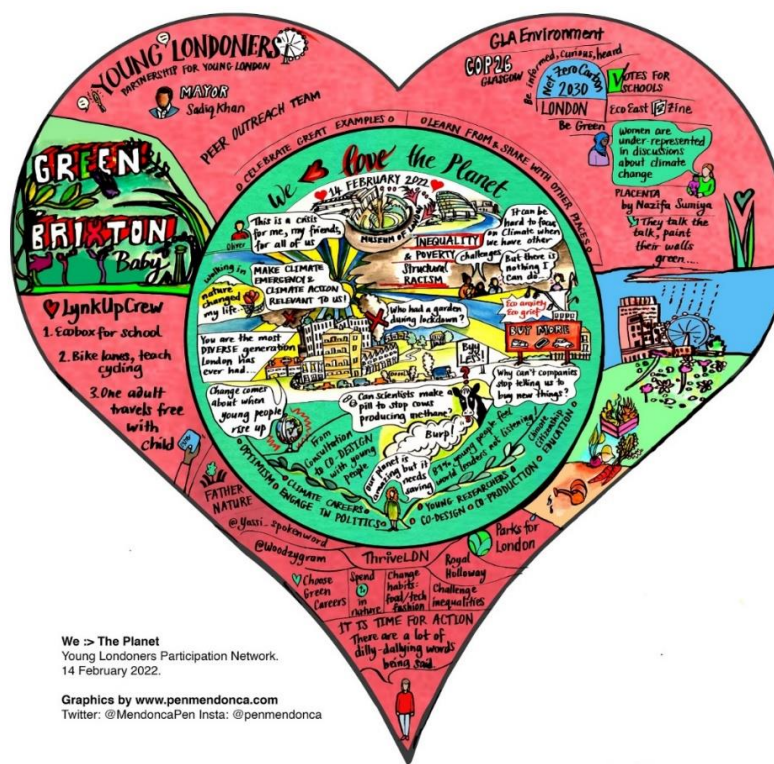
Rejuvenating urban democracy

The process of achieving effective engagement with young people is not always straightforward. Youth may be sceptical about engaging with political institutions for the reasons mentioned previously, and they may not feel equipped with the knowledge or civic skills to participate with older people who have more experience or power. Further, civic authorities and policymakers can often treat young people in a tokenistic manner, encouraging them to come along to meetings (and photo shoots) or participate in discussions without giving them any say in the design and implementation of policy.

Nevertheless, there are good examples of such obstacles being overcome, where city authorities have offered younger residents a chance to learn while becoming civically and politically active and having a say in the policymaking process.

In the United Kingdom, the Greater London Authority has taken the lead in promoting youth voice. The Mayor’s Peer Outreach Team is a group of 30 young people recruited to offer policy input and participate in outreach projects addressing issues that affect youth in the city. Among their many activities, the Team helped review applications for funding from the £45 million Young Londoners Fund and contributed (along with other youth groups in the Authority) thoughts and ideas for the city’s COVID-19 recovery plan; their input contributed directly to the content of the 2020 London Recovery plan, resulting in A New Deal for Young People that guaranteed the provision of a personal mentor and access to quality local activities for all young Londoners.¹⁴ Young Peer Outreach Workers are regularly engaged in deliberative exercises and participatory research to develop their civic skills and knowledge and to enable meaningful participation in policy discussions and activities, including several projects to map London’s Quality of Life indicators against the United Nations SDGs and explore how youth may be best served within this context; the group also investigated young people’s ideas on climate change against the backdrop of the 26th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP26).¹⁵ The graphic shown below is from the We Love the Planet event designed for and by young London residents, the environment team at the Greater London Authority, and youth activists, and organized with the present author. The Event, which took place in early 2022, was intended to provide research on young people’s understandings of climate change and the political dialogue around this issue, and to provide an opportunity to develop recommendations for the Authority.

Figure. Picture from the We Love the Planet event, Museum of London, 14 February 2022



Source: Graphic by www.penmendonca.com @MendoncaPen.

In the United States of America, Constance Flanagan and her colleagues, drawing on Ostrom's concept of the environmental commons, provide powerful evidence of the effectiveness of "community research" or "civic science" combined with access to local policymakers.¹⁶ Community research involves training citizens (including youth) to undertake research with the dual purpose of upskilling the participants and providing local authorities with informed grass-roots ideas and solutions to address key local issues. In their work with young people from lower-income areas and of predominately ethnic minority backgrounds in south-eastern Michigan, they found that the research empowered young participants to raise issues such as air pollution and the supply of clean water with civic authorities and achieve real change.

As the examples above illustrate, it is vital for civic authorities to engage with young people from poorer backgrounds and to ensure that they are not excluded from pandemic recovery plans if progress is to be made towards the Sustainable Development Goals. In all the instances above, authorities have sought to engage with local activist networks and civil society groups to provide outreach to the most disadvantaged communities. This is true for almost all successful examples of inclusive youth engagement. Recent research by the International Institute for Environment and Development has, for example, highlighted the central role civil society groups play in amplifying the voices of young people living in slum settlements in eight African cities.¹⁷ Particular mention

is made of Slum Dwellers International, which represents the interests of slum dwellers with urban authorities as well as internationally, including in forums such as COP27. During the pandemic, young people in this organization's youth affiliates documented and shared their experiences, providing a youth perspective for the development of urban recovery strategies.

Conclusion and recommendations

Young people across the world are engaged in political issues and are eager to have their voices heard. The problem is that youth activism is often disconnected from formal politics, so youth participation is less likely to have an impact and can even lead to damaging political and social conflict. This is counterproductive, given the fact that Governments may share the aims of the protestors, as in the case of climate activism. The challenge for policymakers is to harness the energy, optimism and solutions of today's youth by mainstreaming the politics of young people into formal political processes.

When young people do engage with civic authorities, there are two main barriers to effective participation. First, many politicians and officials only pay lip-service to these interactions, so many young people find the experience ineffective and unrewarding. Civic authorities need to develop training for officials for working with children and young people as partners.¹⁸ Second, young people may lack the civic skills and knowledge to overcome power imbalances in their relationships with these officials. It is a well-established fact in political science that people belonging to high socioeconomic groups have far better democratic skills than do those from low socioeconomic groups. Civic education can help close this gap.

In the case of city and other units of local government, the following three innovations are required to achieve sustained, effective engagement:

- To rebuild trust in government, youth participation must be nurtured through initiatives that provide opportunities for deliberation, civic learning and the co-design of public policy.
- Young people's voices need to be institutionalized within civic administrations and embedded into each main policy area, including through representation in policy directorates.
- If cities are to achieve progress towards the SDGs, youth participation must be inclusive of those from poorer and other disadvantaged backgrounds. This can be achieved by reaching out to relevant civil society and youth activist groups.

The pandemic has forced policymakers to reconsider how they generate sustainable public policy, and they are increasingly coming to recognize the importance of empowering young people. However, youth participation remains patchy at best. As part of his closing remarks to the eleventh annual ECOSOC Youth Forum in April 2022, Economic and Social Council President Collen Vixen Kelapile exhorted young people to take what is theirs by right: "a seat at the table when decisions are taken that would impact your own future".¹⁹ However, it is first necessary to persuade policymakers that it is in their own fundamental long-term interests to open new pathways to youth engagement in public policy if this goal is to be realized in the coming decades.

Endnotes

- ¹ James Sloam is Professor of Politics at Royal Holloway, University of London.
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Combating Misinformation as a Matter of Urgency: An African Perspective

*Naledi Mashishi*¹

Misinformation constitutes a resurgent and serious threat to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising misinformation on social media led to mistrust in health authorities, undermined public health responses to the pandemic, and resulted in individuals engaging in risky behaviours. In the broader context of sustainable development, misinformation posed a threat to the promotion of good health and well-being (SDG 3) through the spread of harmful, inaccurate health information and to the promotion of peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16) through its role in undermining trust in public institutions.

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, Nigeria became an early warning signal for the devastating impact misinformation could have on national health interventions. In 2003, political leaders of the Kaduna, Kano, and Zamfara states in northern Nigeria called for a mass boycott of the national polio immunization campaign. The leaders claimed that the vaccine was contaminated with HIV and cancer-causing agents and would make its recipients infertile as part of a Western plot to lower fertility rates in the Muslim world. The leaders also linked the vaccine campaign to the occupation of Iraq by the United States of America, claiming that the war was part of an attack by the United States against Muslims as a whole.² The false claims about the polio vaccine were linked to efforts by President Ibrahim Babangida's administration in the 1980s to slow population growth by allowing women to have no more than four children. All of this misinformation fed a powerful anti-vaccine campaign that set back the country's fight against polio, with Nigeria still battling to recover lost ground as late as 2016.

The recent pandemic brought with it large-scale misinformation campaigns similar to those seen in Nigeria. The Nigeria and COVID-19 experiences each provide clear examples of the long-term harm misinformation can cause to a country's public health and highlight the need for Governments to address this issue as a matter of urgency. However, there is a risk that overly punitive approaches to the spread of information may weaken the bonds between Governments and constituents by infringing the right to freedom of expression. How, then, do Governments strike a careful balance between facilitating the spread of accurate information and ensuring that the right to freedom of speech is protected? This contribution proposes that Governments should forgo punitive legal measures in favour of improving media literacy and access to accurate information through partnerships with local media and private organizations.

Although there is no universally accepted definition of misinformation, the term generally refers to inaccurate information. In a 2022 report, the Secretary-General of the United Nations observes that "while misinformation refers to the accidental spread of inaccurate information, disinformation is not only inaccurate, but intends to deceive and is spread in order to do serious harm".³ This distinction is important but is not particularly relevant within the present context, given the contribution's focus on the impact of (rather than the motivations behind) the

dissemination of false information, so for the sake of expediency, the term “misinformation” is used here to refer to both.

With the aid of social media platforms, the production and spread of health misinformation during the pandemic exploded into what the World Health Organization termed an infodemic—a flood of both accurate and inaccurate information whose veracity is difficult to distinguish. Research indicates that the ability of audiences to discern factual information from misinformation varies across education and age groups, with older adults being less able to recall specific details.⁴ The ability of information consumers to discern fact from fiction is particularly compromised during times of crisis, when levels of uncertainty, panic and confusion are heightened. Actors who wish to spread information take advantage of the chaotic climate to provide alternative explanations based on bad science or their own special interests. The problem is compounded when misinformation is spread over and over through sharing on social media, as research has found that audiences are more likely to believe information that has been repeated.⁵ Audiences are particularly drawn to content that is high in emotion and easy to understand.

How can Governments combat this problem? One positive trend in Africa has been the increase in the number of countries that have introduced laws or other mechanisms governing access to information. Among the 15 countries in Africa responding to a 2022 survey sent out by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization on legal protections governing access to information, 11 had access-to-information laws on the books, three had laws that were in the process of being elaborated, and nine reported having a dedicated oversight institution.⁶ Among other things, legal safeguards such as these provide media organizations with the support they need to actively combat misinformation—including health misinformation. Community radio broadcasters in Malawi hosted round-table discussions with panels of health experts in which listeners were able to call in and ask questions about COVID-19. These efforts from community broadcasters were carried out in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and other stakeholders, including Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, affirming the potential for effective cooperation and coordination between the media and governmental and non-governmental actors.⁷

The Central African Republic is another country that felt the devastating impact of misinformation prior to the COVID-19 pandemic when in 2014 the propagation of hate speech further polarized the Muslim and Christian communities and sparked a wave of attacks. The Government responded that same year, seeking to combat misinformation by re-establishing an official body called the High Council for Communication, which is mandated to develop and promote a free press and has the authority to introduce regulations to counter misinformation. The Government has also introduced initiatives to train journalists and bloggers on verifying information and identifying reliable sources.⁸ While these initiatives show promise, they have been hampered by a lack of funding and operational capacity. This highlights the need for Governments to prioritize the allocation of resources to combat misinformation.

Because misinformation is not limited to traditional media, neither should efforts to combat it. There is potential for Governments to utilize social media, which is frequently used to disseminate misinformation, as a tool to debunk and correct false information. An example of this from the non-governmental sector is the What’s Crap on WhatsApp initiative created by Africa Check and

podcast company Volume in South Africa. This is a monthly podcast that utilizes the popular messaging platform WhatsApp to fight WhatsApp misinformation. Users submit viral messages they have been sent, and fact-checkers then verify the information in the messages in the form of a short WhatsApp voice note that can be easily shared on the platform. Subscribers are also regularly sent messages with links to Africa Check reports that have verified viral posts on social media.

In terms of impact, the most important action Governments can take is ensuring immediate or early access to accurate information. Research has shown that those who are introduced to accurate information are much less likely to believe misinformation later on.⁹ Governments need to take a proactive, multimodal approach to public messaging, activating campaigns that utilize both traditional and new media to spread accurate information.

Another critical step Governments should take is to build the foundations for smart information consumption. One example of this can be found in South Africa. In 2020, the Western Cape government collaborated with Google Africa to launch an initiative that included an online safety curriculum to be taught to secondary school students across the province as well as associated training for 500 teachers.¹⁰ The curriculum covers a range of activities, including teaching students how to protect their safety online and how to identify fraudulent activities such as scams and phishing attempts. There is limited information about the implementation of the programme. However, this kind of campaign underscores the potential for curricula to include teaching students media literacy skills such as identifying misinformation and fact-checking information they find online. There is a genuine need for such programmes; research shows that over 90 per cent of schoolteachers in South Africa have reported seeing learners share misinformation online,¹¹ and nearly 40 per cent of teachers feel they lack the necessary training to teach media literacy skills.¹² The example provided here shows that public-private partnerships can provide young people with the tools they need to become more discriminating consumers of information.

The COVID-19 infodemic and previous examples of misinformation campaigns highlight the need for Governments to take misinformation seriously. During the pandemic, misinformation undermined public health interventions and sowed distrust in health authorities. It is critical that action be taken to prevent the same thing from happening in future crises. Rather than taking punitive measures, Governments can create enabling environments in which citizens are guaranteed access to information, media institutions are supported through government-media partnerships, and innovative approaches are adopted to utilize social media as a tool to spread accurate and accessible information. Governments also need to prioritize teaching media literacy skills to children and youth still in school. Partnerships with private organizations can play a vital role in providing resources and training, especially in contexts where government resources may be limited.

Endnotes

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Table 1A. Expert recommendations to strengthen Governments’ relationships with society

Area	Action points
<i>Towards a fair fiscal contract? What do the private sector and high-net-worth individuals “owe” society?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look to global initiatives that provide recommendations and guidance to tackle tax avoidance by limiting opportunities to shift profits through mismatches in international tax rules. • Provide more resources to tax administrations to achieve better tax compliance by both better and fairer enforcement and better taxpayer services. • Leveraging growing tax transparency efforts and new technologies (such as AI, machine learning and blockchain) to improve the collection, management and sharing of data and create efficiencies. However, the use of new technologies must be accompanied by a review of taxpayers’ rights in the digital age. • Increase tax certainty to encourage compliance among multinational enterprises through clearer tax laws, more efficient tax administration, robust dispute resolution settlement mechanisms, and cooperative compliance programmes. • Consider the introduction of net wealth taxes while also strengthening the effectiveness of taxation of inheritance and gifts, taxes on capital gains, and consumption taxes, particularly on luxury products and services. • Strengthen action to counter all forms of illicit financial flows.
<i>Gender equality in public administration: a new normal for Governments three years into the pandemic</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remember lessons learned prior to the pandemic and re-energize efforts to adopt and implement good practices, including in the following three areas: data and transparency, placing immediate focus on SDG indicator 16.7.1b; ensuring training and mentorship opportunities; and making use of targets and quotas. • Assess changes made during the pandemic, consolidate positive changes and intentionally integrate them into future gender equality commitments in public administration; in particular, consider the gendered implications of flexible work arrangements and sustain the attention placed on the mental well-being of public administration employees. • Take bold action to regain momentum to reach SDGs 5 and 16 by 2030. • Put gender equality at the centre of present and future recovery efforts and ensure that women are fully integrated into permanent bodies of crisis response and management across all sectors.
<i>Communication with social actors on the COVID-19 pandemic: implications for future crises</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the following factors in communication strategies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ compelling and concise messaging and the selection of appropriate channels of delivery; ○ the ability to identify and meet the needs of the audience (and to understand their limitations); ○ strategic timing; ○ constructive interplay between actors (both within and outside the public sector); ○ the level of trust in the Government; ○ the active involvement of the scientific community; ○ a culture of innovation; ○ political motivation. • Ensure consistent messaging across key public stakeholders. • Ensure the utilization of spokespersons with the requisite expertise that provide accurate information and are articulate and transparent. • Utilize a combination of traditional and modern media tools in developing and implementing risk communications strategies. • Ensure that communications preparedness starts ahead of a crisis.

Area	Action points
<i>Regulating the use of digital technology by public administration to protect and strengthen human rights</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopt a human rights-based approach as the standard for the design and use of digital technologies in accordance with the standards of international human rights bodies and instruments. • Undertake human rights impact assessments of digital-technology-related policies, acknowledging the local contexts and realities of vulnerable and marginalized groups within society. • Create robust frameworks for multi-stakeholder decision-making and oversight that support the development of innovative technological responses to future crises and the shaping of a free, open and secure digital future. • Reform policy and regulatory environments so that they are favourable to the development of complementary models for the provision of connectivity, including community networks and small and medium-sized cooperative service providers or operators. • Ensure the participation of communities in policymaking concerning access to digital technologies and digital inclusion. • Define data governance frameworks and strengthen oversight and accountability mechanisms to increase scrutiny and transparency. • Adopt comprehensive legal and regulatory frameworks that preserve privacy and regulate State-sponsored surveillance in line with the principles of necessity and proportionality. • Repeal laws that unnecessarily and disproportionately limit online freedom of expression. • Refrain from disrupting Internet access.
<i>The appetite for e-justice is a chance to advance SDGs and entrench rights protection</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organize transformation efforts around people's experience of conflicts or injustice rather than adhering to conventional categorizations of legal disputes or current jobs within the judiciary system. • Involve judges and human rights defenders—as guardians of rights—in the design of digital solutions. • Embrace legal processes that incorporate preventive, early resolution and informal approaches to dispute resolution, integrated through e-justice tools for consistent, seamless results.
<i>Civic space and the COVID-19 pandemic</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that emergency measures are limited in duration and are subject to extension only upon legislative approval. • Establish procedures to review emergency measures affecting civic freedoms in consultation with civil society, and relax and remove those measures as soon as they are no longer necessary. • Include reasonable exceptions for restrictions on assembly and movement. • Disseminate accurate information about emergencies and responsive measures through a variety of accessible platforms and in multiple languages. • Publicize official documents describing Governments' response measures, mandate proactive disclosure of official information, establish systems for individuals and groups to request information from public bodies, and enforce existing access to information frameworks. • In the use of digital surveillance technology based on personal data, prioritize privacy, transparency and public consultation and impose narrow limits on these programmes.
<i>Youth voice and sustainable public policy: rejuvenating urban democracy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid tokenistic engagement with youth, as many young people find the experience ineffective and unrewarding and are deterred from participation.

Area	Action points
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In order for cities and local governments to achieve sustained, effective youth engagement, ensure that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ youth participation is nurtured through initiatives that provide opportunities for deliberation, civic learning and the co-design of public policy; ○ young people's voices are institutionalized within civic administrations and embedded into each main policy area—for instance, through representation in policy directorates; ○ youth participation is inclusive of those from poorer and other disadvantaged backgrounds, which requires reaching out to relevant civil society and youth activist groups.
<i>Combating misinformation as a matter of urgency: an African perspective</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rather than taking punitive measures, create enabling environments in which citizens are guaranteed access to information, media institutions are supported, and proactive and innovative approaches are adopted to utilize both traditional and new media to spread accurate and accessible information. • Prioritize teaching media literacy skills to children and youth still in school. • Consider engaging in partnerships with private organizations in order to enhance the provision of relevant resources and training, especially in contexts where government resources may be limited.

Chapter 2: Identifying Policy Priorities, Building Synergies, and Addressing Trade-Offs at the 2030 Agenda Midpoint

2.1 Introduction

Since 2016, progress on the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been slow and uneven.¹ Early advancements have been undermined by the COVID-19 pandemic and its lingering effects as well as by the various crises that have occurred in recent years. Multiple waves of COVID-19, rising inflation, supply-chain disruptions, labour market challenges, political instability and policy uncertainties have tested the capacity of Governments in all countries to deliver on the SDGs.

According to the *Global Sustainable Development Report 2023*,² recent crises have seriously undermined the early gains achieved across many SDGs, with progress on a number of targets having stalled or suffered a reversal.³ Most targets—in particular those linked to SDGs 2, 11, 13 and 16—are not on track to be achieved, and progress does not seem fast enough for the few targets that are closer to being met (such as target 3.1 on reducing maternal mortality and target 8.5 on achieving full and productive employment).

These trends have affected the interdependencies between the SDGs.⁴ Many policy trade-offs related to the SDGs (for example, between knowledge-driven growth and inequality) were well-defined before the pandemic,⁵ but recent multiple crises have created new trade-offs (for instance, between limiting energy price increases and mitigating their impact by supporting lower rents)⁶ and have exacerbated existing trade-offs. Crisis conditions have also made it difficult to mobilize the resources, knowledge and institutional elements needed for the integrated implementation of the SDGs.⁷

Halfway towards 2030, transformative actions are needed to unlock progress across the SDGs. This requires prioritizing actions that are particularly synergistic and offer entry points for transformation, leveraging interlinkages, and managing trade-offs across Goals and targets. Institutional integration and policy coherence are critical for supporting these efforts and addressing the complexity and normative conflicts deriving from the interdependent nature of the SDGs.

The adoption of the SDGs has encouraged Governments to think about sustainable development in terms of systems and interconnected goals. In practice, however, this perspective has not always led to synergistic action. Integration and policy coherence continue to be challenges for public administrations.⁸ Faced with rising uncertainty, diminishing budgets, complex interrelated risks, growing public dissatisfaction and limited trust, institutions are finding it increasingly difficult to deliver on sustainable development commitments through their own activities and to ensure that policies and actions are consistent and mutually reinforcing. Governments need to lead and manage complex institutional systems that can translate more integrated and coherent policy action into long-term transformative actions to achieve the SDGs.⁹

This chapter focuses on how Governments can assess competing priorities, enhance synergies, and manage trade-offs under conditions of instability and uncertainty, diminishing effectiveness of policy and political solutions, legitimacy and accountability challenges, and multiple crises. It

argues that strengthening the implementation of the SDGs requires using and enlarging the policy space¹⁰ and the allocation of resources to policies with the greatest impact on the SDGs. Renewed efforts in enhancing integration and policy coherence are required to leverage synergies at different levels and unleash the transformations needed to achieve the SDGs.

In this chapter, various international experts reflect on the challenges of identifying and leveraging SDG interdependencies and translating relevant policies and plans into action on sustainable development, presenting concrete examples and suggesting actionable ways to address SDG integration and existing barriers to unlock SDG progress. Actionable recommendations from the experts are presented in a table at the end of the chapter.

In her contribution, Nina Weitz reflects on how SDG priority-setting and action can be better aligned with the integrated nature of the 2030 Agenda and why this is key for SDG progress. Karin Fernando and Thilini De Alwis discuss the challenges of managing competing policy priorities at the national level and highlight recent efforts to enhance synergies between equality and economic growth to improve social protection in Sri Lanka.

Franklin Carrero-Martínez, Cherry Murray, E. William Colglazier and Emi Kameyama present several case studies focusing on the intersection of nature, society, science and technology that illustrate the importance of building trust among stakeholders to enhance science-policy interfaces for SDG implementation. Catarina Tully explores recent progress in strategic foresight practice and how it can support policy coherence and integration, outlining ideas to accelerate its adoption to unlock SDG progress. Carlos Eduardo Lustosa da Costa, Isabela Maria Lisboa Blumm and Simran Dhingra examine how transnational networks and professional exchanges can contribute to SDG implementation, highlighting the importance of accessible and inclusive approaches to capacity-building and collaboration.

Rolf Alter explores the potential role of risk management in supporting integrated SDG implementation, drawing on COVID-19 experience and the evolution of SDG coordination structures. Raquel Ferreira, Aura Martínez and Juan Pablo Guerrero provide an overview and examples of budget tagging as a method to link budgets to development outcomes and identify some of the current gaps in this approach. Omar A. Guerrero and Gonzalo Castañeda discuss the lessons for SDG prioritization from quantitatively analysing the linkage between government expenditure and development outcomes from a multidimensional perspective. Finally, Ole F. Norheim underlines the importance of building legitimacy and consensus around SDG policy choices, which in turn requires open, deliberative and inclusive processes.

The next three sections of this overview frame the various contributions by reflecting on the challenges of harnessing SDG interdependencies and translating them into policy action, the contextual determinants of SDG interactions, and how science, knowledge and analytical tools can support integrated SDG implementation. The last two sections focus on strengthening systemic SDG implementation through public financial management and institutional approaches.

2.2 Harnessing SDG interdependencies and synergies halfway to 2030

COVID-19 and its aftermath, together with multiple overlapping global crises, have made accelerating progress towards the SDGs particularly challenging—but also extremely urgent. Now, more than ever, the implementation of the 2030 Agenda depends on harnessing synergies (where progress towards one goal supports progress towards another) and limiting trade-offs (where

progress towards one goal hinders progress towards another) among the various SDGs and associated targets.

To ensure progress towards realizing this interdependent set of Goals, the 2030 Agenda calls for policy coherence and integrated institutional approaches—both of which are essential for addressing the complexity and normative conflicts inherent across Goals and targets. Institutional integration involves bringing together the different dimensions of sustainable development through collaborative institutions and processes. Policy coherence refers to maintaining the consistency and alignment of policies and strategies across sectors and levels of government to ensure mutual reinforcement and avoid inefficiencies. The *World Public Sector Report 2018* addresses integration and policy coherence in some detail.¹¹

2.2.1 Understanding SDG interactions

Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, a growing number of studies have incorporated or reviewed the use of different methodologies and approaches to analyse and understand the interdependencies among the SDGs. The literature on SDG interdependencies has contributed to a more systematic mapping and understanding of the interactions at the Goal and target levels and has contributed to a better understanding of the impact of various interventions on the SDGs.

This subsection does not provide an exhaustive review of the different methodologies and approaches. Recent reviews of the literature on SDG interdependencies can be found in works put out by Cameron Allen, Graciela Metternicht and Thomas Wiedmann in 2016 and 2021,¹² by Anita Breuer, Hannah Janetschek and Daniele Malerba in 2019,¹³ by Therese Bennich, Nina Weitz and Henrik Carlsen in 2020,¹⁴ and by Lorenzo Di Lucia, Raphael Slade and Jamil Khan in 2022.¹⁵ These reviews highlight some takeaways of the studies that are relevant for the purpose of framing the contributions to this chapter and will be addressed below.

First, current methods have limitations in terms of considering the dynamic and contextual nature of SDG interdependencies, which has implications for policymaking.¹⁶ Second, while many studies have analysed SDG interactions, there has been only limited research focused on prioritizing actions.¹⁷ Third, as highlighted by Weitz in her contribution, there is a gap between the available methods and results of the analyses and decision-making. Different methods serve different purposes for policymaking, but the results of these studies are often neither actionable nor tailored to the demands of decision makers. While most countries recognize the interdependencies of the Goals and related targets, there is less evidence of how the integrated nature of the SDGs translates into specific actions.¹⁸

The table below provides an overview of methods used to analyse SDG interdependencies and how they support policymaking.

Table 2.1. Methods of analysing SDG interdependencies and how they inform policymaking

Methodology for analysing interdependencies	Support for policymaking	Sources of selected examples*
Self-assessment <i>SDG interactions characterized based on pre-existing knowledge</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scoping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SDG Impact Assessment Tool (2021)
Expert judgement <i>Systematic assessment by experts to characterize relations between SDG targets</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scoping • Prioritization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Council for Science (2017) • Le Blanc (2015) • Weitz and others (2015, 2017, 2018), with country applications, including Sweden, Colombia and Sri Lanka • Collste, Pedercini and Cornell (2017) • Van Soest and others (2019)
Literature-based analysis <i>Evidence from scientific literature used to analyse SDG interactions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scoping • Prioritization • Identification of alternatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roy and others (2021), systematic literature review on demand climate mitigation actions and SDGs • Leite de Almeida and others (2021), systematic mapping of literature to assess synergies or trade-offs in the SDG Impact Assessment Framework for Energy Projects (SDG-IAE Framework)
Statistical analysis <i>Statistical techniques used to analyse relationships between SDG targets based on historical data</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritization • Monitoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pradhan and others (2017) • Kroll, Warchold and Pradhan (2019)
System Dynamics (SD) Modelling <i>Systems thinking flow models used to simulate impacts of interventions on SDGs over time</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scoping • Prioritization • Identification and evaluation of alternatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allen and others (2020) • Simulation models such as United Nations (2017) forecasting global system dynamics over time
Coupled Component Modelling (CCM) <i>Computer-based models used to simulate the impacts of scenarios on a set of SDGs over time and under different conditions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation of alternatives • Monitoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guerrero and Castañeda (2019, 2020, 2021, 2022), Policy Priority Inference computational model with applications at national and subnational levels (examples from Mexico and Colombia) • OG-Core (2023), long-run baseline to study fiscal policy and demographic effects on economies and population and assess impacts of other policies, with application in South Africa

Sources: Author, based on Lorenzo Di Lucia, Raphael B. Slade and Jamil Khan, “Decision-making fitness of methods to understand Sustainable Development Goal interactions”, *Nature Sustainability*, vol. 5, No. 2 (February 2022), pp. 131-138; Anita Breuer, Hannah Janetschek and Daniele Malerba, “Translating Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) interdependencies into policy advice”, *Sustainability*, vol. 11, No. 7 (January 2019), 2092, available at <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11072092>; and the sources included as examples in column 3.

* Full citations for the sources listed in the third column are provided in a special reference section at the end of the chapter 2 overview.

2.2.2 *The contextual and dynamic nature of SDG interactions*

In the aftermath of the pandemic, some of the pressures surrounding the 2030 Agenda and SDG interactions have become more apparent. The COVID-19 crisis affected most SDGs, with the lockdowns, labour market shifts, institutional closures, dilution of funding, and many other factors contributing to an overall decline in SDG performance.¹⁹ Asymmetries and reversals in progress across targets are evident at the national, regional and global levels;²⁰ Guerrero and Castañeda address this issue in their contribution and previous research. The pandemic has purportedly had an adverse impact on 12 of the 17 SDGs, and there are 28 low-income countries that are unlikely to achieve Goals 1-4, 6 or 7 by 2030.²¹ The loss of momentum highlights the critical importance of enhancing integration and policy coherence to unlock progress on the SDGs.²²

SDG interdependencies are contextual and dynamic. They are sensitive to context, vary across countries, and change over time. SDG targets and the nature of their interconnections and interactions with one another are largely defined by geographical context, the availability and allocation of resources, governance approaches and priorities, and the confluence of events and circumstances at a particular juncture.²³ Over time, trade-offs can change into synergies (for example, between SDG 13 and SDGs 6, 7, 9, 11 and 16),²⁴ and new trade-offs and challenges related to specific Goals may arise during implementation. Projections indicate that certain Goals (including SDGs 1, 3, 7, 8 and 9) are likely to continue to behave quite synergistically, while trade-offs among other Goals (SDGs 11, 13, 14, 16 and 17) can be expected going forward.²⁵

Analysis of how SDG interactions may have changed due to the impact of the pandemic is limited. Some SDGs, including SDG 1, have experienced significant reversals, and this affects their synergies with other SDGs.²⁶ However, research seems to indicate that previously identified patterns of synergism among some SDGs (including Goals 1, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7) may not have changed and will continue to provide good entry points for enhancing SDG implementation in the current context.²⁷

Shifts in budget allocations and public expenditure provide an indication of how SDG priorities may have changed in recent years. Between 2019 and 2022, there were significant (and often negative) shifts in public investment in SDGs that are particularly synergistic and critical for the realization of human rights, including those relating to education and social protection.

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted significant budget revisions and additional resource mobilization, but education systems received almost no additional financial support. Education spending has lost importance in national budgets, particularly in lower-middle- and middle-income countries. In Ghana, for example, education spending was reduced by 4 per cent to 13.5 per cent of government expenditure between 2019 and 2021. Overall, the share of education spending in lower- and middle-income countries fell from 17 per cent in 2019 to 15.9 per cent in 2020, improved slightly in 2021, then fell again (below 2019 levels) in 2022; there were 14 countries that did not meet any of the international benchmarks for education spending (4-6 per cent of GDP and/or 15-20 per cent of total government expenditure).²⁸

Moreover, the share of the education sector in development aid fell from 11 per cent in 2019 to 9.7 per cent in 2020—its lowest level in five years.²⁹ This reallocation of funding may have a long-

term impact on the learning outcomes gap between lower-income and higher-income countries.³⁰ With less overall public spending and increasing fiscal pressures, the actions needed to recover learning losses might not be implemented.

Similar trends can be observed for other SDGs. Many countries increased support for health and social protection to address the emergency, but half of the world's low- and lower-middle-income countries cut health and social protection spending, leading to increased inequality.³¹ Uganda saw social protection spending decline from 8.4 per cent of total spending in 2019 to 1.2 per cent in 2021, and in Kenya, social protection funding decreased from 26.49 per cent of the total budget in 2019 to 23.05 per cent in 2022.³² There are some countries that have remained committed to improving social protection. For example, Costa Rica has maintained high levels of social spending over time, and Mongolia increased social protection spending from 21.27 to 29.24 per cent of expenditure between 2018 and 2020.³³

2.2.3 Considering SDG interactions for the prioritization of Goals and actions

The selection of policy priorities is often sidelined in discussions relating to the 2030 Agenda because of the risk of undermining the interdependent nature of the SDGs. Some countries may prioritize certain SDGs to legitimize existing policy priorities.³⁴ In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, risks to the integrity of the SDGs may have increased as countries sacrifice certain Goals and targets to achieve others. Many societies have become far more polarized in recent years, and the decision to focus (for example) solely on economic growth for pandemic recovery may lead to negative trade-offs vis-à-vis other SDGs, making it much harder to promote consistent progress on all aspects of sustainable development.³⁵ The contribution of Karin Fernando and Thilini De Alwis explores the building of synergies for economic recovery.

Prioritization is inevitable during SDG implementation, as countries have limited resources and different development needs. Moreover, prioritization recognizes the inherent political, normative and legitimacy conflicts surrounding different policy objectives and the stakeholders that pursue them³⁶ and can facilitate the identification of innovative policy mechanisms to support progress towards specific development outcomes as well as multiple synergistic Goals.³⁷

During this second half of the SDG implementation period, prioritizing certain Goals and targets can help leverage synergies and accelerate progress on the 2030 Agenda. Selecting SDG policy priorities according to each country's challenges and development needs—while simultaneously considering the integrated nature of the 2030 Agenda—can enhance the effectiveness of implementation and advance overall progress.

Various studies have suggested a range of prioritization criteria, including urgency, systemic impact, policy gaps, citizen or expert perceptions, and return on budgetary allocations.³⁸ A practical approach is to contextualize policy prioritization and resource allocation based on the trade-offs and synergies within a particular country or group of countries.³⁹ For example, lower-income countries may benefit most from addressing poverty reduction, while prioritizing integrated strategies to tackle climate change and inequality may best support progress in high-income countries.⁴⁰ This approach enables countries to identify entry points for sustainable development and evaluate how key policies and investments may help to achieve these outcomes and the broad suite of SDGs.

The identification of priority entry points in a particular national context (for example, poverty reduction and education, or decarbonization and inequality) makes it easier to address interlinkages and trade-offs in decision-making.⁴¹ In pursuing the identified priorities, Governments can focus on identifying the main synergies and trade-offs related to those priorities and determining how they can be harnessed to deliver broader outcomes while ensuring that progress in other areas is not undermined. This reduces the complexity of the SDGs and provides a simpler and more integrated framework for advancing the 2030 Agenda.

The six-entry-point framework presented in the 2019 and 2023 editions of the *Global Sustainable Development Report*⁴² could help countries identify key transformations linked to contextualized SDG prioritization. In Australia, for example, integrated modelling of these entry points and their interactions found that the opportunities created by recent crises together with available policy interventions and long-term investment in climate action could accelerate SDG progress.⁴³ Guerrero and Castañeda's contribution underscores how computational models can support such efforts, as they have expanded the capacity to inquire into the analysis of policy priorities and the impact of budget allocations.⁴⁴

The criteria, processes and tools used for national SDG prioritization and the trade-offs and synergies involved should be transparent and clearly communicated, as Weitz emphasizes. After priorities are set, it is critical to enhance institutional integration and policy coherence to support SDG implementation. This may be achieved through, for example, better coordination across sectors and levels of government and collaboration with multiple stakeholders (as reported, for example, by Argentina, Botswana, Jamaica, and the Philippines); in many countries, these and other key elements need to be strengthened to move the SDG process forward. Weitz's contribution offers specific illustrations of this.

2.2.4 Integrated SDG implementation in practice

A systemic understanding of SDG interdependencies is critical for advancing an integrated implementation of the SDGs that is sensitive to national circumstances and the need to set policy priorities.⁴⁵ However, perspectives on SDG interdependencies and policy coherence are not yet incorporated in national reports on SDG implementation.⁴⁶ In 2019 and 2020, the voluntary national reviews (VNRs) included very few references to trade-offs.⁴⁷ In 2021, only a quarter of the 41 VNRs referred to policy coherence. This could indicate a failure to recognize and address the integrated nature of the sustainable development challenges and the changes needed to realize the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda in the current context.⁴⁸

Broadly speaking, there is limited evidence on how institutional fragmentation, interdependencies and integration play out in different national contexts and across sectors and levels of government. Similarly, evidence of how a systemic understanding of the SDGs translates into actual policy actions is scarce.

A recent analysis of the impact of the SDGs (based on a meta-analysis of over 3,000 studies) has found that Governments have not made significant progress in terms of achieving policy coherence for SDG implementation.⁴⁹ Most national Governments acknowledge the trade-offs and synergies surrounding in the SDGs, but there are significant opportunities for strengthening institutional integration and policy coherence. So far, integration of the SDGs into national strategies and plans has not led to the development of cross-sectoral policies or programmes.⁵⁰ Risk management

systems exist in public administration, but they are generally not integrated into coordination structures for SDG implementation, as noted by Alter.⁵¹

It is unclear whether institutional changes have led to enhanced integration and coherence. Drawing on examples from the 2021 and 2022 VNR synthesis reports, Weitz's contribution highlights examples of how countries report on setting priorities and their efforts to improve coordination, policy coherence and integration. As noted in her contribution, independent evaluations are needed to assess whether the institutional measures adopted actually make priority-setting and implementation more systemic. As highlighted in box 4, external audits can help in this regard.

Although a higher degree of policy coherence is likely when government entities use coordination mechanisms, there are several barriers and challenges that can undermine progress in this area, including bureaucratic obstacles, limited political will, waning SDG ownership, and the prioritization of short-term agendas.⁵² The transformational impact of the 2030 Agenda depends on addressing these challenges. A systemic understanding of SDG interdependencies needs to be considered in national implementation processes to help inform priority-setting and efforts to advance policy coherence and integration. The United Nations' work on Integrated national financing frameworks (INFFs) provides practical guidance for countries to address these multifaceted challenges and enhance policy coherence in various SDG sectors.⁵³

2.3 Contextual determinants of an integrated SDG implementation

Global, regional and domestic conditions affect how and why State actors set policy priorities, whether they have the capacity to implement certain SDGs and targets, and how effectively they implement them.⁵⁴ Some of the global and local contextual factors that have gained relevance in the aftermath of COVID-19 include declining prosperity, increased poverty and inequality, security and technology threats, domestic challenges related to limited resources and fiscal space, data and capacity constraints, and the erosion of governance. These factors are intertwined, underlining the complex cross-sectoral and transnational nature of sustainable development challenges.

The effects of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine have halted global progress on poverty eradication.⁵⁵ Inflation and rising food and energy prices have contributed to worsening poverty, with 93 million people pushed into extreme poverty in 2020 and increased income poverty in all countries.⁵⁶ Asymmetries in social protection in response to the pandemic have deepened inequalities, increasing income differences across countries.⁵⁷ Structural and systemic discrimination has intensified, and there has been a global regression in women's rights.⁵⁸

The global security scenario has changed with the erosion of multilateralism, increasing strategic competition among countries (including in newer areas such as cyberspace) and escalating threats such as climate change and natural disasters, biological incidents, and misinformation.⁵⁹ Responding to these threats requires enabling and strengthening collaboration between State actors and non-State actors, including the private sector.

There have been significant digital and other technological advances over the past several years, many of them driven by the urgent need to address pandemic-related challenges.⁶⁰ These developments, while largely positive, also involve risks and may create or reinforce existing policy trade-offs (including those relating to inequalities). International cooperation and domestic policy

changes may be needed to allow Governments to fully access and leverage the potential of digital advancements.⁶¹

At the national and regional levels, resource constraints make it difficult to achieve policy coherence. Growing needs and declining resources have affected SDG financing.⁶² Pandemic-induced increases in spending and decreases in tax revenues have exacerbated the unsustainability of the fiscal path taken by many countries, contributing to growing debt and further limiting the fiscal space.⁶³ These trends are also evident at the regional level; for example, fiscal space limitations linked to large national debt burdens, low levels of economic diversification, and the lack of sustainable funding for development limit policy options for fighting inflation and undermine coherence in the Caribbean region as a whole.⁶⁴

The suspension of governance principles, declining trust in democratic institutions, political polarization, and challenges to civic space undermine the legitimacy of SDG policy choices at the national level. The number of democracies stagnated between 1980 and 2021, institutional innovation remains limited, and the number of countries moving in an authoritarian direction is more than double the number of those moving towards democracy.⁶⁵ According to the CIVICUS Monitor, only 3.1 per cent of the world lived in open civic space in 2022.⁶⁶ Positive perceptions of autocratic leadership have also increased, with 52 per cent of the respondents to the 2021 World Values Survey leaning in this direction.⁶⁷

Countries may lack the analytical capacities and tools to assess SDG interdependencies or the frameworks to prioritize SDG policy goals.⁶⁸ Policy and planning processes may be hindered by data constraints or by insufficient input from stakeholders. For example, Indonesia has faced challenges in setting a long-term vision and objectives because of the limited engagement of non-State actors.⁶⁹

Global factors, including external shocks, affect SDG policy choices at the national level. The trade-off between security and safety and personal freedoms requires regulatory responses and monitoring technologies which may not develop as quickly as technological solutions (see chapter 1).⁷⁰ Countries may need to strengthen national innovation strategies and systems and their integration into sustainable development plans.⁷¹

Governments also face difficult choices relating to monetary and social policies to control inflation, with mitigation measures often involving reduced social spending. There is an urgent need to prioritize strategies that ensure long-term fiscal sustainability, including changes to fiscal rules, tax reforms, and expenditure and revenue optimization, which may involve drastic trade-offs in terms of the activities and programmes financed. The analytical work of INFFs provides a framework to help policymakers think through these trade-offs and make informed policy choices.⁷²

There are synergistic efforts being undertaken to address inequalities and progress on SDGs, particularly in the key areas of poverty, productive employment, health and education; however, there is significant debate around these efforts in many countries. The alternatives around COVID-19 responses highlighted the tensions between health and socioeconomic rights in many countries, as illustrated in box 2.1. While at times the subject of contention, these trade-offs have also contributed to innovation, as analysed in the contribution of Fernando and De Alwis for the case of Sri Lanka.

Box 2.1. Trade-offs between health and socioeconomic rights in response to COVID-19: the case of Malawi^(a)

The COVID-19 pandemic forced Governments to make difficult choices that affected the health, wealth and freedoms of their populations.^(b) Governments had to manage difficult policy trade-offs such as health preservation versus economic stability; in many countries, policymakers imposed national lockdowns and travel restrictions to lessen the spread of the virus, resulting in severe economic downturns.^(c) Globally, more than 100 countries had instituted either a full or partial lockdown by the end of March 2020.^(d)

Responding to the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic by the World Health Organization on 11 March 2020, the then President of Malawi declared a state of national disaster in line with section 32 of the Disaster Preparedness and Relief Act on 20 March.^(e) On 1 April, the Government established the special Cabinet Committee on Coronavirus, chaired by the Minister of Health. On 13 April, when the number of COVID-19 cases had reached 16 and 2 deaths had been confirmed, the Committee announced that a 21-day lockdown would be imposed to contain the virus, in line with the COVID-19 rules established under section 31 of the Public Health Act and gazetted by the Government.^(f)

On 17 April, two individual citizens joined a human rights coalition and a religious organization to obtain an injunction and apply for a judicial review to restrain the Government from implementing the lockdown on the basis that it would severely affect citizens' socioeconomic status.^(g) Another individual filed a separate application on the same issue, but the two cases were joined.

The claimants challenged the constitutionality of the lockdown on the basis that public health rules had been issued without the parliamentary oversight required by section 58 of the national Constitution. Additionally, they claimed that the lockdown had been adopted without the declaration of a state of emergency, which would have been required as it involved a substantial derogation of fundamental rights.^(h) The claimants further argued that the lockdown would impose an economic burden on Malawians since it was not accompanied by social protection interventions to support marginalized groups.⁽ⁱ⁾

The injunction was granted pending a full hearing of all the parties involved.^(j) After the public hearing, the High Court Sitting on Constitutional Matters ruled that the lockdown was unconstitutional and limited fundamental rights, namely the right to economic activity (to work and pursue a livelihood) and the right to education. The Court stated that the rights restrictions deriving from the lockdown provisions under the COVID-19 rules exceeded the permissible constitutional limits.^(k) Following the Court's ruling, the lockdown was suspended.

This challenge to the legitimacy of the lockdown and the consequent judicial decision were exceptions in the regional context. Multiple factors influence how Governments manage policy trade-offs in times of crisis and how citizens respond to the policy choices adopted by Governments; in the case of Malawi, such factors included the strength of the rule of law, the level of civic engagement, and the role and involvement of civil society.

Sources: ^(a) Written by Jessie Kalepa, Junior Professional Officer, DPIDG, UN DESA; ^(b) Ole F. Norheim and others, "Difficult trade-offs in response to COVID-19: the case for open and inclusive decision making", *Nature Medicine*, vol. 27, No. 1 (January 2021), pp. 10-13, available at [doi: 10.1038/s41591-020-01204-6](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-020-01204-6); ^(c) Daniel Dunford and others, "Coronavirus: the world in lockdown in maps and charts", *BBC News*, 7 April 2020, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52103747>; ^(d) *ibid.*; Vibhuti Mendiratta, Olive Nsababera and Hannah Sam, "The impact of COVID-19 on household welfare in the Comoros: the experience of a small island developing State", World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 9964, available at

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/349051646942786069/pdf/The-Impact-of-Covid-19-on-Household-Welfare-in-the-Comoros-The-Experience-of-a-Small-Island-Developing-State.pdf>; ^(e) High Court of Malawi, Constitutional Reference No. 1/2020: case of Esther Cecilia Kathumba and 4 others versus the President of Malawi and 5 others, available at <https://malawilii.org/akn/mw/judgment/mwhc/2020/29/eng@2020-09-03/source>; ^(f) *ibid.*; ^(g) Zodiak Broadcasting Station in English, available at <https://www.zodiakmalawi.com/>; see also <https://pknewspapers.com/malawi/english/zodiak-broadcasting-station.html>; ^(h) High Court of Malawi, Constitutional Reference No. 1/2020 (case of Esther Kathumba and others versus the President of Malawi and others); see also Malawi's Constitution of 1994 with Amendments through 2017, available at https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Malawi_2017.pdf?lang=en; ⁽ⁱ⁾ High Court of Malawi, Constitutional Reference No. 1/2020 (case of Esther Kathumba and others versus the President of Malawi and others); ^(j) *ibid.*; ^(k) *ibid.*

2.4 The importance of science-policy interfaces in supporting integrated action on the SDGs

The COVID-19 pandemic both challenged and affirmed the importance of science-policy interfaces (SPIs).⁷³ Some scientific contributions were critical to the pandemic response and were widely accepted and integrated into national policies; however, as highlighted in Norheim's contribution, there were many cases in which the role played by the scientific community was contested and scientific advice and evidence-based policy alternatives disregarded.

Maximizing synergies and mitigating trade-offs among the SDGs requires SPI processes that enable collaboration between policymakers and the scientific community. Such collaboration should be built on productive exchanges and the co-creation of knowledge to inform SDG implementation and enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of policy decisions.⁷⁴ SPIs can contribute not only to greater policy coherence for the SDGs but also to enhanced trust in science, as noted by Carrero-Martínez and others in their contribution to this chapter. Various strategies that facilitate the exchanges between the scientific community and policymakers have been formalized in different types of SPI frameworks.⁷⁵

In this context, two relevant questions relate to what scientific methods and capacities are needed to help policymakers address SDG interdependencies and improve policy coherence and what institutional forms or models of SPIs may be particularly conducive to enhancing such capacities. Several contributions to this chapter address this question. Tully explores the use of strategic foresight to guide SDG implementation. Lustosa da Costa, Lisboa Blumm and Dhingra reflect on the benefits of networks, as one institutionalized SPI mechanism, in bridging the gap between research and decision-making and ensuring inclusive capacity-building. The importance of inclusive collaborative processes is also emphasized by Norheim and by Carrero-Martínez and others.

2.4.1 *Scientific support for SDG implementation*

The scientific community can help policymakers translate knowledge and evidence surrounding SDG interactions into more coherent and integrated policy implementation. Enabling the co-production of policy-relevant knowledge, providing institutional mechanisms through which knowledge can inform policymaking, and establishing guiding principles or policies that ensure transparency and collaboration are vital elements.⁷⁶

Science can support integrated SDG policymaking in different ways. It can provide early warning and support the identification, avoidance and control of risks.⁷⁷ Science provides analytical

methods and tools that can help Governments understand SDG interlinkages and assess trade-offs and synergies with a long-term perspective (using nexus and systems thinking, trade-off analysis, behavioural science and strategic foresight, for example).⁷⁸

Science can also be used to help synthesize evidence to enable policymakers and advocates to frame policy problems and legitimize policy priorities.⁷⁹ For example, within the realm of SDG interlinkages, there are empirical grounds for arguing that investments in the governance targets of SDG 16 can catalyse interventions to reduce poverty and inequalities, since participation and inclusion are positively correlated with poverty reduction, and higher levels of transparency and accountability help improve access to basic services and social protection targeting.⁸⁰

Some of these approaches facilitate participatory processes and the engagement of stakeholders. More inclusive knowledge generation and sharing can build the expertise needed to support informed decision-making. As an illustration, there has been an increasing focus on integrating local and Indigenous knowledge into science-policy interfaces for the SDGs (see box 2.2).⁸¹ Several examples of participatory processes are also provided in the contribution of Carrero-Martínez and others.

Box 2.2. Integrating traditional knowledge into the science-policy interface^(a)

Conservation science is often the leading voice in efforts to foster conservation, ensure the sustainable management of forests, protect biodiversity, and address climate change (SDGs 13 and 15). Conservation science supports spatial conservation through the creation of protected areas. However, this can violate the territorial and cultural rights of Indigenous Peoples as enshrined in the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Though Indigenous Peoples protect 80 per cent of the Earth's biodiversity,^(b) they have legal rights to only 18 per cent of the world's land area.^(c) Recognizing and respecting the role of Indigenous Peoples as caretakers of the land enables them to engage in the conservation and management of natural resources and eventually be compensated for the use of their traditional knowledge (for private purposes, for example).

Traditional knowledge includes the “innovations and practices of Indigenous Peoples in matters related to agriculture, environmental management, art and language”.^(d) Indigenous knowledge is necessary to identify priority areas to be protected, to ensure the preservation of Indigenous ways of life and food security, and to mitigate climate change. Welcoming the voice of traditional knowledge creates space to consider SDG trade-offs, synergies and intergenerational fairness, since Indigenous Peoples practice decision-making that prioritizes future generations.

A partnership formed between the Nature Conservancy of Canada and the Cree Nation Government exemplifies how utilizing both traditional knowledge and conservation science can inform conservation policy decisions that respect Indigenous rights. The Nature Conservancy and the Cree Nation Government worked together to identify “ecologically and culturally significant” land areas and practised consultation, flexibility and effective collaboration to refine the boundaries of protected areas in line with the global conservation commitments of Canada.^(e) This example illustrates how the inclusion of Indigenous traditional knowledge contributes to the recognition of Indigenous Peoples' rights and aids in the effort to protect biodiversity and mitigate climate change.

Sources: ^(a) Written by Kiana Schwab, an intern working with DPIDG, UN DESA; ^(b) Gleb Raygorodetsky, “Indigenous peoples defend Earth's biodiversity—but they're in danger”, *National Geographic*, 16 November 2018, available at <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/can-indigenous-land-stewardship-protect->

[biodiversity](#); ^(c) Morgan Erickson-Davis, “‘Catastrophic failure’: world’s indigenous communities lack rights to 75% of their land”, *Mongabay Environmental News*, 2 October 2015, available at <https://news.mongabay.com/2015/10/catastrophic-failure-worlds-indigenous-communities-lack-rights-to-three-quarters-of-their-land/>; ^(d) Tom Kwanya, “Indigenous knowledge and socioeconomic development: Indigenous tourism in Kenya”, in *Knowledge Management in Organizations: 10th International Conference, KMO 2015, Maribor, Slovenia, August 24-28, 2015—Proceedings*, Lecture Notes in Business Information Processing, vol. 224 (August 2015), Lorna Uden, Marjan Heričko and I-Hsien Ting, eds. (Springer), available at doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-21009-4_26; ^(e) Commission for Environmental Cooperation, “Partnerships in indigenous-led land-use planning for an environmentally and economically sustainable future”, NAPECA Project, available at <http://www.cec.org/north-american-partnership-for-environmental-community-action/napeca-grants/partnerships-in-indigenous-led-land-use-planning-for-an-environmentally-and-economically-sustainable-future/> (accessed on 8 November 2022).

2.4.2 *The use of strategic foresight and similar methodologies to support policy coherence*

There are multiple science-based methods, tools and practices that can help strengthen policy coherence and integration for the SDGs (see the table in subsection 2.1). In the context of the pandemic and the climate crisis, strategic foresight has gained increased attention as an effective framework for ascertaining and analysing the implications of external shocks and identifying longer-term policy alternatives.⁸²

As described in Tully’s contribution, strategic foresight can contribute to increased policy coherence for the SDGs in different ways and in various contexts.⁸³ It can help institutions assess and manage risks associated with different policy alternatives so that they can make informed choices or identify reinforcing synergies to achieve long-term goals.⁸⁴ It can also help bring an intergenerational lens into decision-making and engage multiple stakeholders in strategic planning, help mobilize multiple inputs, build a shared vision or common understanding of policy problems, and enhance trust among stakeholders. These elements contribute to fostering integration and institutional collaboration.

The menu of strategic foresight tools available is vast and includes intergenerational fairness assessments, participative foresight and cross-generational dialogues, and building foresight ecosystems and future generations institutions, among others.⁸⁵ Tully presents some experiences of the use of these tools to support integration and policy coherence for the SDGs.

Government and other State entities have started to institutionalize and build capacity for strategic foresight to advance sustainable development.⁸⁶ For example, the Senate of the Philippines⁸⁷ has established the Committee on Sustainable Development Goals, Innovation and Futures Thinking to incorporate strategic foresight in government actions related to sustainable development. The Committee has used futures thinking and strategic foresight to explore prospects and solutions for different sectors, including education, health, food security and infrastructure.

Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs) have also incorporated strategic foresight in their independent assessments of government policies.⁸⁸ Strategic foresight is used by the United States Government Accountability Office’s Foresight Center to analyse trends and their impact on various policy areas, including sustainable development, highlighting drivers of uncertainty and identifying possible scenarios and policy implications.⁸⁹

The examples provided affirm the value of science-based approaches, but there are still gaps in terms of how these methods perform and support countries in SDG implementation, help

policymakers understand SDG interactions, and provide the tools and evidence needed to identify, evaluate and prioritize policy alternatives.

Moreover, while strategic foresight and similar methods can be used to engage stakeholders around a common vision, non-State actors have yet to leverage these capabilities to the same extent. Some initiatives are trying to address this gap. For example, the Civil Society Foresight Observatory in the United Kingdom aims to create space for civil society organizations to take part in strategic foresight by prioritizing outcomes and anticipatory knowledge from people and communities.⁹⁰

2.4.3 SPI institutional forms and processes

Given these challenges, there is a need to identify how SPIs can better support policy coherence and integration for the SDGs and what institutional forms and processes may be most conducive to developing capacities for strengthening SDG implementation. While global SPIs offer cutting-edge knowledge and evidence on critical areas such as climate change, the multiplication of SPIs may also contribute to fragmentation and undermine integrated SDG implementation at the national level.

The urgency of undertaking transformative actions to advance the SDGs in a complex context underlines the existing challenges to a linear understanding of the relationship between science and policymaking. Government institutions need to manage available knowledge and tap into new sources of knowledge (including Indigenous Peoples, local communities, civil society and youth), but they require relevant, easy-to-use approaches and tools with actionable results to allow them to leverage this expanded body of knowledge to inform decision-making on SDG implementation.

Improving responsiveness to the needs and demands of policymakers may require a stronger focus on co-producing inclusive alternatives and facilitating capacity-building efforts. First, iterative co-development or co-production of research leads to more robust and legitimate outputs and helps bridge the gap between evidence, policymaking and practice.⁹¹ Moreover, these approaches can help improve the alignment between the views and priorities of researchers and users with regard to methods and tools.⁹² Box 2 and the contribution of Carrero-Martínez and others present examples of collaborative inclusive experiences. Second, the adoption and use among policymakers of available science-based methods and tools for SDG implementation—including systems thinking, strategic foresight, and analyses of interdependencies—can be supported through capacity-building and sharing, as highlighted by Weitz.

Identifying and mapping the SPI capacities needed to support policy coherence for the SDGs are critical, as public entities with different experiences in SDG implementation will have diverse capacity needs. Moreover, some institutional forms of SPIs such as networks and other collaborative mechanisms can provide the institutional space for enhancing the development of capacities and ensuring the adoption of inclusive approaches to capacity development, as illustrated in the contribution of Lustosa da Costa, Lisboa Blumm and Dhingra. Section 6 of this overview offers further elaboration on capacity development.

2.5 Supporting integrated SDG implementation through public financial management

Strengthening public financial management (PFM) systems and the efficiency, efficacy and equity of public expenditure are critical for enabling the coherent and synergistic implementation of the SDGs. With the fiscal space shrinking due to declining domestic revenues and growing debt burdens in many countries, Governments face harsh policy trade-offs in their efforts to boost SDG implementation. Some countries, in particular those with limited domestic resources, may deprioritize investment and public spending on the SDGs.⁹³

Resource limitations and spending inefficiencies exacerbate financing gaps and undermine progress on the SDGs. Mobilizing additional spending on specific SDGs (according to recent estimates, an extra ten percentage points of GDP would be needed for low-income countries and two percentage points for emerging market economies)⁹⁴ may be difficult given the limited fiscal space in many countries. Improving the efficiency of public spending would help strengthen progress on the SDGs while reducing the need for additional spending.⁹⁵ Policy alternatives for expanding the fiscal space—including increased revenue mobilization, narrowing the gaps between budget allocations and actual spending, improved fiscal transparency in revenue generation and budget execution, and new approaches to debt management—could be used to sustainably finance spending on synergistic SDGs.⁹⁶ For example, Barbados has laid out a plan for restructuring the country's debt, taking into consideration the risks of climate change and ensuring sustainable financing for biodiversity conservation.⁹⁷

Understanding the links between public spending and the attainment of SDGs on a cross-national basis may help identify the main drivers of inefficiencies and incentivize countries to take further action that can boost performance on SDG implementation.⁹⁸ There is also a need to understand the financing needs, flows, risks and constraints in specific national financing contexts. Research has found a non-linear relationship between public spending and SDG performance. Therefore, it is critical to identify the impact on performance of additional public spending as well as areas where additional investments may have limited impact due to structural bottlenecks that would require long-term institutional changes.⁹⁹ This can shed light on where public spending and major investments to achieve specific priorities can generate synergies or trade-offs with other SDGs and help advance the 2030 Agenda.

Computational models and scenario and pathway approaches in combination with simulation modelling are useful for supporting these efforts. However, they should be adapted to various contexts and local capacities to leverage their potential. For example, computational modelling has found that environmental issues relating to clean air could be substantially improved with additional budget resources while other issues relating to SDGs 14 and 15 would require improving the effectiveness of programmes.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, institutional levers related to SDG 16 are important for enhancing management effectiveness and have a positive impact on SDG 14 outcomes.¹⁰¹

At the country level, national modelling studies in Australia and Fiji have identified variations in SDG performance for alternative scenarios due to the differences in public and private expenditure and revenue settings. In Fiji, scaling up investment and ambition would allow the country to make 83 per cent of targeted progress on the SDGs by 2030, but the scale of investment might not be achieved without significant support. Moreover, it might be impossible to overcome persistent trade-offs such as increasing agricultural output and improving nutrition (Goals 2 and 8) versus ensuring sustainable fish stocks (Goal 14).¹⁰² In Australia, a sustainability approach based on the coherent management of economic, social and environmental trade-offs instead of an exclusive

focus on economic growth would lead to the best SDG performance, but closing the gaps to full SDG achievement might be challenging given the diminishing returns on investment, even for the top-performing SDGs.¹⁰³

Monitoring the efficiency of budget execution and whether Governments spend what they plan to spend according to the approved budget is critical for SDG performance and provides a measure of the overall credibility of government budgets. SDG 16 recognizes the importance of budget credibility through a dedicated indicator (16.6.1). The COVID-19 pandemic caused budget disruptions and impacted aggregate spending; in several regions, the average deviations between actual and planned budgets were higher during 2020 and 2021 than in previous years—an indication of changing policy priorities due to the emergency.¹⁰⁴ In Europe and Central Asia, more than half of the countries overspent by more than 15 per cent. However, most countries in other regions underspent; in Eastern Asia and Pacific, some countries underspent by more than 10 per cent, countries in Southern Asia underspent by 20-30 per cent on average, and most of the countries in Latin America and the Caribbean and in Sub-Saharan Africa also underspent to varying degrees.¹⁰⁵

These patterns have implications for SDG performance. Research in 14 countries and seven policy areas related to 10 SDGs between 2018 and 2020 shows that Governments often reduce the share of spending (relative to the aggregate budget) in the education, social protection, water, agriculture and environment sectors during budget implementation.¹⁰⁶ This affects performance not only on those SDGs but also on interrelated Goals and targets.

There are significant opportunities to improve the efficacy of public spending. The adoption of the SDGs represents one such opportunity, as it has prompted the development of financing and budgeting initiatives that may support an integrated SDG implementation. For example, the United Nations is supporting over 70 countries in the development of INFFs to mobilize financing for the SDGs and to enhance coherence across financing policies and their alignment with national priorities.¹⁰⁷ They provide a framework for developing financing strategies and related financing policies, resource mobilization efforts and governance frameworks, and allow countries to align their financing policies (from taxation to investment and development cooperation) with their sustainable development strategies and the SDGs. There is still limited evidence on how they may have affected SDG budget allocations.

The interdependent and cross-cutting nature of the SDGs and associated targets makes it difficult to track SDG spending. However, several countries (including Argentina, Colombia, Denmark, Finland, Mexico and the Philippines) have developed methodologies to link the budget to development objectives and the SDGs.¹⁰⁸ More countries (including Australia, Canada and New Zealand) are also adopting well-being budgets to support expenditure on the SDGs.¹⁰⁹ Advances such as these can help Governments identify contributions to progress on specific Goals and targets from interrelated policy areas. Some countries (such as Afghanistan and Ghana) are increasingly reporting on SDG budget execution and how it may support progress on the SDGs.¹¹⁰ In their contribution, Ferreira, Martínez and Guerrero discuss the strengths and limitations of SDG budgeting based on recent experiences.

Governments can improve policy coherence and increase accountability by linking or tagging the budget to the SDGs and to national monitoring and performance frameworks.¹¹¹ A coherent budget enhances the efficiency of public spending by addressing conflicts or overlaps between budget allocations.¹¹² One limitation is that many countries have barely started to integrate the SDGs into

their budgetary processes. Moreover, there is a lack of widely accepted general guidelines and methodologies to link public spending to progress on the SDGs, and the quality of information varies.¹¹³ Some methodologies may be better at identifying positive spending contributions than accounting for negative impacts on interrelated programmes.¹¹⁴ It should also be noted that reforms to link budget allocations with development objectives have not generally informed policymaking. For example, there is little evidence yet on how the information generated through budget markers in Colombia has informed policy dialogue between the executive and legislative branches and civil society, or how it has affected budget formulation (see box 2.3).¹¹⁵

Box 2.3. Budgeting for sustainable development: the experience of Colombia

Colombia has developed methodologies to monitor budget allocations and execution for cross-cutting sustainable development issues and the SDGs. Law 1955 of 2019, which issued the 2018-2022 National Development Plan,^(a) gave the Ministry of Finance and Public Credit and the National Planning Department the mandate to develop a methodology to track cross-cutting expenditure categories on gender, peacebuilding, and the integration of ethnic minorities, allowing the identification of objectives and indicators related to these priorities, together with the associated budget allocations and actual expenditures.

The law also establishes requirements for the submission of annual reports to Congress on the cross-cutting expenditure categories of gender and peacebuilding and the inclusion of annexes with the cross-cutting figures in the annual budget proposal submitted to Congress for legislative discussion. The annual reports are submitted when the Ministry of Finance and Public Credit submits the annual budget. The reports have informed the debates of some special legislative committees, including the Special Committee on Equity.

Drawing on this experience, the Ministry of Finance and Public Credit has worked jointly with international partners in applying an SDG budget coding and tagging methodology for the 169 SDG targets and 232 indicators.^(b) The methodology considers the interlinkages among SDG targets and identifies for each main target up to five possible complementary or associated targets. International partners have also supported the application of the Policy Priority Inference methodology^(c) to identify expected progress on the SDGs based on the current budget allocations. The results showed that 43 per cent of the indicators would be reachable by 2030, 16 per cent would require more than ten years, and 40 per cent would need more than twenty years to be achieved.

Institutional fragmentation has been a challenge in these efforts. The National Planning Department is responsible for planning, while budget legislation plus monitoring and reporting on budget execution are within the purview of the Ministry of Finance and Public Credit. Work carried out on SDG budgeting and the cross-cutting budget indicators requires ongoing coordination and joint efforts between the two entities. Horizontal coordination has also been key to gathering information on budget execution relating to cross-cutting issues from different public entities and departments. Personnel rotations have sometimes hindered these efforts. The creation of an Intersectoral Commission on Public Financial Management has helped prevent duplication and has enhanced the interoperability of data. Ongoing communication with the entities and training public officials on the cross-cutting methodology have been critical. Focal points have been designated in each entity, which has also contributed to strengthening coordination, and the annual reporting to Congress has provided the incentive for public officials to gather the required information.

The Ministry of Finance and Public Credit is working on making the data publicly available in 2023, including setting up a dashboard for data visualization. The Ministry is also working to link budget execution to advances on the SDG targets; to this end, they have conducted a pilot exercise related to climate

financing.^(d) Another way to further advance this work would be to fully incorporate the territorial dimension into the methodology, including all the public resources allocated to and disbursed at the subnational level.

Similar efforts to link budgets to development priorities have taken place at the subnational level in Colombia. For example, the Capital District of Bogotá is working on integrating cross-cutting budget lines relating to, for example, gender, youth, ethnic minorities and marginalized groups. The city government has also opened up participation spaces for the targeted groups.

Sources: Based on interviews conducted in December 2022 with representatives of the Ministry of Finance and Public Credit in Colombia, as well as the following sources: ^(a) Regional Observatory on Planning for Development, Law 1955 of 2019 of Colombia (Spanish), available at <https://observatorioplanificacion.cepal.org/en/regulatory-frameworks/law-1955-2019-colombia-spanish>; ^(b) Joint SDG Fund, INFF Colombia and United Nations Development Programme, “Alineación de presupuestos públicos y otros flujos a ODS: hacia una taxonomía ODS-- análisis para el caso colombiano” (1 July 2022), available at <https://www.undp.org/es/colombia/publications/alineacion-presupuestos-publicos-otros-flujos-ods>; Guerrero and others, “Budget trackers and fiscal transparency”; ^(c) see the contribution by Omar A. Guerrero and Gonzalo Castañeda in this chapter; ^(d) Colombia, Ministerio de Hacienda y Crédito Público, “Boletín No. 38: el país adopta Marco de Referencia para la Emisión de Bonos Verdes, Sociales y Sostenibles Soberanos de Colombia”, available at https://www.irc.gov.co/webcenter/portal/IRCEs/pages_Deuda/bonosverdessociales (accessed on 20 February 2023).

Budget information helps stakeholders advocate for and support integrated SDG implementation. Ideally, the proactive publication of thematic budgetary reports should be part of a comprehensive policy of budget transparency and participation, which would allow civil society to monitor SDG implementation, ensure that policy priorities reflect social demands, advocate for corrections, and exercise social control (see chapter 3).¹¹⁶ Budget information also enables the critical role of oversight institutions, which can hold Governments accountable for their SDG performance. For example, SDG budget tagging enables SAIs to audit the effective implementation of the budget and its contribution to progress on the SDGs.¹¹⁷

The budget is a key distributive mechanism. Governments should be encouraged to better link PFM decisions to development outcomes for different groups in society. A systematic link between PFM decisions and development outcomes would allow Governments to identify the implications of budget allocations and actual expenditures for specific groups and how trade-offs affect them. This means that potential winners and losers of policy choices could be clearly identified, including from an intergenerational perspective.¹¹⁸

Fiscal sustainability and debt management are relevant considerations from an equity and intergenerational perspective. This is exemplified in Kenya, where one of the objectives of the 2020 public debt policy was to guarantee the sustainability of public debt to prevent negative effects on future generations and ensure regional equity in the distribution of costs and benefits of projects financed with public debt.¹¹⁹ In the aftermath of COVID-19, the discussion on fiscal sustainability has to address critical trade-offs related to managing future crises while improving the quality of public services and strengthening social protection to prevent further negative impacts on inequality and social conflict.¹²⁰

Complex intersecting and intergenerational challenges such as gender equality and climate change require integrated government responses supported by responsive PFM systems.¹²¹ Countries have advanced gender- and climate-responsive budget reforms,¹²² but few have considered the interlinkages and made a climate-responsive budget also gender-responsive or vice versa.¹²³ Information disaggregated by cross-cutting priorities, with consideration given to their intersections, is essential for strengthening budget methodologies and processes in a way that can not only improve monitoring and reporting but also inform SDG implementation by leveraging synergies and enhancing coherence and coordination.

2.6 Institutional arrangements for integrated SDG implementation

Effective, responsive and accountable institutions are conducive to successful SDG implementation.¹²⁴ Human rights principles and the institutional principles of SDG 16—many of which overlap—can help Governments navigate difficult trade-offs and manage complex policy choices.¹²⁵ They can guide macroeconomic and budget decisions and inform policymaking.¹²⁶ Open, coherent, and accountable institutions help convene multiple stakeholders to facilitate the implementation of long-term strategies that promote sustainable development and overall well-being.¹²⁷ They enable Governments to promote mutually reinforcing policy actions, create synergies, and address trade-offs.

Institutional changes could be a first indication of more integrated institutional approaches and coherent policymaking. However, such changes do not always bring about the intended results.¹²⁸ Many opportunities exist to advance institutional arrangements to enhance integration and policy coherence.

The dichotomy between SDG implementation and national development processes could be narrowed. Social, economic and environmental considerations could be further mainstreamed into development strategies or plans, sectoral planning instruments, and budgets. Moreover, planning and budget processes for various global sustainability frameworks and the SDGs could be better aligned. Particular urgency should be attached to enhancing coherence between the climate framework and the 2030 Agenda, which could be achieved, for example, by aligning budget processes for the SDGs and climate action or by integrating climate commitments into relevant national SDG targets.¹²⁹

There has been a strong focus on establishing coordination mechanisms, particularly at the centre of government,¹³⁰ but there is relatively little evidence on their effects, whether they have enhanced institutional integration and SDG performance, and the nature and extent of their variation across contexts. Some argue that cross-sectoral coordination might be time-consuming or unmanageable when dealing with issues that are very complex.¹³¹ Factors that can challenge or undermine coordination include bureaucratic inertia, limited resources, unclear responsibilities, capacity constraints, and the lack of well-structured collaboration with non-State actors.¹³² There is a need to draw lessons from the results of existing experiences across different contexts to better understand how COVID-19 and multiple crises may have affected coordination arrangements and their effects on integration. In some countries, coordination mechanisms set up during the pandemic proved successful and have acquired permanent status; an example is the National Cabinet in Australia, which now serves as the primary intergovernmental decision-making forum for the country.¹³³

The lack of a long-term approach to risk management will exacerbate SDG trade-offs. Managing risks requires governance systems with adequate legal and policy frameworks, clear roles and responsibilities, leadership, sufficient resources, effective coordination, and institutionalized monitoring and accountability.¹³⁴ One area of opportunity involves the systematic integration of risk management into cross-cutting processes and institutional arrangements at the centre of government, including strategic planning and foresight, coordination structures, and monitoring and evaluation systems.¹³⁵ However, as Alter notes, persistent institutional fragmentation and the challenges surrounding the development of responses to long-term issues hinder these efforts. Investing in strengthening risk anticipation capacities and preparedness and promoting shared learning can bolster progress.¹³⁶

One way to discern the differentiated effects of specific factors on various SDGs is to use impact evaluation tools more systematically (to gauge environmental or social impact, for example). This can help identify some of the potentially discriminatory impacts of new programmes, policy tools and even technologies across different groups and sectors and can also enhance the post-intervention assessment of programme impacts. For example, the integration of evidence-based policy tools such as regulatory impact analysis into governance processes can contribute to increased coherence between increasingly complex regulatory policies.¹³⁷ A systemic approach to impact evaluation, taking into consideration the joint actions of different initiatives, can help enhance coordination across entities and with other stakeholders.¹³⁸

Progress in this area has been somewhat uneven, as there are still significant asymmetries in the adoption of regulatory impact evaluation across countries due to the absence of legal obligations, the lack of guidelines and robust methodologies, insufficient institutional support and skills, and the scarcity of reliable data and appropriate indicators, among other factors.¹³⁹ Similarly, countries have a wide range of legal requirements for environmental impact assessment, and the uptake of strategic environmental assessments has generally been slow.¹⁴⁰

External audits can also help identify systemic challenges, supporting efforts to maximize efficiency and assess the value for money of policy alternatives.¹⁴¹ Specifically, performance audits contribute to policy coherence and to the identification of constraints in policies and programmes, enhance the monitoring and performance framework, and promote transparency and accountability in the use of budget resources.¹⁴² Performance audits can assess and make recommendations to improve policy coherence (eliminating the overlap and duplication of responsibilities, for example) and to strengthen the effectiveness of institutional mechanisms such as coordination bodies, information exchange and participatory mechanisms in supporting integration (see box 2.4).¹⁴³

Box 2.4. External audits as a tool to advance the integrated implementation of SDGs

Supreme Audit Institutions contribute to strengthening the integrated implementation of the SDGs. Performance audits are a valuable tool for identifying and addressing systemic constraints that may hinder integrated policymaking and for assessing the value for money of programmes and policies for SDG implementation. External audits related to SDG implementation have focused on health (SDG 3), sustainable public procurement (SDG 12), gender (SDG 5) and the environment (SDGs 13, 14 and 15), among other areas. Some of these audits have had a significant impact in terms of strengthening SDG implementation in different countries.^(a)

In 2020, the Federal Court of Accounts of Brazil coordinated an audit on selected targets of SDGs 14 and 15 with a focus on protected areas.^(b) The audit evaluated 2,415 protected areas in 17 countries. It assessed progress towards the achievement of the SDG quantitative targets on protected areas, the performance of the protected areas policy, and the coherence among policies on protected areas, land use and tourism. The audit identified fragmentation and overlapping competencies between ministries and entities responsible for environment and tourism, with no instruments of coordination nor clear definition of how they should act individually or jointly to achieve common objectives. The audit recommended the establishment of strategic mechanisms for ecological tourism in protected areas and the integration of government agencies responsible for environment and tourism. In the area of governance, the audit prompted Governments to ensure that public participation mechanisms were active and representative and involved traditional and/or local communities, and to strengthen monitoring activities to generate information on the conservation results and to enable the timely identification of environmental vulnerabilities and biodiversity risks.

Sources: ^(a) Aránzazu Guillán Montero and David Le Blanc, “The role of external audits in enhancing transparency and accountability for the Sustainable Development Goals”, Working Paper Series, No. 157, 28 February 2019 (New York, United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019), available at <https://doi.org/10.18356/3fe94447-en>; ^(b) COMTEMA-OLACEFS, Federal Court of Accounts of Brazil, “Protected areas: coordinated audit—executive summary” (Brasilia, TCU, 2021), available at [EXECUTIVE SUMMARYtcu.gov.brhttps://portal.tcu.gov.br > file > fileDownload](https://portal.tcu.gov.br/portal.tcu.gov.br/>file>fileDownload).

In addition to adopting an appropriate mix of strategies, ensuring their coherence (the alignment of objectives), and implementation, there are certain procedural elements required to sustain integration and policy coherence. Sustainable development problems reflect value-based issues that cannot be addressed in purely objective scientific terms. First, a common policy framework or shared understanding of the problem and of the responsibilities of all involved is critical to sustaining integration and coherence, as it affects the implications and trade-offs related to various policy interventions. Norheim notes in his contribution that consensus, shared values and principles, and a common understanding of the nature of the problems are critical for identifying the relevant evidence and potential choices, facilitating collaboration, and building legitimacy around the policy solutions.

Different stakeholders can work together to foster a common understanding of problems and possible policy solutions. As indicated earlier, SPIs go beyond bringing evidence into policymaking and enable the collaborative framing and structuring of a policy problem.¹⁴⁴ Similarly, as highlighted in the contribution of Lustosa da Costa, Lisboa Blumm and Dhingra, SDG networks enable governmental and other stakeholders to frame issues for collective debate, thereby affecting decision-making and implementation and the resulting outcomes.¹⁴⁵

Two other relevant procedural elements are the authority to steer the implementation process and carry out changes and the strategic production and use of information and data on the implementation of strategies and instruments.¹⁴⁶ In Chile, legislation adopted in 2018 established the responsibilities for each ministry and level of government with regard to a comprehensive child protection system.¹⁴⁷ A coordinating body was created in the Ministry of Social Development to steer activities across three sectors (health, education and childcare) and regional and municipal authorities.¹⁴⁸ Its mandate included not only overseeing implementation, but also allocating budgets and monitoring compliance.¹⁴⁹ An information system was established to manage and

share information on the programme's beneficiaries and on the performance indicators that were used to allocate budget resources to various entities.¹⁵⁰

Other foundational elements that are important for supporting and sustaining integration and policy coherence for the SDGs are the organizational culture within public administrations and the capacity and skill sets of civil servants and other stakeholders. Institutions are made up of people who require specific skills, knowledge, and capacities to identify policy priorities, collaborate, and enhance policy coherence and integration. Training public sector and other stakeholders is key to supporting the sustained integration of systems and processes.¹⁵¹ In the Philippines, for example, the Government understood that prior to the adoption of foresight methods, it was crucial to provide the personnel of the National Economic and Development Authority with relevant training to enable them to think creatively and find new solutions to sustainable development challenges.¹⁵²

Investing in talent and capacities and co-creating capacity development and training for the public sector is critical. A 2020 review of 24 countries found that capacity-building strategies and plans for SDG implementation at the whole-of-government level were uncommon.¹⁵³ Nonetheless, national Governments have made efforts to incorporate the SDGs into capacity-building at the sectoral and thematic levels and to enhance the capacity of public officials to analyse synergies and trade-offs, conduct assessments and analysis of policy coherence, and enhance policy integration.¹⁵⁴ Guidance, toolkits, training materials and online tools have been developed to support these efforts.¹⁵⁵ However, the fragmentation of these efforts might have increased in the aftermath of COVID-19 despite the move to online activities.¹⁵⁶

The development of capacities and skills to operationalize the interdependencies of the SDGs would benefit from inclusive approaches that engage multiple stakeholders. Joint training and activities, the dissemination of common conceptual frameworks, and mutual learning can contribute to increasing the use of science-based tools, supporting collaboration around sustainable development challenges, promoting policy innovation, and enhancing trust. They can also contribute to identifying capacity gaps and needs, and to assessing capacity-building efforts and monitoring results.¹⁵⁷ Rigorous and systematic evaluation of capacity-building and other SDG implementation efforts could help strengthen strategic and sustainable approaches to transform the integrated nature of the SDGs into an institutional reality.

Endnotes

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Expert contributions to Chapter 2

Managing Policy Trade-Offs and Synergies at the National and Local Levels as the Urgency of Sustainable Development Goal Progress and Priority-Setting Rises

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This contribution focuses on managing policy trade-offs and building synergies at the national and local levels in a context of rising urgency to achieve progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Drawing on recent science and country practice, it exemplifies how priority-setting and action can be better aligned with the indivisible and integrated nature of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and why this is key for moving forward on efforts to realize the SDGs by 2030.

Introduction

The first half of the SDG implementation period is coming to an end amidst multiple crises, with insufficient progress and even backsliding on several indicators and targets.² The impacts of COVID-19, climate change and conflicts show the vulnerability and interconnectedness of progress. The additional challenges posed by crises, poor performance on many SDGs, and a limited timeframe for delivery elevate the competition between multiple policy priorities and present new trade-offs for decision makers to manage. The voluntary national reviews (VNRs) for 2022 reflected the need to reprioritize investments and showed that strategic implementation of the SDGs was becoming more difficult with a larger share of countries' gross domestic product being spent on COVID-19 response.³ It should be noted, though, that insufficient progress was being made even prior to the pandemic.

When adopted in 2015, the 2030 Agenda marked a shift in the global governance approach to development by integrating Goals and targets across social, economic and ecological dimensions of development and recognizing that they are indivisible and comprise essential parts of a whole. With this came a renewed focus on the need for policy integration and coherence, which has been a recurring challenge for public administration since long before the SDGs were in place.

The approach of the SDGs as indivisible and integrated is key to ensuring, for example, that social, economic and environmental Goals and targets are not being pursued at the expense of one another. To achieve sustainable outcomes, policy development and interventions at national and subnational levels should therefore be informed by analysis of the synergies between various development goals and how trade-offs can best be handled in specific contexts. To unlock progress across the 17 Goals and ensure that progress remains robust for the long term, countries need to manage both historically persistent and emerging interactions.

The upcoming SDG Summit, to be held in September 2023,⁴ is an important junction for SDG implementation; Member States will review progress to date and explore ways to accelerate it in the time remaining until 2030. Countries will set priorities by identifying areas in which they want

to speed up progress in the second half of the 15-year implementation period (how to do this will be a focus of the 2024 Summit of the Future).⁵ With the fast-approaching deadline, poor performance to date, and multiple competing agendas, there is a risk that countries will focus their implementation efforts on Goals and targets that are of political or economic interest or that are just more easily achieved rather than prioritizing those that can effectively drive progress towards the vision of the 2030 Agenda. Those that choose expediency over the implementation of a cohesive strategy for comprehensive sustainable development risk further abandoning the indivisibility and integration reflected in the 2030 Agenda.

Some SDGs already receive more attention than others in national implementation, with Member States understandably prioritizing and adapting the SDGs according to their specific contexts, needs, capabilities, levels of urgency and existing policy landscape. However, countries now need support—underpinned by science—in setting priorities that remain aligned with national plans but also contribute towards the overall vision and intended outcomes of the 2030 Agenda. Priority-setting should not just be about the achievement of separate Goals; it must be informed by how the Goals drive change both individually and through their interactions with one another. The nature of progress on the SDGs is predominantly synergistic;⁶ there are more synergies than trade-offs, and these dynamic relationships can be used as leverage points for countries to more effectively advance the 2030 Agenda in the second half of the implementation period. Analysis of how the Goals interact also informs priority-setting by clarifying which Goals do not benefit from progress towards other Goals and therefore stand a higher risk of not being met. Other reasons for careful analysis are to ensure that implementation strategies mitigate any unintended impacts from prioritizing certain Goals and to enhance transparency in priority-setting.

Clarifying SDG interactions and allowing information about synergies and trade-offs to guide priority-setting for the second half of the implementation period holds untapped potential for accelerating progress on the 2030 Agenda.

Approaches and tools for operationalizing indivisibility

With the 2030 Agenda, there have been signs of a growing interest among policymakers in exploring systemic approaches to governance. Recognition of the indivisible nature of the SDGs is critical to achieving the Goals, but supporting integrated policymaking in practice requires an understanding of how different approaches could be helpful and which innovative governance approaches could be used to manage synergies and trade-offs.⁷ A useful heuristic on levels of systems thinking suggests that actors move from a realization that systemic features and interactions exist (sensitivity) through systems literacy to the capability of operationalizing systems thinking in practice.⁸ A comprehensive scientific review presented in 2022 showed that the political impact of the SDGs was limited and concluded that, for the SDGs to drive change, institutional and regulatory changes would need to follow to put the powerful principle of indivisibility into practice.⁹ In this regard, the research community has progressed in support of systems literacy,¹⁰ but further support is needed to operationalize systems thinking and institutionalize systemic governance approaches.

There are several tools and approaches available that can support more systemic decision-making around the SDGs, including conceptual and quantitative systems modelling, network analysis,

participatory methods, cross-impact methods and scenario analysis. The various approaches reflected in the literature are used to respond to different policy questions. One set provides specific tools and processes to inform priority-setting, ensuring that this is guided by systems thinking. For example, frameworks are provided to guide priority-setting for all 17 SDGs and targets or specific topics, to rank synergies and trade-offs between SDGs at the global and country levels, and to inform strategy development through the study of different pathways for achieving long-term objectives and what they imply for short-term action.¹¹ These approaches are used to enhance understanding of policy interactions and can support more integrated policymaking. Other approaches are useful for assessing ex ante policy decisions and can thus support monitoring and evaluation of the SDGs and the extent to which they deliver on the principle of indivisibility.¹²

These approaches and tools must be more rapidly adopted and applied if they are to inform priority-setting and help accelerate progress on the SDGs. Uptake rates are relatively low at present, likely because there is no political and academic consensus on how the SDG interlinkages are best managed in practice,¹³ because implementation is complicated by the contextual nature of SDG synergies and trade-offs, and because the tools are not always easy to use or able to produce the actionable results decision makers demand.¹⁴ The practical value of the tools and approaches highlighted here and relevant academic and scientific knowledge relating to SDG interlinkages must be communicated to decision makers as actionable advice, and such advice must take into account the implementation capacity of different countries. As Goal interactions, conditions and solutions are likely to change over time, such advice should ideally be an integral and enduring component of policymaking cycles rather than a one-off assessment.

Managing SDG synergies and trade-offs: country practices

The VNRs and other SDG follow-up and review processes are meant to “track progress in implementing the universal Goals and targets, including the means of implementation, in all countries in a manner which respects their universal, integrated and interrelated nature and the three dimensions of sustainable development”.¹⁵ The VNR synthesis reports from 2021 and 2022 incorporate key messages and information from reporting countries on their fulfilment of the mandate to respect the indivisibility and integrated nature of the SDGs in their implementation of the Goals and targets.^{16,17} Some examples from these reports are highlighted here to show how countries set priorities and are working to strengthen coordination, policy coherence and integration. Further research and independent assessment on a case-by-case basis are needed to evaluate whether these processes and institutional measures effectively make priority-setting and implementation more systemic and enhance the capacity to manage synergies and trade-offs, whether they are helpful in identifying measures to resolve or mitigate trade-offs and leverage synergies, and the extent to which tools and approaches developed to support systems thinking in decision-making on the SDGs have been utilized.

Tools for SDG prioritization and integration. Several countries (including El Salvador, Gabon, São Tomé and Príncipe, Lesotho, Kazakhstan, Uruguay and Switzerland) report that SDGs are prioritized based on a review of the Goals and their associated targets within the national context or a mapping of SDG targets to existing national development plans and strategies. Several VNRs reflect upon the potential of maximizing benefits through interlinkages, note the benefit of

integrated policy development and implementation, or acknowledge that assessing synergies and trade-offs can facilitate the preparation of cohesive plans for accelerating the achievement of many SDGs. Some countries (such as Botswana, El Salvador and the United Arab Emirates) have developed their own tools and guidelines for SDG prioritization and integration with national strategic plans. Others (including Chad and the Dominican Republic) report using the UNDP Rapid Integrated Assessment tool,¹⁸ which supports an integrated approach and highlights the need to understand links and synergies between policy areas and the potential trade-offs surrounding policy choices and competing priorities. In its 2021 VNR, Sweden reports being guided by the decision-support tool SDG Synergies,¹⁹ developed by researchers at the Stockholm Environment Institute; this same tool is mentioned in the 2021 VNR for Colombia and has also been used by the Governments of Sri Lanka and Mongolia.

Institutionalizing coordination for SDG implementation. A number of countries report having made institutional changes to facilitate coordination and improve policy coherence; various national institutional arrangements that have evolved for this purpose are illustrated in the VNRs. Argentina, Botswana, the United Arab Emirates, El Salvador, Djibouti, Luxembourg, Equatorial Guinea, Ghana, Jamaica and the Philippines have established interministerial structures or mechanisms to mobilize the various parts of the Government around the SDGs, facilitate work across multiple policy areas, and advance whole-of-government approaches.

The local role in SDG prioritization and implementation. The VNRs reflect a growing subnational focus, as effective SDG implementation relies on the concrete application of programmes and policies at the local level. Because this is where the impacts of the synergies and trade-offs play out, the involvement of local-level authorities in setting priorities is key to establishing clear policy directions and building ownership for planning, implementation and monitoring. Generally, policy coherence is seen to be strengthened by localizing the SDGs. Actors at the subnational level play an important role as change agents, so it is essential that their involvement in priority-setting be well supported by ensuring that tools and approaches that facilitate prioritization and integration are adaptable to specific local contexts and are effectively and consistently utilized.

Budgetary linkages. Another way countries approach priority-setting is by linking their budgets and budget processes with the SDGs. Andorra, Argentina, Ethiopia, Ghana, Italy, Lesotho, Malawi, Sri Lanka and Uruguay are mapping their budgets to the SDGs and measuring their contribution to each Goal. Ethiopia, Lesotho and the Philippines incorporate the SDGs in their medium-term expenditure frameworks. Botswana, Cameroon, Grenada, Jordan, Liberia, Montenegro and Togo are implementing gender-responsive financing strategies and budgeting. Ethiopia and Sri Lanka are decentralizing budgeting to empower SDG implementation at the local level.

Support from legislative bodies. Some countries (including Botswana and Switzerland) highlight the role of parliaments or similar decision-making bodies in providing oversight, legislation, resource mobilization and support for the SDGs. Managing trade-offs is ultimately about balancing or negotiating the conflicting interests of various actors, and the pledge made in the 2030 Agenda to leave no one behind makes impacts on inequality a key consideration in this process. While policy coherence is a precondition to promoting the achievement of Goals across the 2030 Agenda, strengthened coherence does not necessarily reduce inequality. Ensuring that policies are

representative and respect the principle of leaving no one behind is essential. Legislative bodies have an important role to play in this by ensuring that outcomes and new laws are inclusive in that they represent the interests, needs and views of all segments of society, in particular marginalized groups, both within and outside national borders.

Competition, conflict and trade-offs surrounding the SDGs are not always possible to avoid, but striving for policy coherence and the effective management of trade-offs and synergies can help Governments navigate these challenges in a transparent and equitable manner, ensuring that all pillars of sustainable development are given fair consideration so that progress can be achieved towards all Goals.

Some implications for SDG implementation going forward

The VNRs exemplify how countries are seeking and activating strategies that promote respect for the integrated and indivisible nature of the SDGs; as shown above, some of the approaches taken include aligning the pursuit of SDGs with national strategies and budget processes, localizing implementation, establishing coordination mechanisms, and actively engaging parliamentary or other decision-making bodies in SDG priority-setting and implementation to improve oversight and alignment with legislation.

While efforts such as those highlighted above are noteworthy, there is little empirical evidence to suggest that impacts across all SDGs are being duly considered during the implementation process or that systemic approaches are being used to guide priority-setting up front. It is unclear whether the institutional changes reported actually help to resolve trade-offs in implementation of the SDGs. National reporting and independent evaluation can furnish the evidence needed to build a political and scientific consensus on how SDG interactions should guide priority-setting and how synergies and trade-offs can best be managed in implementation in different contexts.

Recommendations

As the SDG Summit approaches and priority-setting becomes more urgent, Member States need to be proactive in exploring and activating strategies and mechanisms that can help them optimize the management of policy trade-offs and synergies in the second half of the implementation period. The scientific community and intergovernmental organizations can provide the necessary tools, guidance and support and facilitate the sharing of best practices. Some recommendations on next steps are provided below.

Member States should adopt scientifically sound but easy-to-use decision-support tools that reflect and facilitate systems thinking to ensure full implementation of the SDGs. Developers should understand the dynamic nature of this process and be prepared to adapt their tools to diverse and changing needs; broader and faster uptake will occur with stronger alignment between the development of tools and the demands of decision makers in different contexts. The scientific community should better communicate and demonstrate the value of the tools created to address complex trade-offs and pressing challenges, ensure that tool development is focused on responding to the needs of decision makers, and work with decision makers to build capacity (including through training and knowledge exchange).

In the light of the midterm review, Member States should revisit their implementation strategies and action plans, using local knowledge and decision-support tools based on systems thinking to assess how SDG interactions are playing out within national and subnational contexts. Guided by findings indicating how action on various Goals supports or inhibits progress on other Goals, countries can then work on setting priorities that align with the vision of the 2030 Agenda. It is important that Governments be transparent about trade-offs (how prioritizing certain development objectives affects progress on other Goals or targets) and about the implications for addressing inequalities. Countries should document the process, reporting on the use of evidence and analytical tools, the choices made and their implications, and the extent to which new approaches have strengthened decision-making and implementation. Finally, countries should share knowledge and information about their processes for managing implementation synergies and trade-offs with other Member States through VNRs and other means.

The High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development can help mitigate the problem of partial implementation by encouraging Member States to share successful implementation experiences founded upon the principles of integration and indivisibility. The Forum can also facilitate the exchange of knowledge on how synergies and trade-offs can best be managed in practice.

Conclusion

The information provided here is intended to help Member States effectively manage existing and emerging synergies and trade-offs across indivisible SDGs. Examples have been provided to show how some countries are approaching this challenge today, but there is very limited empirical evidence suggesting synergies and trade-offs across all SDGs are being duly considered during the implementation process or are guiding priority-setting up front. The SDG Summit presents an opportunity for Governments to correct their course and place greater emphasis on systemic governance in the second half of the implementation period. Priority-setting and managing trade-offs and synergies to address sustainable development challenges can involve political maneuvering and cause contention, but they can also make the implementation of the SDGs impactful and transformative.

Endnotes

¹ Nina Weitz is a Research Fellow with the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI). Appreciation is extended to Henrik Carlsen, Senior Research Fellow at SEI, and Aranzazu Guillan Montero, Senior Governance and Public Administration Officer in the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, for providing commentary on an earlier version of this contribution.

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Building Synergies for Equality and Economic Recovery: Innovation in Social Protection Systems in Sri Lanka

Karin Fernando and Thilini De Alwis¹

Historically, rapid social or economic change has forced Governments and leaders to rethink development strategies. The global shock of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed flawed institutional processes and inequalities in many countries, making it clear that many of the traditional approaches to governance and development were not sustainable in the face of emergencies. The experience of Sri Lanka, presently struggling to deal with its waning economy, clearly illustrates the need for innovative and accountable reform. This contribution examines how the country's management of competing policy priorities (reducing debt, controlling foreign trade, enhancing sustainable agriculture, and safeguarding vulnerable communities) has impacted its citizens. It also highlights recent efforts by the Government and various development partners to enhance synergies between equality and economic growth and improve social protection mechanisms.

Setting the context: the current economic predicament of Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, the pandemic shock and subsequent economic crisis occurred against the backdrop of pre-existing development challenges, including slow progress in securing wider private sector participation in the economy, the lack of export orientation, and inadequate integration into the global value chain.² While Sri Lanka ranks relatively high in the Human Development Index, its score declines when adjusted for inequalities,³ clearly indicating that growth is not equitable. With the adoption of low-tax-revenue policies in 2019 and high non-discretionary expenditures, there was little room left for critical development spending, including on health, education and infrastructure.⁴ By the end of 2021, the country's difficult fiscal and debt positions could not withstand forex liquidity constraints,⁵ causing the rupee to crash and the cost of living to triple in the first half of 2022.⁶ This sets the context for the next phase of development in Sri Lanka. Overcoming these challenges will require institutional reform, accountability, and economic recovery but also ensuring the protection of vulnerable communities.

Progress towards achieving the SDGs in Sri Lanka

The already fragmented Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) process in Sri Lanka has been losing momentum since 2018 due to a constitutional crisis, major shocks such as the Easter Sunday bombings in 2019, and a lack of commitment from subsequent administrations.⁷ Furthermore, the institutional positioning of the SDG agenda has shifted from a separate ministry (in 2015) to a unit within the Ministry of Environment (since 2018), where it is a subtopic rather than a key area of focus. Progress continues to be hindered by the current economic crisis. Seven years after the launch of the SDGs, Sri Lanka has yet to fully adopt a comprehensive plan for SDG implementation. Low political will and the fragmented nature of public administration have caused policy planning processes to be carried out in silos, with little to no intended coherence or

coordination across sectors. It has also been noted that policymakers tend to downplay the negative trade-offs of their own sectors⁸ and hence do not grapple with the need for policy coherence. Furthermore, economic growth remains the key priority over social policy and environment planning,⁹ which is symptomatic of the lack of a holistic approach to policy design and implementation. Frequent policy changes undermine consistency and stability, rendering policymaking a political exercise. Balancing and indeed achieving the three domains of economic growth, social inclusion and environmental sustainability requires political commitment coupled with integrated planning and managing policy trade-offs to mitigate any unintended consequences of prioritizing one over the others.

The SDGs offer a framework for understanding the interlinkages and spillover effects of development goals. The Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) developed a methodology for identifying and selecting Goals and targets with the most synergistic effects.¹⁰ The application of the methodology in Sri Lanka was guided by an expert committee led by the Ministry of Sustainable Development, Wildlife and Regional Development. The interactions among the SDG targets were scored during a national consultation workshop in 2019 that brought together 40 experts from the Government, civil society, academia and development partners. This exercise revealed that among the prioritized targets, those that had the greatest potential to accelerate progress on other targets were strengthening policy coherence (target 17.14), reducing corruption (target 16.5), and enhancing capacity for dealing with climate change (target 13.3).¹¹

The extent to which development priorities can intersect and require integrated action on multiple fronts was recently brought to light through a policy decision to ban chemical fertilizer in Sri Lanka. In 2021, against the backdrop of the country's mounting debt crisis, a ban on chemical fertilizer was put in place with the idea that it could address multiple challenges, including saving foreign currency, reducing chemical inputs, and making farming more sustainable and food systems healthier. However, the lack of an integrated policy decision-making process¹² led to a severe loss in productivity, a reduction in farming income, and an unprecedented food security crisis.¹³ A rapid food security assessment carried out in mid-2022 indicated that families in Sri Lanka were spending an average of 82 per cent of their household budget on food.¹⁴ A World Food Programme report released in January 2023 revealed that 32 per cent of the country's residents were not able to satisfy their nutritional requirements.¹⁵ The lack of an integrated plan caused a chain of events that affected nutrition and food security as well as the stability of farming as a source of livelihood, increased poverty rates, and had an impact on the well-being of women.

Because of the financial crisis, Sri Lanka has lost significant ground on the progress made towards achieving SDG 1. The poverty rate is estimated to have doubled between 2021 and 2022, rising from 13.1 to 25.6 per cent (\$3.65 per capita, 2017 purchasing power parity).¹⁶ As the World Bank observed, "not only are more people living below the poverty line; they have also fallen further in terms of their current living standards relative to the minimum threshold represented by the poverty line. The average distance between the poor and the poverty line ... increased to 27.4 per cent of the poverty line in 2022—up from 18.9 in 2019."¹⁷ Better social safety protection mechanisms are needed to ensure that people are able to meet their basic needs and are also able to get back to productive work.

Economic recovery and social protection reforms

Application of the SEI interaction model showed how progress on social protection (target 1.3) may not be pivotal but supports targets aimed at economic development, including innovation (target 8.2), food and nutrition (targets 2.1 and 2.2), equality (targets 5.1, 10.3 and 10.4) and the environment (targets 13.2, 12.3, 14.1 and 15.1).¹⁸ Social protection has been critical for supporting or providing a cushion for households in the pandemic and post-pandemic periods,¹⁹ but there are several gaps that undermine the fair and efficient delivery of social programmes.²⁰

The approach to social protection in Sri Lanka is fragmented; many social protection schemes have been implemented, but there is no coordination among them. There are also challenges relating to the disbursement of allowances, mainly because delivery mechanisms are inefficient and beneficiary databases are not yet digitized and must be updated manually. Beneficiaries are still compelled to queue to access cash transfer schemes. The lack of good governance practices is a key reason why countries lag behind on their development targets.²¹ Reducing corruption (target 16.5) in countries such as Sri Lanka could improve access to social protection and service delivery, thereby accelerating progress on achieving substantial social protection coverage (target 1.3).²² Perceptions of bias, discrimination and political interference in programme delivery are a main source of public dissatisfaction; there have been complaints among social protection programme applicants and recipients, for example, that some beneficiaries are selected because they “know someone”.²³ Finally, the country’s lack of a reliable system for identifying those in need of social protection, the lack of preparedness to cover many new beneficiaries, and the lack of exit protocols for graduated beneficiaries could have an impact on the equitable distribution of funding.²⁴ During the pandemic, the Government’s response was limited by the lack of data on which households were most seriously affected. Assistance was being provided based on existing lists of current programme beneficiaries and waiting lists assembled between 2016 and 2019.²⁵ As a result, social assistance did not reach those who were newly poor due to the COVID-19 crisis.

With mounting economic pressures, the increase in the number of those needing assistance, and the conditionalities and austerity measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Government recently took steps to modernize the welfare benefits programme through the Welfare Benefits Board. By the end of 2022, the Board had begun working on a management system based on a single source of verified information on each citizen and household to facilitate better targeting.²⁶ Having a central registry can facilitate better recording and monitoring. While the new welfare benefits scheme has yet to be rolled out, the steps taken towards building a digitalized registry, the willingness to embrace innovation in assigning a QR code to each family, and the establishment of a decentralized system of data collection²⁷ are positive signs of a commitment to move forward. An appeal procedure has also been proposed to ensure transparency and accountability.

Another relevant addition to the process has been the identification of criteria for determining eligibility for social protection schemes,²⁸ developed for the purpose of reducing corruption and capturing multidimensional poverty. The methodology adopted to verify eligibility for social benefit payments uses six criteria relating to education levels, health conditions of family

members, economic activity, ownership of assets, housing conditions and family demographics. There are 22 specific indicators that are used to measure these criteria.

The data collection process is under way; it needed to be innovative to ensure comprehensive coverage and optimal efficiency in a narrow window of time. When the process was launched, people were required to self-register (to the extent possible) to receive a QR code; assistance was provided to those who found the digital process daunting and to ensure the widest coverage possible. By the end of the registration drive, more than 3.5 million people across the country were signed up and needed to have their information verified to receive support. As data had to be collected in a few months, it was necessary to train a large pool of data collectors to use a computer-assisted personal interview tool designed for data collection. A combination of face-to-face and video-assisted training was provided to more than 14,000 ground-level implementation officers across the country's islands. The training was carried out by State and non-State partners working collaboratively.

Lessons learned

Several lessons have been learned in this process. The implementation has involved experts from various fields and has included input from civil society. However, interactions have been inadequate due to the lack of transparency and short time frames (linked to pressures to implement and meet IMF conditions). The multidimensional approach and the indicators should have been discussed more widely. For example, it is unclear whether a rigorous pilot test of the indicators was conducted, and there are some indicators, such as the threshold value for electricity and economic assets, that are being debated only after they have been published in the official *Gazette of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka*. Once the indicators are published, the procedure for changing them is cumbersome. In addition, there are unclear methodological aspects (such as the cut-offs) that create doubt about the approach. Strengthening ownership and the inclusion of ground-level implementation officers could have resulted in better support for the proposed changes, the data collection and the consequent implementation. Protests against the penalty clauses in the data collection process have hampered the roll-out and caused delays. This situation has also led to the use of alternative modalities to complete data collection that could have compromised the rigour of the process.

There is still work to be done, and a number of challenges remain. The data collected will have to be verified. There is also a fear that funding may be insufficient, since the redesigned social protection system would likely need to cover more people and provide more substantive support.²⁹ It is unclear what the potential fallout might be if the Government is unable to meet its social protection obligations, especially if there is no alternative plan in place, and if steps are not taken to establish a proper grievance redress mechanism. It must also be noted that implementation modalities are still unknown at this stage. The lack of overall awareness of the processes among both local-level officials and the general public has hampered acceptance and implementation.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic crisis showed how critically important it is for a country such as Sri Lanka to have an effective and efficient social protection mechanism in place. The shock of the pandemic, followed by the economic crisis, has brought serious challenges that have necessitated the adoption of innovative approaches such as the use of QR codes and digitized registries, as well as the use of multidimensional poverty measures and video-based training, to revamp the social protection system. The renewed determination to overhaul social protection has been a positive step, and the process has been supported by collaboration with stakeholders whose inputs have been leveraged to address complex policy design and implementation challenges. Intentional efforts are being made to acknowledge the multidimensionality of poverty and to consider different dimensions of well-being in alignment with the SDGs. Social protection provides a cushion for achieving several of the other SDGs and related targets—highlighting the need to build on synergies and manage trade-offs. As a final caveat, it is important in development efforts such as these to ensure adequate consultation and transparency, to thoroughly test new ideas and make adjustments where necessary, to establish a realistic time frame for programme planning and execution, to ensure that all parties are on board, and to undertake an assessment of synergies and trade-offs in order to identify effective policy solutions aimed at improving the delivery of public services and building a more resilient society.

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Strengthening the Science-Policy Interface in Order to Operationalize Sustainable Development

Franklin Carrero-Martínez, Cherry Murray, E. William Colglazier and Emi Kameyama¹

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and overlapping global issues, including geopolitical conflicts, economic crises and climate change, have made the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) more challenging. Realizing the objectives set out in the SDGs will require broad engagement and commitment from Governments, the private sector, funding bodies, scientists and engineers, and civil society. In some countries, including the United States of America,² recognition of the SDGs remains low, despite the high degree of interest in the types of activities included in the SDGs.

As the midpoint of the 15-year timeline for achieving the SDGs approaches, it is becoming increasingly clear that action must be taken to strengthen the science-policy interface and create research agendas to inform the post-2030-Agenda processes. In November 2022, an expert committee of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) in the United States released a short consensus report, *Operationalizing Sustainable Development to Benefit People and the Planet*, that identifies key research priorities and possible actionable steps to operationalize sustainable development.³ The present contribution offers constructive, forward-looking assessments based on the lessons learned from some of the positive case studies in the NASEM report, focusing on the productive intersection of nature, society, science, and technology.

As the SDGs are interrelated and can often be mutually reinforcing, common priorities across the eight themes highlighted in the report include the need for multi-stakeholder, multisectoral collaboration and the importance of participatory processes in decision-making. One takeaway from the case studies presented below is that it is important to build trust among different stakeholders to enhance science-policy interfaces for an integrated implementation of the SDGs that builds on their synergies and minimizes possible negative interactions.

The scientific community can play an important role in building trust among government, industry, and local community stakeholders by listening to and acknowledging their needs and by exploring ways to make science systems more inclusive, equitable and socially relevant. The science-policy interface is strengthened by all stakeholders collectively participating in decision-making, setting priorities, and managing trade-offs, which could help strengthen public trust in science and support inclusive knowledge production and capability-building. This collective listening and decision-making process takes time and effort but is essential. Scientists working together with other stakeholders can support the adoption of evidence-based policies and actions that can bolster and even accelerate the implementation of the SDGs.

Education and capacity-building

Education is critical to achieving the SDGs, and educational institutions at all levels are powerfully positioned to stimulate the operationalization of sustainable development across society. Achievement of SDG 4 (quality education) requires making complex subjects understandable, building mindsets for long-term engagement, transforming abstract SDGs into locally relevant issues, taking actions for change, and engaging children at a young age.

One promising initiative at the K-12 level is the work of the Smithsonian Science Education Center (SSEC),⁴ which promotes active inquiry-based science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) teaching and learning; advances K-12 STEM education for sustainable development; and ensures diversity, equity, accessibility and inclusion in K-12 STEM education.⁵ In 2016, SSEC intentionally aligned its work with the SDGs, creating the Smithsonian Science for Global Goals project in collaboration with the InterAcademy Partnership, an umbrella group of more than 140 science and medicine academies, to help young people discover, understand and act. Locally relevant, locally driven but globally important experiential learning experiences combine STEM education, social and emotional learning, and civic engagement in a process similar to the multi-stakeholder process described above.

At the tertiary level, Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) serves as an example of how colleges and universities can operationalize sustainability. In 2019 CMU launched the campus-wide, multidisciplinary Sustainability Initiative, through which the first United States-based voluntary university review (VUR) was developed to assess how education, research and practice in a post-secondary educational setting align with the SDGs.⁶ CMU students have been involved in creating a voluntary local review (VLR) for the City of Pittsburgh and capstone projects to develop case studies in several cities in the United States and Canada that are tracking the impact of pandemic relief and recovery funds on issues relating to social justice needs (including SDGs 2, 3, 10 and 16). To operationalize sustainable development, universities could develop partnerships with local and national governments, business communities, and civil society organizations to develop VURs and VLRs for their local communities to evaluate needs and take actionable steps to advance progress toward the SDGs.

Localization of the SDGs

While the SDGs embrace global aspirations, they must be rooted in local buy-in and implementation. Local communities have an important role to play in achieving the SDGs; however, jurisdictional boundaries, regulatory limitations and financing considerations can create obstacles. Electoral cycles can be tricky as government champions may come and go, but embedding sustainability into government, citizens groups, and informal networks provides the longevity needed.

As an on-the-ground example of localization, Hawai'i Green Growth (HGG) uses and contributes knowledge through a number of networks that provide examples of what works and what could be approached in a better way.⁷ Launched in 2011, HGG brings together more than 150 diverse stakeholders committed to economic, social, and environmental priorities. Success rests on four key pillars: leadership commitment, public-private partnerships, measurement of progress, and concrete, on-the-ground action. The common language of the SDGs can be used to produce data

that are transparent and useful. An online open data dashboard shows citizens the progress being made and where work is falling short. Measuring what matters encourages multi-stakeholder-driven development of local metrics and indicators and an understanding of how diverse metrics are related to each other and to the SDGs. Progress towards SDG 17 (partnerships) is essential but must move at the pace of trust.⁸ People often want to take quick action, but process matters; it takes time to convene and connect diverse partners, identify shared priorities, measure what matters, and coordinate partnerships to drive action. In 2020, Hawai‘i became the first state in the United States to conduct a voluntary state review.

To localize the SDGs, there is a need to explore ways to make science systems more inclusive and equitable—to involve a wider range of voices, institutions, types of knowledge, and approaches to learning that are designed to capture local needs and thus strengthen the local science-policy interface. Local officials could use the SDG framework to align local policies and initiatives. Urban and community leaders could tap into existing knowledge networks to advance sustainability, exploring the resources and activities of entities such as C40, the Brookings Institution (SDG Leadership Cities initiative), the Global Island Partnership, UCLG Learning, Vikalp Sangam, the Global Tapestry of Alternatives, and the African Network of Cities.⁹ As more states and cities in the United States conduct VLRs, the federal Government could leverage and synthesize this knowledge and work to conduct a voluntary national review (VNR).

Urbanization

Although SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities) most directly targets urban areas, cities will not realize the goal of becoming “inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable” without progress on related SDGs. Many opportunities exist for synergies among SDGs related to urbanization. For example, restoring wetlands and urban forests can bolster food security, provide flood and drought relief, buffer urban heat island effects, and reduce air pollution, as well as providing city dwellers mental and physical relief from stress. Transitioning to low-carbon (including bike-friendly or bus-based) transport systems can not only reduce carbon emissions, but also decrease obesity levels, improve local economies, and reduce air pollution. Decreasing carbon emissions by x per cent or increasing tree cover by y per cent may be possible, but doing so without exacerbating inequity or worsening poverty and vulnerability is more challenging and difficult. To generate sustainable prosperity and improve the quality of life for urban residents, a new development paradigm is required.

An initiative being carried out in Porto Alegre, Brazil, illustrates how this synergistic approach can help engage citizens at the local level and over the long term to make sustainability fun and aspirational. Founded in 2001, Global Urban Development has been involved in a World Bank-funded strategy for the state of Rio Grande do Sul in southern Brazil. The Sustainable Innovation Zone was created within Porto Alegre, a city of 1.5 million, with the aim of making the city the most solar-powered, energy-efficient, bike-friendly, circular-economy, and digitally connected community in Latin America by 2030.¹⁰ Community members have joined together to plan and take part in activities involving community gardens, composting centres, electric car and bike sharing, solar posts and rooftops, and much more. A bottom-up approach, with neither State nor city officials in charge, involves civil society, academia, business, and government actors.

Elements for change include taking actions and producing results to show what sustainable improvements will look like, participatory inclusiveness, and independent non-partisanship to survive electoral changes in political leadership. This experience demonstrates that strategies must be participatory and co-developed at all stages, with recognition given to the importance of collaboration and knowledge-sharing in achieving sustainable urbanization. If tied too closely to the agenda of a mayor or other leader at the helm, strategies could fall apart with changes in leadership.

Science, technology and innovation for the SDGs

Science, technology and innovation (STI) are major pillars for accelerating progress towards the SDGs. STI partnerships across sectors and disciplines offer hope for resurgent multilateralism and innovative approaches to advance the SDGs.¹¹ Several challenges to applying STI have surfaced and in some cases have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical and social unrest. One such challenge is the digital divide, in which access to digital technologies is uneven and inequitable across and within countries. As the interconnected world relies more heavily on such technologies, countries and people without digital access may fall further behind.¹² Full realization of the benefits of digital technology and mitigation of its detriments require appropriate governance, infrastructure, resources, and capabilities, as well as the capacity of individuals, communities, and companies to absorb and apply them.

The United Nations Interagency Task Team on Science, Technology and Innovation for the SDGs (IATT), coordinated by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and United Nations Conference on Trade and Development,¹³ is leading the Global Pilot Programme on STI for SDGs Roadmaps, which offers a promising approach to planning for how STI can accelerate a country's efforts towards achieving the SDGs. IATT began this pilot project with Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Kenya and Serbia and continued to scale with the addition of Ukraine. The Roadmaps process involves six steps: (1) define objectives and scope; (2) assess the current situation; (3) develop a vision, goals, and targets; (4) assess alternative pathways; (5) develop a detailed STI for SDGs roadmap; and (6) execute, monitor, evaluate, and update the plan.¹⁴ Key inputs include stakeholder consultations, technical and managerial expertise, and data and the evidence base. Lessons from the Roadmaps pilot underline the importance of (a) ensuring active participation across government, scientists and engineers, industries, and non-governmental and local community stakeholder groups to develop a coherent vision, goals, and targets;¹⁵ (b) using this enhanced science-policy interface and up-to-date data and expertise to assess STI options; and (c) earmarking budgets to implement the initiative. Among the pilot countries, Ghana is committed to strengthening institutional coordination and institutionalizing mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating STI for SDG strategies,¹⁶ while Ethiopia and Ukraine are involved in conflicts that have disrupted their plans for sustainable development, illustrating that wars and local conflicts may be the greatest threat to achieving the SDGs.¹⁷ Although countries are dealing with different challenges that may affect the prioritization or implementation timeline of STI for SDG strategies, the Roadmap offers a clear pathway for moving forward when the time is right.

Conclusion

As the midpoint of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda approaches, there is an urgent need to accelerate actions for sustainable development. Accelerating progress on operationalizing sustainable development involving all levels of government and all sectors of society can be a major stepping stone towards realizing the optimistic future envisioned in the 17 SDGs. Experience has shown the folly of relying on technology-only solutions or simply copying something that has worked in one place but will generally not work in another.¹⁸ The positive case studies shared in this contribution demonstrate that it is important to build trust among different stakeholders to enhance science-policy interfaces for the integrated implementation of the SDGs. The scientific community can play an important role through actively collaborating in multi-stakeholder processes in decision-making, setting priorities, and managing trade-offs to help enhance public trust in science and support inclusive knowledge production. To operationalize sustainable development, there is a need to explore ways to make science systems more inclusive and equitable—to involve a wider range of voices, institutions, types of knowledge, and approaches to encourage learning, capacity-building, and producing knowledge that are attuned to local needs. It is essential to identify governance models and arrangements that could strengthen science-policy interfaces and accelerate local transformations for sustainable development.

Endnotes

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⁹ Information on the knowledge-sharing activities of these entities can be accessed on their respective websites: <https://www.c40.org>; <https://www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/city-playbook-for-advancing-the-sdgs>; <https://www.glispa.org>; <https://learning.uclg.org>; <https://vikalpsangam.org>; <https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org>; and <https://aston-network.org>. The Brookings Institution link provides access to its *City Playbook for Advancing the SDGs: A Collection of How-To Briefs on Advancing the Sustainable Development Goals Locally*.

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Operationalizing Strategic Foresight to Better Support Governments in Managing Sustainable Development Goal Trade-Offs and Synergies in the Post-COVID Context

Catarina Zuzarte Tully¹

*The challenges and commitments ... are interrelated and call for integrated solutions. To address them effectively, a new approach is needed.*²

As the midpoint of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda approaches, the world is changing rapidly, and resources are growing scarce. The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath have increased uncertainty and budgetary pressures. Policymakers need to make difficult trade-offs to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and navigate the technological and environmental transitions ahead. The pressure to deliver on global commitments is ever more intense, and yet global uncertainties are threatening to derail efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Building robust institutions and resilient and effective long-term policies is more important than ever. Strategic foresight can support decision makers in these areas in times of uncertainty, risk, and social and technological innovation.³ Strategic foresight contributes to effective governance for sustainable development in various ways, providing a solid framework for strengthening strategic planning, risk management, innovation, community empowerment and intergenerational equity. Thinking about the future is powerful because, when undertaken strategically, it can help inform technical decisions on policy trade-offs and—even more importantly—can contribute to building a consensus on a shared vision for the future across society.

Over the past few years, the unfolding of the pandemic, the growing urgency surrounding climate change, and the deeply transformative implications of accelerating technology development have kindled a growing interest in the adoption and operationalization of strategic foresight. Governments have stepped up efforts to build strategic foresight capabilities with the help of peer-to-peer networks and United Nations entities such as the accelerator labs and regional offices of the United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Global Pulse training programmes,⁴ and United Nations regional commissions. Strategic foresight can help Governments with the following challenges:

- Addressing the urgent need not only to identify risk, but also to institutionalize prevention and to implement contingency plans (the pandemic was an example of a known future risk, and yet countries were globally unprepared for its arrival);
- Responding to wide-scale misinformation and mistrust in scientific data and technocratic policies;

- Bringing together fragmented and siloed policymaking approaches to address the many (often multidisciplinary) aspects of human well-being, including health, education, decent jobs and housing;
- Allaying concerns about the depth of multilateral cooperation and solidarity around any burden-sharing that might lie ahead, given the largely non-collective response to pandemic recovery;
- Mitigating intergenerational tensions and balancing the needs of today's citizens with the needs of future generations.

The present contribution explores recent progress in strategic foresight practice and outlines ideas for accelerating its adoption—particularly by national Governments—to unlock SDG progress and accelerate advancement towards the 2030 Agenda.

Why strategic foresight is needed to successfully implement the 2030 Agenda

There are three imperatives for the continued adoption of strategic foresight as a pillar for effective governance:

- *Supporting trade-offs.* Managing trade-offs is not an objective scientific exercise involving top-down technocratic analysis; it is a political issue that requires principle-driven decision-making. It is critical for communities to come to a consensus on shared problems and the implications of future decisions. This can enable early action and investment in prevention. The systems-thinking logic underpinning foresight can help with the exploration of alternative scenarios and how best to use scarce resources to build resilient policies.
- *Supporting capability-building.* Governments around the world—overwhelmed by major crises and grappling with declining legitimacy and public trust—are struggling with how best to respond to the public administration challenges that lie ahead. An anticipatory policymaking approach needs to be adopted early enough, fast-tracked, and supported with adequate resources.⁵
- *Supporting the ambitious 2030 Agenda principles of interdependence, universality and leaving no one behind.* During the first half of the implementation period, policymakers have applied the SDG framework as if it is a static vision composed of 17 siloed Goals rather than the interconnected, inclusive and universal framework that it has the potential to be if seen as a dynamic and integrated solution. This has resulted in incremental rather than transformative change. The SDG midterm review can be an inflection point to commit to the widespread adoption of strategic foresight as the basis of the “new approach” called for in the 2030 Agenda and outlined in the vision of the Secretary-General of the United Nations in *Our Common Agenda*.⁶

Towards the new approach: What does good practice look like?

There are a number of recent examples of innovative country-level strategic foresight approaches being implemented at low cost and with the use of minimal resources.⁷ The adaptive nature of foresight and its ability to support emergent strategic planning is helpful for designing and implementing an effective national sustainable development plan that takes into account inherent

interdependencies. Some examples below demonstrate the diversity of application and purpose characterizing this approach.⁸

Young people from China, Japan, Mongolia and the Republic of Korea have contributed to the design and facilitation of Futuring Peace in Northeast Asia, an initiative launched by the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, using a risk-management approach to strategic foresight to find new ways to share their vision of a peaceful north-eastern Asia region. The young people have discussed future scenarios to better understand how identifying anticipated challenges and making informed decisions today can support a better future.⁹ In the strategic planning category, foresight has been used in the process of domesticating the SDGs and integrating them into national processes according to each country's context, capacities and priorities, including South-South collaboration and support. Cambodia, for example, has a long-term development plan to become a middle-income country¹⁰ and achieve net-zero emissions¹¹ by 2050, and similar approaches to foresight and planning are reflected in the Strategic Sustainable Development Plan 2022-2026 in Cabo Verde and the National Development Strategy for North Macedonia.¹² There are inspiring examples of strategic foresight being leveraged for community empowerment and Indigenous stewardship. In Aotearoa (New Zealand), Maori communities are adapting foresight approaches so that they can be embedded in *rangatahi* (youth) culture and drive *rangatahi*-led change; key aims include developing future-focused skills within communities and providing the tools for self-governance, with the ultimate vision being income, education, and employment equity by 2040.¹³ In the Manguinhos favela in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, young citizens are coming together as part of the Sementes Manguinhos Favela project to reimagine their desired community.¹⁴ In Barbados, foresight for leadership is being activated, with emerging political leaders using foresight to build consensus to address the ever-more-serious impacts of climate change.¹⁵ In South Africa, the Geekulcha platform, supported by the Government's Centre for Public Service Innovation, has recently started to use foresight to build intergenerational equity by upskilling young people to encourage a deeper understanding of the future of technology and the impact it will have on societies.¹⁶

Interestingly, there is a growing trend of building strategic foresight capability across different government departments and levels, reflecting the adoption of an ecosystemic approach. Finland and Wales are oft-cited examples, where strategic foresight culture, processes, and institutions are being adopted in a systematic way across public administrations, regional bodies and local municipalities. There are other countries where this journey has started and where capability has survived political transitions. In Colombia, for example, strategic foresight has been steadily integrated into public administration. The adoption of strategic foresight in policymaking can be seen in multiple contexts: at the city level (in the multidisciplinary growth framework for Barranquilla through 2050 and beyond, to 2100, and as a youth engagement approach to respond to the 2021 demonstrations); as part of outreach efforts by the former public prosecutor; integrated into capability-building and reforms at the National Planning Department; and as part of a national dialogue for the National Development Plan 2022-2026.¹⁷

Implications for policymakers

There are two main implications for policymakers looking to apply strategic foresight in the service of achieving sustainable development in their countries.¹⁸

The first implication is the importance of supporting the efforts of public administrations and State institutions to prepare for the future through the adoption of an integrated approach across a nation's governance ecosystem.¹⁹ Building anticipatory governance structures and processes and a network of strategic foresight champions across different institutions is critical to ensuring a lasting impact. They form an internal infrastructure for connecting signals of the future to decision-making today in a wide range of areas, including policy development, strategic planning, risk assessment, investment, innovation and recruitment. This will require new methods of data scraping, artificial-intelligence adoption signal adjustments and effective content collection, as future-facing data and information are needed to sustain policy integration and coherence over time.

A recommended first step is to establish a centre of foresight excellence at the heart of government that is charged with ensuring that foresight is connected to policy impact, which can be achieved through building a quality supply of insights, educating senior policymakers on how to use the insights, and coordinating existing capability across government.

Building a governance culture of addressing differences by using strategic foresight approaches consistently over time is ultimately what will drive deep, lasting transformation. Consistency and commitment are needed to navigate the pendulum swing where successive Governments build and then halt the integration of foresight capability.²⁰ Building collective resources and networks to circulate success stories and support movements to document and build evidence of what works is crucial. This is particularly needed in States facing serious long-term challenges or uncertainties, including those that are fragile, undergoing stabilization, or affected by climate change.²¹ This process must be seen as a marathon, not a sprint; institutional change cannot happen overnight.

While digital technologies play an important role in promoting sustainable development and are essential for institution-building to support the integration of strategic foresight, technocratic approaches by themselves are not sufficient to lead to societal transformation on the scale needed to achieve the vision of the 2030 Agenda. The second implication is that harnessing strategic foresight for societal transformation for sustainable development requires two additional components to achieve a fairer future for current and future generations—namely, citizen engagement and leadership support.

It is essential to engage citizens so that they are involved in shaping their future; participatory foresight processes—including building strategic foresight into the design of participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies—are critical. As noted previously, sustainable development trade-offs are driven more by social considerations than technocratic solutions. Foresight strategies can contribute by supporting the efforts of public administration officials to build resilient policies, assess choices, and connect to cross-society voices and innovations. However, it will be critical for communities to develop a consensus on shared problems, activate their imaginations to generate responses, and explore the implications of these decisions for the future (including actively considering the interests of future generations). Activating meaningful participation and validating lived experience and community knowledge and stewardship, including among youth and Indigenous communities, form the basis for profound change.

It is also vital to support the efforts of leaders to make intergenerationally fair decisions and to hold political leaders to account for the intergenerational impact of policies. Public administrations have often been held back from long-term policymaking by the lack of political support for addressing thorny issues beyond politicians' terms of office. The pandemic changed this political calculation; it not only intensified uncertainty about the future but also heightened awareness and political salience around intergenerational impacts. Citizens are now more interested in the distribution of the costs and benefits of measures—relating to priorities such as employment, education, housing and health—that will impact generations alive now and in the future. Some political leaders are explicitly stating they are championing intergenerational fairness and solidarity between all citizens, both present and future.²² One of the most potentially transformative developments is the focus on exploring the incentives of public administrations to support and facilitate the investigation of the long-term, integrated systemic impact of policies and investments made now.

The strategic foresight for societal transformation and effective governance triangle is illustrated in the figure below.

Figure. The transformative foresight triangle: an integrated strategic foresight approach to governance for societal transformation



Takeaways for Governments and international stakeholders

For public officials:

- Create a strategic foresight centre of excellence to spearhead a lean and outcome-focused multi-year initiative to build an effective anticipatory governance ecosystem across executive, legislative and audit institutions, government agencies, and municipal bodies.
- Integrate strategic foresight into civil service training and the education of current and next generations of public officials.

- Prioritize the principle of fairness for current and future generations across the public sector and assess policies from the standpoint of intergenerational fairness.
- Support global innovations to protect the rights of current and future generations by, for example, contributing to efforts to develop a declaration of rights of future generations, advocating for a strong multilateral policy scrutiny role for the Special Envoy for Future Generations, and committing to a national listening exercise that connects foresight-enabled intergenerational dialogues about the future to national strategic planning.²³

For multilateral organizations and donors:

- Use the United Nations summits taking place over the next few years (the SDG Summit in 2023, the Summit of the Future in 2024, and the proposed World Social Summit in 2025)²⁴ as an opportunity to commit to the rapid adoption of strategic foresight as the basis for the 2030 Agenda’s “new approach” to local, national, and multilateral public administration and anticipatory global governance fit for the twenty-first century.
- Support a high-ambition strategic foresight capability-building programme in government.
- Champion a responsible foresight agenda for societal transformation. This involves recognizing the risk of a performative adoption of strategic foresight, challenging the existing organizational culture and ways of working, and prioritizing transformational values. Specific commitments that address key priorities, such as strengthening intergenerational citizen engagement (especially from the global South) and developing accountability mechanisms to assess the intergenerational distributional impact of policy decisions, should be integrated into international standards, programme design and *Our Common Agenda* proposals.

Endnotes

¹ Catarina Tully is Founder and Managing Director of the School of International Futures.

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¹⁹ More information on the ecosystems approach to foresight can be found in the “CEPA strategy guidance note on strategic planning and foresight” (p. 13) or in the original research by the United Kingdom Government Office of Science (see Bethan Moran and Karen Folkes, “Features of effective systemic foresight in Governments around the world”, blog post, 12 May 2021, available at <https://foresightprojects.blog.gov.uk/2021/05/12/features-of-effective-systemic-foresight-in-governments-around-the-world/>).

²⁰ This can happen for a variety of reasons, including shifts between government administrations that can result in the uprooting of prior foresight endeavours; see *Avances y retrocesos de la construcción de capacidades*, a recent book by Javier Medina Vásquez, Rubén Patrouilleau and Javier Vitale highlighting this trend in Latin America, available at <https://www.scribd.com/book/621608660/Avances-y-retrocesos-de-la-construccion-de-capacidades>. As support for strategic foresight in public administration and wider decision-making becomes more mainstream, the risks will not disappear but are likely to metamorphose into two key risks that are already visible and important to address. The first risk relates to the politicization of the future, with specific concerns around the intergenerational distribution of costs and transitions being a source of energy for far-right movements. The second risk, driven by top-down pressure, is the adoption of strategic foresight as a performative rather than transformative endeavour, which does nothing for institutional change.

²¹ Examples of collective futures resources include the RBAP Horizon Scanning Initiative (<https://data.undp.org/rbaphorizonscanning/>), a horizon scanning process across 18 countries looking at risks and uncertainties, coordinated by the UNDP Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific; the foresight directory for global practitioners, commissioned by the International Development Research Centre and developed and maintained by the School of International Futures (<https://foresight.directory/>); and the United Nations Global Pulse’s Foresight for Systems Change training programme (<https://www.unglobalpulse.org/2022/09/building-actionable-knowledge-to-make-uns-vision-of-the-future-a-reality/>).

²² Announcement made by Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa at an event hosted by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation on 22 March 2022; further information is available at <https://www.fdsd.org/portugal-commits-to-intergenerational-fairness/>.

²³ For more information on a model and design produced in the United Kingdom, see School of International Futures, *A National Strategy for the Next Generations: Pilot Programme Report* (London, 2020), available at <https://soif.org.uk/leading-thinking/a-national-strategy-for-the-next-generations/>; for a summary of practical steps recommended by the United Nations, see “Our Common Agenda, Policy Brief 1: to think and act for future generations”, March 2023, p. 2, available at <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/our-common-agenda-policy-brief-future-generations-en.pdf>.

²⁴ Information on the first two events listed can be found at <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/SDGSummit2023> and [https://www.un.org/en/common-agenda/summit-of-the-future#:~:text=Having%20welcomed%20the%20submission%20of,will%20take%20place%20this%20year](https://www.un.org/en/common-agenda/summit-of-the-future#:~:text=Having%20welcomed%20the%20submission%20of,will%20take%20place%20this%20year;); information on the proposed World Social Summit can be found at https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf, pp. 29-30.

The Role of Transnational Networks and Professional Exchanges in Supporting an Integrated Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals

Carlos Eduardo Lustosa da Costa, Isabela Maria Lisboa Blumm and Simran Dhingra¹

Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer an ambitious and integrated strategy for emerging and developed countries to address familiar yet complex sustainable development challenges. The interconnected nature of the SDGs requires a comprehensive and holistic approach which depends on, among other factors, the participation and collaboration of different stakeholders to enhance institutional integration and policy coherence in their implementation.

Transnational networks and professional exchanges, involving practitioners, civil servants, and representatives from academia, civil society, the private sector, and non-governmental organizations, are an important resource to support an integrated implementation of the SDGs. Networks facilitate the development of mutual and collaborative responses, as members are encouraged to identify and characterize common challenges, to find solutions, and to discuss policy alternatives to address global issues. These forums represent a fruitful locus to advance technical discussions, support the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and good practices, and promote innovation in SDG implementation.

This contribution examines how transnational networks and international professional exchanges can help foster sustainable development. It builds on the example of a network for sustainable development that brings together young professionals from different countries. This case highlights the importance of supporting accessible and inclusive approaches to capacity-building and collaboration, especially at the crucial midpoint of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, where insufficient progress and a complex context call for strengthening the integrated implementation of the SDGs.

Networks as catalysts for change

With the increasing complexity of society's challenges—including the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and migration—networks are becoming more important. Global and complex issues demand collaborative solutions as they cannot be tackled by one nation or independent actors. Communities and societies need to cooperate to collectively define problems and agree on possible solutions; broad collaboration allows a variety of perspectives to be shared and considered and increases the legitimacy and local suitability of policy alternatives.

The Oxford Handbook of Public Policy defines policy networks as “sets of formal institutional and informal linkages between governmental and other actors structured around shared if endlessly negotiated beliefs and interests in public policy making and implementation. These actors are interdependent, and policy emerges from the interactions between them.”²

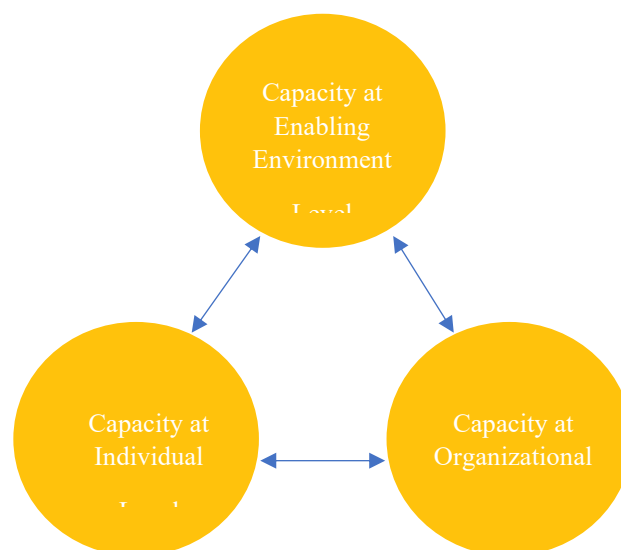
Networks facilitate cooperation, enable collaboration and create space for mutual dialogue.³ They have the potential to work as connectors between researchers and policymakers.⁴ This is extremely relevant to the development of evidence-based policies, especially in times where social phenomena such as “fake news” and misinformation may impact policy processes and undermine their legitimacy. Networks not only connect actors and knowledge but can also support the legitimization of governmental policies and programmes.

Furthermore, with the ultimate objective of advancing international cooperation on sustainable development and supporting the implementation of the SDGs, particularly in the present context of high uncertainty, it is imperative to ascertain the channels through which those networks may influence the design and implementation of policies to advance the SDGs, as well as any evidence of their benefits and results.

Networks can contribute to the building and sharing of capabilities at three interconnected levels:⁵

- *Individual*: improving individual skills, knowledge and performance through training, experiences, motivation and incentives;
- *Organizational*: improving organizational performance by optimizing and leveraging strategies, plans, rules and regulations, partnerships, leadership, and organizational politics and power structures, and by strengthening organizational systems, processes, roles and responsibilities;
- *Environmental*: creating an enabling environment for improving the policy framework to address economic, political, environmental and social factors, including economic growth, financing, labour markets, the political context, the policy and legislative environment, class structures, and cultural dynamics, in a coherent and mutually reinforcing fashion.

Figure 1: Three interconnected levels of capacity



By convening multiple stakeholders, networks enable capacity-building and sharing, the dissemination of knowledge, and collaboration. Some key elements through which transnational networks and their activities can support multi-stakeholder collaboration for an integrated implementation of the SDGs include continuous communication, mutually reinforcing activities, shared purposes, and a common agenda. Furthermore, transnational networks contribute to the identification of similar problems, shared understandings and aspirations, and the identification of blind spots among the broad spectrum of stakeholders, including scholars or institutions that are working on similar topics or dealing with similar issues.

Networks can facilitate growth and development at different levels (including the individual, organizational and environmental levels) over time. The impact of networks is typically linked to the progress made towards their stated objectives, which vary across networks. For example, a network that aims mainly to facilitate information exchange may not be expected to generate collective action but can nonetheless have a demonstrable impact on policy outcomes downstream.⁶

Ultimately, the effectiveness of policy networks for sustainable development would depend on whether Governments changed policies or policymaking in response to the networks' efforts. For example, countries would act differently on the implementation of a health policy depending on whether they were or were not signatories to a certain international treaty.⁷ For the SDGs, an effective network could contribute to more integrated, coherent and inclusive implementation because of the effects of the network on its members' capacities, skills and practices (including collaboration).

Given the challenge of measuring the impact of networks, less demanding forms of monitoring and evaluation could consider intermediate indicators and focus on the deliverables or outputs expected depending on different networks' goals and evaluation criteria as well as the competency effects on their members. Some of the indicators that could be used would entail curating or implementing joint projects, the adoption of new or improved practices, and more inclusive representation and participation in decision-making processes.⁸ These indicators could be intertwined with different levels of capacities and competencies.

Moving from theory to practice

The effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda requires a rich ecosystem that involves multiple stakeholders. While there are several examples⁹ of global networks for sustainable development, this section highlights the experience of the Managing Global Governance (MGG) Academy and how it contributes to SDG implementation by mobilizing, connecting, and enhancing global expertise and promoting practical solutions for sustainable development.

The MGG Academy is a training programme that has been organized annually by the German Institute of Development and Sustainability since 2007. It brings together young professionals with diverse backgrounds from Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, South Africa, and the European Union to collectively address global challenges. Currently, the MGG network includes more than 100 institutions and approximately 380 alumni that interact through an online platform, national meetings, and global conferences.

The main objective of the MGG Academy is to foster “an innovative platform for multi-stakeholder collaboration” on global sustainable development. The programme was built with insights from behavioural sciences, investing in the idea of building transnational cooperation for primarily relational rather than transactional or instrumental purposes.¹⁰

The MGG Academy also aims to prepare future change-makers for a professional and personal life dedicated to sustainable development. Participants take part in a four-month training programme that combines a broad range of working methods, including practical experience and participatory approaches, training, lectures, discussions with experts, study trips, and peer coaching through academic and leadership modules and a change-maker project.

For the change-maker projects (CMPs), the participants have to develop a prototype incorporating a practical solution to a real-world challenge. The CMP process essentially involves deep navigation through the challenge or problem, assessment of its causes and effects, consideration of alternative perspectives, and the development of possible solutions. It encourages participants to use holistic approaches and apply analytical tools, including systems-thinking methodology, to tackle complex sustainable development challenges in innovative ways.

The challenges considered for the CMPs are very diverse and relate to different SDGs. Past projects have focused on, for example, the use of green and sustainable packaging (SDG 12); expanding branchless banking to improve the digital and financial inclusion of low-income populations, especially women (SDGs 1, 2 and 5, among others); and leveraging the voices of small civil society organizations (CSOs) to promote more efficient cooperation with local governments around the 2030 Agenda (SDGs 11 and 16).

The development of such prototypes contributes to enhancing different types of competencies and capacities at the individual, organizational and environmental levels. For instance, the project aimed at leveraging the voices of small CSOs introduced an initiative called “BW4SD” (Be Wise for Sustainable Development) to empower a network of CSOs while opening avenues for potential collaboration with other stakeholders. It envisioned the organization of a change-maker fair to provide a space for CSOs to draw attention to their projects’ unique value and share objectives and results. Additionally, it aimed to leverage partnerships on common agendas with other stakeholders. Such an initiative could provide opportunities for CSOs to address common challenges and conduct new research and case studies to open doors for new partnerships.

In the process of developing these projects, the participants apply and strengthen different competencies for innovation, transformation and cooperation.¹¹ The groups are composed of young professionals of different nationalities who have to reflect on their own values, communicate their ideas and motivate others, manage conflicts, practise their ability to strategically design interventions for change, apply design thinking to explore the problems in a holistic way, focus on the common good, and apply their knowledge of the SDGs to come up with practical and feasible solutions with the potential to positively impact society.

This experience demonstrates that networks, as a nexus of capacity-building and exchange, can help strengthen soft and hard skills, particularly among young people, to promote positive change in addressing sustainable development challenges. Networks contribute to creating and sustaining

more inclusive approaches to knowledge generation and capacity-building for the SDGs by bringing together people with different professional backgrounds from the global South and North and by encouraging genuine collaboration. The MGG network can not only impact individuals' careers and competencies but can also influence institutional capacity-building, as illustrated in the box below.

Box. Anecdotal evidence of institutional capacity-building by Managing Global Governance partners

The Managing Global Governance (MGG) programme has supported the formation of multi-stakeholder voluntary sustainability standards (VSS) platforms in Brazil and China. Standards bodies and ministries in Indonesia, Mexico and South Africa are engaged in setting up similar institutions. MGG think tanks have expanded their expertise and provide advice to national VSS platforms and standards bodies in Brazil, India, Indonesia and South Africa. MGG has also facilitated the interaction of national platforms and other actors with the United Nations system.

MGG was instrumental in bringing Southern think tanks into the “Think 20” (T20) process during the 2017 German Group of 20 (G20) presidency. MGG partners assumed roles as co-chairs in five out of ten T20 task forces. This led to the founding of the T20 Africa Standing Group, with the participation of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, which serves as a platform for knowledge institutions from G20 countries and Africa.

The Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS) in India used the MGG Programme to acquire expertise on the development cooperation modalities and experiences of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries. This benefited the institution's analytical and advisory work on South-South and triangular cooperation. In hosting international forums on this topic, RIS draws widely from partners in the MGG network.

Source: Thomas Fues, *Investing in the Behavioural Dimensions of Transnational Cooperation: A Personal Assessment of the Managing Global Governance (MGG) Programme*, Discussion Paper 12/2018 (Bonn, Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik, 2018), available at https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/DP_12.2018.pdf.

By creating a space for reflection and innovation, networks enable members to identify and frame policy problems, develop common understandings, and comprehend the causes and consequences of present challenges. Networks help disseminate concepts and analytical frameworks to facilitate understanding of complex sustainable development issues (such as trade-offs relating to inequalities in the context of climate justice). They emphasize the importance of holistic and integrated approaches and encourage the use of available tools to support policy coherence. These elements are fundamental for a systemic approach, as called for in the 2030 Agenda.

Conclusion

Transnational networks constitute an effective mechanism to support Governments and non-State stakeholders in building their capacities to enhance integrated SDG implementation. Networks can promote an inclusive approach to capacity-building and knowledge generation. These forums should increase the participation of regions, countries and actors historically underrepresented, providing an arena in which all voices can equally contribute to developing practical solutions to global sustainable development challenges. Moreover, global networks can promote the dissemination and adoption of analytical tools and models to support policy coherence and integration and encourage their practical use. Members can learn the value of these tools, offer practical advice, and acquire the skills needed to use them in practice. Finally, networks are a starting point for identifying synergies and mutual interests since they leverage partnerships and common projects with a globally cooperative approach that can impact lives and nations for a more sustainable future.

Endnotes

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² R.A.W. Rhodes, “Policy network analysis”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Public Policy*, Michael Moran, Martin Rein and Robert E. Goodin, eds. (Oxford, United Kingdom, Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 426, available at https://www.hse.ru/data/2012/11/03/1249193747/Public_policy_handbook.pdf.

³ Johanna Vogel, *The Transformative Capacity of Transnational and Transdisciplinary Networks and the Potential of Alumni Work*, Discussion Paper 24/2021 (Bonn, Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik, 2021), available at https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/DP_24.2021.pdf.

⁴ Emily Perkin and Julius Court, “Networks and policy processes in international development: a literature review”, Working Paper 252, August 2005 (London, Overseas Development Institute), available at <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/22716/wp252.pdf>.

⁵ United Nations Development Group, “UNDAF companion guidance: capacity development”, available at <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/capacity-development-undaf-companion-guidance#:~:text=The%20objective%20of%20this%20companion,forward%20a%20set%20of%20common>.

⁶ Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, “Global governance networks”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Networks*, Jennifer Nicoll Victor, Alexander H. Montgomery and Mark Lubell, eds. (Oxford, United Kingdom, Oxford University Press/Oxford Academic, 2016).

⁷ Thomas W. Valente and others, “Network influences on policy implementation: evidence from a global health treaty”, *Social Science and Medicine*, vol. 222 (February 2019), pp. 188-197, available at doi: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2019.01.008.

⁸ Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, “Global governance networks”.

⁹ Examples of global networks include the Geneva SDG Community (<https://www.sdglab.ch/geneva2030/community>), the SDG Hub (<https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/sdg-hub-global-sdgs-network-innovation-and-impact>), and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (<https://www.unsdsn.org/about-us>).

¹⁰ Thomas Fues, *Investing in the Behavioural Dimensions of Transnational Cooperation: A Personal Assessment of the Managing Global Governance (MGG) Programme*, Discussion Paper 12/2018 (Bonn, Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik, 2018), available at https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/DP_12.2018.pdf.

¹¹ Benjamin Kafka and others, “Leadership for global responsibility: values and key competencies for a profound shift towards sustainability”, in *Intergenerational Learning and Transformative Leadership for Sustainable Futures*, Peter Blaze Corcoran and others, eds. (Wageningen, The Netherlands, Wageningen Academic Publishers, 2014); Arnim Wiek, Lauren Withycombe Keeler and Charles L. Redman, “Key competencies in sustainability: a reference framework for academic program development”, *Sustainability Science*, vol. 6 (May 2011), pp. 203-218.

Risk Management in the Aftermath of COVID-19: Its Role in Improving the Assessment of Interlinkages and Strengthening Synergies to Support the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals

*Rolf Alter*¹

Introduction

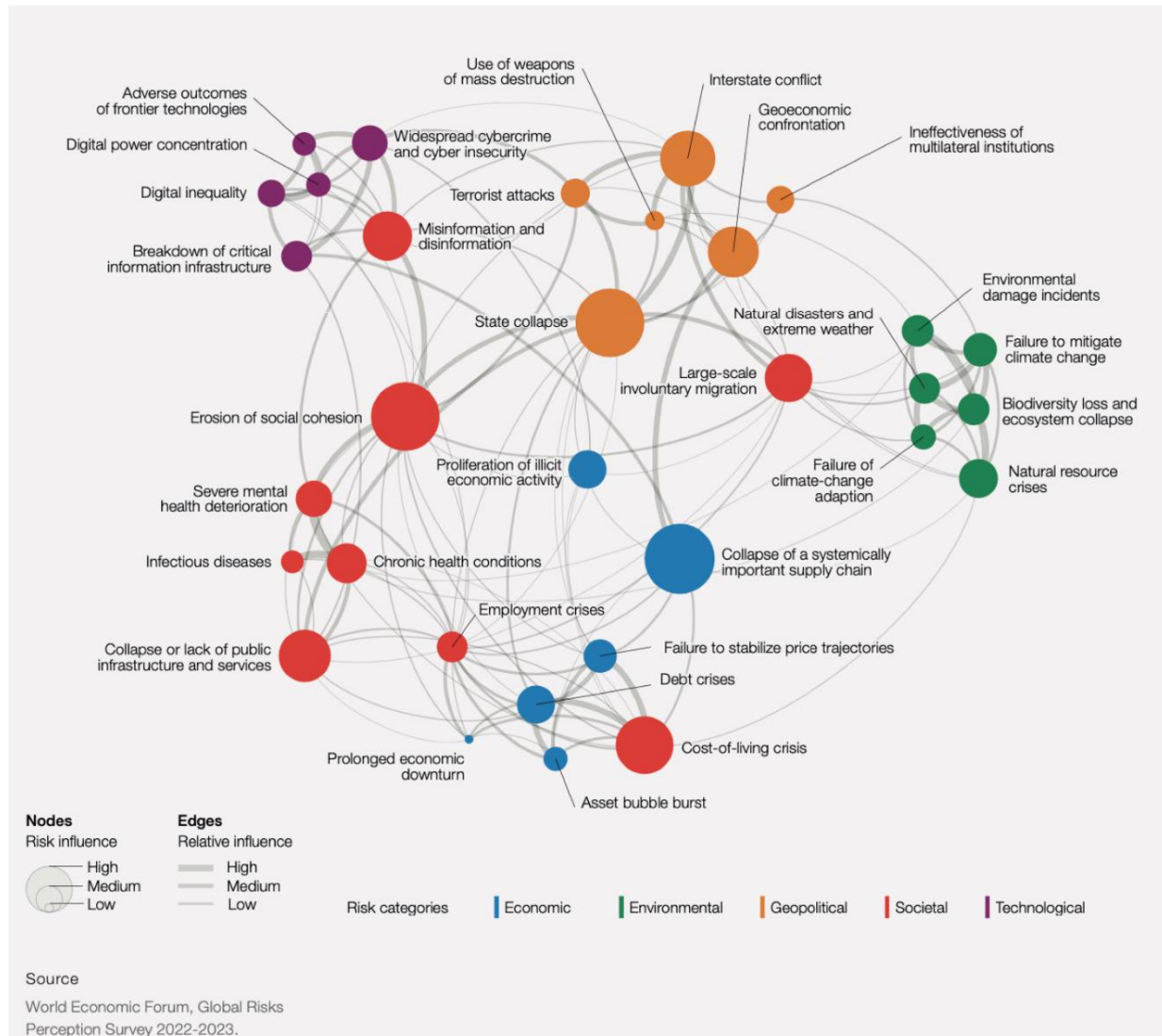
Priority-setting inherently involves assessing the trade-offs and synergies of policy objectives. This assessment involves finding a balance between long-term and short-term goals, addressing the needs of multiple stakeholders, and sequencing policy actions with incomplete and imperfect information. Risk management provides an additional dimension to the evaluation of policy trade-offs and synergies, identifying the uncertainties attached to individual objectives as well as the multiple interlinkages. In this regard, how can risk management contribute to improving evidence-based priority-setting in the context of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

The assessment of trade-offs and synergies among the SDGs reflects the imperative of policy coherence recognized in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.² In a recent strategic guidance note, the United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration argues in favour of integrating risk management in priority-setting processes and institutions.³ The integration of the risk management portfolio implies expanding the critical coordination function of specific SDG piloting structures such as centres of government (CoG).⁴ This contribution explores the potential role of risk management in supporting SDG implementation, drawing on the COVID-19 experience and the evolution of SDG coordination structures.

Experiences and evaluations of COVID-19 crisis management

The COVID-19 pandemic and multiple global crises have dramatically sharpened the appreciation of the central role of risk management in the public sector. The growing transnational and interlinked character of risks has been perceived as a relatively new challenge for risk management—one that requires action beyond the systematic assessment of the probability and impact of uncertain events. The results of the most recent Global Risks Perception Survey, elaborated in the World Economic Forum's *Global Risks Report 2023* and illustrated in the figure below, provide valuable insights into the complex interconnectivity among risk categories.⁵

Figure. The Risks Map 2023



During the COVID-19 pandemic attention was focused primarily on crisis management, while the critical earlier stage of the risk policy cycle—risk anticipation and preparedness—was largely left aside. Internationally comparable and comprehensive evaluations of risk management related to COVID-19 are not yet available. Individual countries undertook assessments of specific dimensions, sectors and instruments at different points in time, mostly in response to urgent decision-making needs, which has made comparative analysis difficult. The comparability of these evaluations has also been weakened by the lack of sufficient evidence on critical sectors’ preparedness for pandemics, the proportionality of policy responses, their coherence, and the impact of what were often seen as centralized, confusing and costly government interventions on citizens’ trust in government institutions. The need for further ex-post analysis—at the policy level and through academic research—is obvious.

Nevertheless, some common features have been identified across the diversity of evaluations, most recently in the context of a survey of country members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).⁶ First, pandemic preparedness was generally insufficient.⁷ Second, massive budgetary resources were mobilized to mitigate the economic and financial effects. Finally, the engagement of stakeholders and the public in risk-related decision-making was the exception. While conclusions are still preliminary, some relevant lessons for risk management can already be identified.

There is a need to invest in risk anticipation capacities and in critical sectors to strengthen preparedness for pandemics and other major crises through early warning systems, foresight, systematic horizon scanning, scenario planning and risk assessments.⁸ Higher levels of risk interconnectedness must be compensated for through additional data collection and deepening expertise in government to fully exploit available data and provide evidence-based advice to decision makers. Calls for appointing national risk and resilience officers in the United States of America and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland seem to reflect this concern.⁹

Care must also be taken to increase the impact of anticipation measures on actual preparedness—or in other words, to reduce the “impact gap”. Despite national risk assessments frequently and prominently including the risk of pandemics, the track record of countries’ responses once the risk of COVID-19 materialized was mostly inadequate. Many countries established national security strategies, including national risk assessments and institutional frameworks, which turned out to be inadequate as they focused on centralized, top-down, sectoral management of emergency situations.

For both risk anticipation and crisis management, inter-agency cooperation requires stronger commitment from leadership and fit-for-purpose governance structures with clear mandates. Scientific advisory bodies providing valuable evidence to inform decision-making need to rely on more varied sources of expertise.

During the pandemic, insufficient international coordination on risk anticipation and crisis management may have contributed to the adoption of mostly national-level emergency measures, despite the global and interconnected nature of the crisis. Hefty competition among countries for emergency equipment, resources and protection instead of international coordination led to the waste of public resources and reduced effectiveness of the response measures.

Whether and to what extent the implementation of the SDGs worldwide is being negatively influenced by these risk management weaknesses remains an open question. However, the massive mobilization of budget resources for the immediate protection of citizens and the private sector may well have diverted critical financing from SDG implementation.¹⁰

The preliminary results and lessons learned from COVID-19 crisis management suggest that the potential contributions of risk management to SDG priority-setting are likely to remain weak. Existing gaps in risk management systems need urgent attention both to improve the performance of the systems themselves and to strengthen their contribution to SDG implementation, particularly in a context of growing uncertainty and complexity and the potentially significant impacts associated with current and future risks.

Upgrading existing risk policies and institutions should not be limited to technical modifications of the concepts of preparedness, mitigation and adaptation as they relate to risk and resilience. The 2014 OECD Council Recommendation on the Governance of Critical Risks¹¹ suggests a whole-of-society approach, which might be translated into “building a risk culture”. This approach is aimed at raising risk awareness, facilitating a better understanding of the economic and social implications of risks, and highlighting both individual and collective responsibilities for risk management among all stakeholders and the public.

A risk culture based on the understanding and transparency of risks would likely change the attitudes of all stakeholders towards, and facilitate a more effective distribution of, the ownership of risks. In terms of the political economy of risks, government risk management would be less negatively affected by the “paradox of prevention”.¹² Governments would no longer be expected to assume exclusive responsibility for risk and crisis management and for financial compensation for damages and losses. Citizens would be able to decide on insurance on the basis of their risk appetite. The private sector would be incentivized to prepare better for uncertainties and invest in protection and resilience for businesses. Finally, well-regulated ownership of risks would offer the conditions for closer coordination among all stakeholders to anticipate and be prepared for risks and respond to emergency situations when risks materialize.

Integrating risk management into existing priority-setting architecture

The role and success of public risk management in supporting the assessment of trade-offs and synergies related to the SDGs do not depend solely on its own performance. Equally important is how effectively risk management can be brought into the architecture of the SDG policymaking process, including the CoG and their coordination function across ministerial portfolios.

In principle, piloting structures for SDG implementation should be well set up to integrate risk management functions and benefit from the opportunity to strengthen their priority-setting capabilities through reliance on risk-enhanced evidence of trade-offs and synergies. Implementing this approach remains a complex task, however, for two main reasons.¹³ First, piloting structures for SDG implementation may not be very risk-versed in their functions and responsibilities. In its 2017 Survey on Organisation and Functions of the Centre of Government, OECD found that 83 per cent of CoG assumed some responsibility for risk management, with over a third assuming primary responsibility. Despite these figures, only around 10 per cent of the CoG surveyed listed “risk management and strategic foresight for the whole of government” as a key responsibility.¹⁴

Second, despite the impressive reforms of CoG in many countries, priority-setting processes continue to suffer from major constraints. For example, in Finland, considered one of the frontrunners in innovative governance, the gap between the ambition and reality of future-oriented policymaking remains significant.¹⁵ Constraints include the silo mentality of ministries, especially in the budget area, no systemic future seeking, and foresight impact gaps (where foresight exercises do not impact policy decisions). While COVID-19 crisis management lacked coordination capacity for timely responses to the pandemic, the crisis triggered the preparation of COVID-19-specific scenarios (published in April 2021), with three possible paths of development from the summer of 2021 through the end of 2023.¹⁶

A recent in-depth review of the CoG in Brazil¹⁷ aimed at better supporting decision-making and steering government action to define and achieve high-level priorities identified two main constraints: the absence of shared policy goals and institutional fragmentation. The former would imply a considerable institutional gap around policy formulation and decision-making, while the latter would likely result in overlapping mandates. In fact, four institutions are responsible for strategic foresight and risk anticipation within this country's CoG: the Institutional Security Bureau (responsible for national security, including cyber security and cyber incident management), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Special Secretariat for Strategic Affairs, and the Casa Civil (Executive Office of the President of Brazil).

While the range of institutional arrangements for SDG implementation is evolving over time, the *World Public Sector Report 2021* confirms that most countries are relying on piloting structures for SDG implementation.¹⁸ Integrating risk management into the SDG coordinating architecture remains desirable but highly complex. The incentives could be higher if integrating risk management also helped improve coordination capacities and performance overall.

In future work on the CoG and other coordinating institutions, attention should be given to the potential opportunities and benefits deriving from the risk-informed assessment of policy trade-offs and synergies, including rebuilding trust in government, better calibrating SDG-related public investment across sectors and over time, protecting public assets, reducing the waste of public resources, and strengthening national resilience on the way to greater prosperity.

Options for international cooperation

International cooperation could help strengthen the role of risk management in setting policy priorities and assessing trade-offs and synergies for SDG implementation.

An exchange of good practices in the monitoring and evaluation of risk and crisis management could help address the knowledge gap surrounding what has worked and what should be avoided in the future. Extracting insights and lessons learned would contribute to “building back better” and could also help deepen international coordination around risk, crisis and resilience management. Strengthening data governance to accelerate the generation of reliable, timely and shared data and to ensure easy access to data through compatible technologies would be an important topic within this context.

Deliberations on how to best close the impact gap as it relates to risk management should involve risk managers in both the public and private sectors as well as political leaders. The paradox of prevention could be explored against the background of a risk culture characterized by higher levels of awareness and understanding of individual and collective responsibility for preparedness. Ongoing knowledge-sharing and peer learning exchanges in which a wide range of experiences and practices are reviewed should also include subnational authorities in order to strengthen coordination across levels of government.

Learning from CoG or other piloting structures for SDG implementation that have had some success in integrating risk anticipation in the assessment of trade-offs and synergies could be a demanding yet rewarding exercise. Exchanges of good practices and experiences could potentially take place at the regional level (as has occurred with the African Peer Review Mechanism). Moreover, the role of risk management in policymaking, priority-setting and SDG implementation could be explicitly addressed in voluntary national review and voluntary local review processes.

Conclusions

Mainstreaming risk management into priority-setting processes holds promise for improving SDG implementation. The experiences surrounding COVID-19 crisis management indicate that reaping the benefits of risk-informed assessments of policy trade-offs and synergies will require considerable investment in building risk-anticipation capacities and preparedness and establishing effective coordination mechanisms in centres of government or other coordinating structures.

The emerging and ongoing crises and incessant high levels of uncertainty prevailing in the world today highlight the urgent need for a medium-term investment strategy for risk management and the reform of coordinating structures at this critical midpoint in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. International cooperation to support shared learning and the exchange of good practices could facilitate better (and faster) priority-setting in the development of national SDG strategies and ultimately accelerate SDG implementation.

Endnotes

¹ Rolf Alter is a member of the Committee of Experts on Public Administration and a Fellow at the Hertie School of Government.

² United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Principles of effective governance for sustainable development”, developed by the Committee of Experts on Public Administration (New York, 2019), available at <https://www.sdg16hub.org/system/files/2020-08/booklet%20-%20Principles%20of%20Effective%20Governance%20for%20Sustainable%20Development.pdf>. These principles, developed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, identified risk management as one of the relevant strategies of effective governance for the implementation of the SDGs.

³ Rolf Alter, “CEPA strategy guidance note on risk management frameworks” (New York, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, February 2021), available at <https://unpan.un.org/sites/unpan.un.org/files/Strategy%20note%20risk%20management%20frameworks%20Mar%202021.pdf>.

⁴ United Nations, *World Public Sector Report 2021—National Institutional Arrangements for Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals: A Five-Year Stocktaking* (Sales No. E.21.II.H.1), available at <https://publicadministration.un.org/en/Research/World-Public-Sector-Reports>.

⁵ World Economic Forum, in partnership with Marsh McLennan and Zurich Insurance Group, *The Global Risks Report 2023: Insight Report*, 18th ed. (Cologny/Geneva, World Economic Forum, 2023), available at https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Global_Risks_Report_2023.pdf.

⁶ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, “First lessons from government evaluations of COVID-19 responses: a synthesis”, OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19), 21 January 2022 (Paris, OECD Publishing), available at <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/first-lessons-from-government-evaluations-of-covid-19-responses-a-synthesis-483507d6/>.

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⁸ World Economic Forum, in partnership with Marsh McLennan and Zurich Insurance Group, *The Global Risks Report 2023: Insight Report*.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Especially if compared with the financial resources deployed in the context of the global financial crisis of 2008/09, which were already characterized as “unprecedented”.

¹¹ OECD, *Assessing Global Progress in the Governance of Critical Risks*, OECD Reviews of Risk Management Policies (Paris, OECD Publishing, 2018), available at <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264309272>.

¹² Successful prevention rarely generates much political recognition due to the difficulty of proving causality; however, failed prevention triggers a loss of political capital.

¹³ OECD, “Building resilience to the COVID-19 pandemic: the role of centres of government”, OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19), 2 September 2020 (Paris, OECD Publishing), available at <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/building-resilience-to-the-covid-19-pandemic-the-role-of-centres-of-government-883d2961/>.

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¹⁶ Ibid., p. 93.

¹⁷ OECD, *Centre of Government Review of Brazil: Toward an Integrated and Structured Centre of Government*, OECD Public Governance Reviews (Paris, OECD Publishing, 2022), available at <https://doi.org/10.1787/33d996b2-en>.

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Evidence-Based Resource Prioritization for Sustainable Development Goal Implementation

Raquel Ferreira, Aura Martínez and Juan Pablo Guerrero¹

Limited resource availability and growing needs—exacerbated by economic downturns due to unexpected global occurrences such as the COVID-19 pandemic—mean that Governments have to make tough budget choices and that the efficiency of those choices matters more than ever. Engaging key stakeholders in making these choices increases the likelihood that they will support healthy public finances, better fiscal outcomes, and more responsive, effective and equitable public policies. Their involvement also strengthens the legitimacy of these choices and contributes to increased trust in public institutions.

To make informed choices, Governments and other stakeholders need to have, at a minimum, technically sound, quality information to weigh the potential positive and negative consequences of the policy choices available to them. Providing key decision makers with solid data facilitates a collaborative resource allocation process that contributes to the achievement of long-term development goals, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Budgets are key in this process, as they reveal information about unavoidable trade-offs, allowing stakeholders to plan public policies accordingly. The extent of information largely depends on how budget systems are technically set up and whether the information emanating from them meets quality considerations. To participate effectively, stakeholders outside government need access to this information and open engagement spaces where their contributions can have an impact.

This contribution presents budget tagging as a method that can be used to link budgets to development goals, allowing policymakers and other stakeholders to quantify priority resource requirements, to target resources accordingly, and to monitor results and take corrective action as needed. Practical examples from several countries illustrate the application of this approach and highlight the important role of stakeholders outside the executive branch. The contribution also identifies some of the current gaps in this approach and offers recommendations to address them.

What is budget tagging and what are its benefits?

Budget tagging can be used to technically link financial resources in budgets to priority development goals. In this methodology, individual budget allocations or programmes are assessed and given specific tags when they are considered to affect particular priority goals. Methodologies differ in terms of levels of granularity and coverage. The goals targeted can be directly linked to the SDGs or can be tied to particular national development goals relating to, for example, traditionally marginalized populations such as women, children, youth and Indigenous Peoples or even to specific agendas such as climate/green goals. They can also cover different levels of government and different budgetary classification levels.

Within government, budget tagging facilitates internal review, including the identification of priority goal resource requirements, budget allocations and actual spending, as well as comparisons of actual spending with budget allocations (to assess budget credibility).² Further, it provides civil society and other stakeholders with the information required to contribute to budget development and monitor budget execution. Essentially, it facilitates the identification of commonly understood policy priority trade-offs, providing a direct and consistent tool that can be used by all stakeholders in linking public financial management (PFM) decisions to development outcomes over time.

Budget tagging also enriches monitoring and evaluation. It facilitates not only the monitoring of follow-up action in daily operations but also analysis for decision-making, and it enables international comparisons to some extent. When financial resources are linked to priority goals, with budget development and monitoring supported by strong public participation, the impact of public spending becomes traceable and measurable, potentially triggering significant social development improvements. The table below details some of the benefits of SDG tagging throughout the budget cycle.

Table. Benefits of the SDG-tagging methodology in specific budget phases

Budget formulation	Legislative approval	Budget implementation	Audit and oversight
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitates identification of development goal resource requirements Supports the use of SDGs as an arbitration tool and a driver for evidence-based allocation adjustments Mainstreams national efforts towards the achievement of the SDGs into operational procedures directed by the ministry of finance towards line ministries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enriches the debate around the proposed budget, showing allocations to development goals Facilitates clear identification and communication in terms of investment in target populations and cross-cutting priorities such as children and youth, gender, and climate change Enriches communication with non-PFM-oriented civil society groups and the private sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improves the assessment of budget performance Allows the design of budget monitoring dashboards for decision makers and the public Monitors expenses through a cross-cutting-priority lens and facilitates evidence-based allocation improvements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrates a focus on particular SDGs in expenditure reviews Allows Supreme Audit Institutions to undertake audits of the impact of SDG-related policies Allows parliament and other oversight stakeholders to scrutinize Government's performance in achieving development goals and recommend corrective measures in cases of deviation from budget targets

Budget tagging in practice

Several countries, including those in which members and partners of the Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency (GIFT) network operate,³ have been working on integrating development objectives and the SDGs into budget systems.

In the Americas, the Ministry of Finance and Public Credit in Mexico publishes a database on its [Transparencia Presupuestaria](#) website that shows at a granular level how government programmes and projects are linked with the SDGs for each fiscal year and throughout all phases of the budget cycle.⁴ The information is provided in an open data format that is easily accessible to the public. This annual information supports user-engagement initiatives focused on innovative analysis of budget data for sustainable development. While these exercises were co-pioneered by the Ministry and local data-driven civil society organizations (CSOs), GIFT has documented and promoted the model in its [Dataquest](#) and [Rally](#) concept note,⁵ which has been adapted for application in Argentina, Chile, Colombia (at the national level and in Bogota City), Costa Rica, Indonesia, Mongolia, the Philippines and Uruguay, as well as at the subnational government level in Guanajuato and Mexico City in Mexico. Guanajuato has made further progress by identifying gender considerations in budgeting.

The financial management information system (FMIS) in Argentina consolidates data on national budget allocations to priority areas such as gender-, youth- and child-related policies. Quarterly spending reports are published,⁶ with data presented in open data formats, enabling public administration agents to re-use the data and publish progress dashboards. In Colombia,⁷ international partners developed an SDG budget coding and tagging methodology for the 169 SDG targets, as detailed in box 3 in the overview section of this chapter.

In Africa, the Government of Ghana has incorporated SDG budgeting and financing into its national budgeting processes at an aggregated level, with SDG codes being added to the standard chart of accounts. The Ministry of Finance publishes periodic SDG budget reports detailing central and local governments' annual budgetary allocations to each SDG. Data on actual spending, however, are not published. The Ghana Statistical Service launched an online interactive dashboard for monitoring the country's SDG progress.⁸ To help fill SDG data gaps, the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics initiated partnerships with CSOs and integrated a set of quality criteria for citizen-generated data in the Kenya Statistical Quality Assurance Framework.⁹ With the support of the United Nations Children's Fund and the GIFT network, Egypt and Lesotho have also taken steps towards linking their programme-based budgets with cross-cutting development goals.

In Asia, the Philippines is developing a policy-based, unified codification of SDG-related programmes, activities and projects using a whole-of-government approach, providing a basis for linking budgets and the prioritization of public resources as well as private investment with programmes that will impact the SDGs.¹⁰

The role of stakeholders outside government

Stakeholders outside the executive branch can advocate for the publication of quality budget information and the creation of public participation spaces. They can actively use information to contribute to policy decisions and to monitor the execution of budgets towards the achievement of the SDGs. If those outside of government do not demand information or use the budget information provided, there will be little or no broad-based pressure on the public sector to start or keep producing and publishing such information. Further, stakeholders can undertake research and provide inputs, monitor and advocate for SDG goals, and provide opportunities to educate the public on PFM, among other actions. Relevant examples from the GIFT network illustrate such contributions.

Many CSOs are actively involved in budget monitoring, research and advocacy. The Centro de Investigación Económica y Presupuestaria (CIEP),¹¹ a Mexico-based think tank, and the Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios Fiscales¹² in Central America have analysed budget allocations and execution, including intergenerational implications. A mapping exercise based on the methodology of the Development Financing Assessment, complemented by an integrated national financing framework, was carried out by CIEP to link resources to actions relating to progress on the SDGs.¹³ To explore the connections between budget credibility and efforts to achieve the SDGs, the International Budget Partnership¹⁴ coordinated country research which revealed key data gaps and ways in which budget credibility could be strengthened to support the achievement of development goals.¹⁵

In Colombia, information from the equity for women budget tracker, available since 2019, has been used by Congress and independent observers to monitor budget allocations to this priority area. The Budget and Public Accounts Committee of the Chamber of Deputies in Mexico has developed technical tools to guide policymakers in the analysis, examination, discussion and approval of the budget from a sustainability perspective towards the allocation of public resources for the achievement of the SDGs. The National Strategy for the Implementation of Agenda 2030 in Mexico¹⁶ states that the Executive Secretary of the National Council on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is to report every two years on the progress of the Strategy, including on the budget allocated to the SDGs.

Academia can also make valuable contributions. For instance, the public policy programme of the Alan Turing Institute uses a survey to estimate, through predictive statistical models, how the trajectory of achievement of the SDGs will be directly impacted by existing allocations on specific policy instruments.¹⁷

Current limitations

These and other examples provide encouraging signs that a growing body of information is available at different levels of government and on different key areas. This information can be leveraged by civil society and other stakeholders. International platforms such as the GIFT network provide critical spaces to promote the exchange of experiences and peer learning. Despite these developments and opportunities, significant gaps remain.

As seen in the United Nations *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2022*,¹⁸ few countries have internationally comparable data on most of the SDGs. When information is available, it often fails to meet quality considerations: the information is generally too aggregated to be useful, and there is often a risk of double counting in the case of intragovernmental transfers; SDG washing often occurs, with tagging only being done on positive contributions, while negative implications are ignored; not all public resources, including those reserved for contingencies or debt financing, can be incorporated into an SDG tagging methodology; the quality of information varies between levels of government and ministries, often depending on the officials in charge of record management; publicly available data may differ between official sources; and the information generated by budget tagging is mostly used to compile reports rather than in decision-making processes at other stages of the budget cycle.

Multiple methods can be used for budget tagging,¹⁹ and the consequent lack of uniformity makes it difficult to objectively evaluate data emanating from these systems and to produce internationally comparable data. Key stakeholders such as supreme audit institutions (SAIs) are also often left out of the process. In addition, while budget tagging provides a diagnosis, it cannot accelerate the closing of development gaps. Finally, the balance between the administrative burden budget tagging imposes and its value added is not always clear.

Overcoming limitations

Several actions could help address these shortcomings. Governments should integrate development goals/SDGs in all stages of the budget cycle in a sufficiently disaggregated manner. It is necessary to have open, structured data on the administrative, economic, functional and programmatic classifications, which are the pillars for SDG budget tagging. SDG mapping should consider not only positive links but also negative links and spillovers.

Governments should provide the evidence-based rationale for the prioritization method used, disclosing the methodology applied. A systematic link between PFM decisions and development outcomes should enable the identification of budget implications for specific groups and policy agendas and how they are affected by trade-offs. Governments can better manage public interest trade-offs if democratic checks and balances are in place.

An automated method is essential for expanding the use of tagging and bringing it into common practice. International financial institutions could assist Governments in doing this by developing a simple internationally accepted budget tagging and prioritization model that could be freely used to link budgets and spending with development results. They could provide technical assistance to Governments in integrating a goal-oriented approach across the fiscal policy cycle.

All key stakeholders should be engaged. They can help government reformers understand which policy choices are more likely to have wide backing if they have quality information and space to provide their inputs. The production of information is fundamental, and transparency is a big step forward, but ultimately actions need to be taken by different stakeholders. Civil society needs to form coalitions to bring additional power to the budget table, embracing the opportunity to serve important global movements, including those focused on gender, climate, and other key areas. For instance, the climate change movement is powerful, but advocates generally lack knowledge on

budget implications. CSOs could assist them in bringing informed arguments to the table, supporting and empowering those movements with the budget evidence and information they need to advocate for necessary PFM adaptations.

The whole accountability ecosystem—including legislators, SAIs, the media, independent fiscal institutions, and academia—should be leveraged to move this process forward. Legislators play key roles in approving and overseeing budgets. Auditors should consider adopting an SDG focus in their audits, and independent evaluations should also take SDG indicators into account. Further research into the PFM value added of adopting this approach may prove valuable in documenting benefits, potentially showing the net benefit of implementing it across the fiscal policy cycle and consequently affirming its value to various stakeholders.

Conclusion

While budget tagging shows good results and strengths across various countries in which it has been implemented, significant gaps remain. Lessons learned from these experiences point to actions that could be taken by Governments, international institutions and other stakeholders to overcome relevant challenges and fully realize the potential benefits of linking budgets to sustainable development goals.

Endnotes

¹ Raquel Ferreira is Senior Technical Advisor with the Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency (GIFT), Aura Martínez is the GIFT Coordinator for Knowledge and Technical Collaboration, and Juan Pablo Guerrero is the GIFT Network Director.

² Budget credibility is determined based on the difference between the budget and actual revenue and expenditure; among other things, it provides an idea of whether fiscal targets set out in budgets are realistic.

³ For more information on the GIFT network, see <https://fiscaltransparency.net/>.

⁴ For more information on the Budget Transparency Portal, see <https://www.transparenciapresupuestaria.gob.mx/>.

⁵ For more information on the Dataquest and Rally experiences, see Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency, “Note on GIFT’s flagship user-engagement initiatives: Public Infrastructure #DataOnTheStreets Rallies and #BetterBudget Dataquests for Sustainable Development”, available at <https://fiscaltransparency.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Rally-Dataquests-ConceptNote-2023.pdf>.

⁶ For more information on the Ministry of Economy’s Open Budget website and activities, see <https://www.presupuestoabierto.gob.ar/sici/analisis-transversales-home>.

⁷ See Joint SDG Fund, INFF Colombia and United Nations Development Programme, *SDG Alignment and Budget Tagging: Towards an SDG Taxonomy—Analysis for Colombia* (UNDP, 2022), available at https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/co/UNDP_Co_POB_Publicacion_SDG_Alignement_and_Budget_Tagging_Methodology_May23_2022.pdf.

⁸ For more information on this national SDG reporting platform, see <https://sustainabledevelopment-ghana.github.io/>.

⁹ For more information on the Framework, see <https://www.knbs.or.ke/download/kenya-statistical-quality-assessment-framework-kesqaf/>.

¹⁰ For more information on the Joint Programme on INFF Philippines and the ongoing development of the country’s Integrated National Financing Framework, see <https://medium.com/@jp.inff.ph>.

¹¹ For more information on the Center for Economic and Budgetary Research (CIEP), see <https://ciep.mx/>.

¹² For more information on ICEFI, see <https://intranet.eulacfoundation.org/en/mapeo/instituto-centroamericano-de-estudios-fiscales-icefi>.

¹³ For more information on the mapping exercise, see Centro de Investigación Económica y Presupuestaria, A.C., “Evaluación del financiamiento para el Desarrollo: mapa de recursos”, available at <https://ciep.mx/wp->

[content/uploads/2022/11/Evaluacion-del-Financiamiento-para-el-Desarrollo.pdf](#). Information on the UNDP Development Financing Assessment is available on the Sustainable Finance Hub at <https://sdgfinance.undp.org/sdg-tools/development-finance-assessment-dfa-guidebook>. Information on integrated national financing frameworks is available on the INFF Knowledge Platform at <https://inff.org/>.

¹⁴ For more information on the International Budget Partnership, see <https://internationalbudget.org/>.

¹⁵ Sally Torbert, “Connecting budget credibility and the Sustainable Development Goals: results from 13 country investigations”, synthesis paper (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and International Budget Partnership, October 2022), available at <https://internationalbudget.org/wp-content/uploads/Connecting-Budget-Credibility-and-the-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Results-from-13-Country-Investigations2.pdf>.

¹⁶ See Mexico, Presidencia de la República, *Estrategia nacional para la implementación de Agenda 2030 en México* (2019), available at https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/514075/EN-A2030Mx_VF.pdf.

¹⁷ For information on the work being carried out by the public policy programme of the Alan Turing Institute, see <https://www.turing.ac.uk/research/research-programmes/public-policy>; specific information on automatic SDG alignment and budget tagging is available at <https://www.turing.ac.uk/research/research-projects/automatic-sdg-alignment>.

¹⁸ United Nations, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2022* (Sales No. E.22.I.2), available at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2022/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2022.pdf>.

¹⁹ See, for example, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Green Budget Tagging: Introductory Guidance and Principles* (Paris, OECD Publishing, 2021), available at <https://doi.org/10.1787/fe7bfcc4-en>.

Government Expenditure and Sustainable Development Prioritization: Lessons from the Policy Priority Inference Research Programme

Omar A. Guerrero and Gonzalo Castañeda¹

Artificial intelligence and computational models can support efforts to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This contribution examines the lessons learned from quantitatively analysing the linkage between government expenditure and development outcomes from a multidimensional perspective. It builds on the Policy Priority Inference (PPI) research programme,² which uses computational methods to analyse how budgetary priorities impact the performance of various development indicators representing interdependent policy dimensions. The computational approach developed in PPI enables multidimensional impact evaluation in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It allows exploiting new open-spending data sets to understand how policy priorities shape the dynamics of the SDG indicators. This piece summarizes and reflects on insights obtained from various academic and policy studies, particularly regarding their policy implications. It looks at studies that focus on a single country (Mexico) and then at analyses comparing several countries.³

Data challenges: government spending, indicators, and computational models

The amount and quality of government spending data have increased in the past decade thanks to the efforts of public administrations and international organizations in setting standards for the publication of data sets.⁴ The main objectives of these initiatives are to support the good-governance agenda and to empower citizens and non-governmental organizations by enabling the monitoring of public funds via fiscal transparency. While these efforts are commendable, using open-spending data for the sole purpose of promoting transparency is limiting. Given the ongoing multiple crises, it is important to move beyond monitoring concerns and take on impact-evaluation challenges. This type of analysis is indispensable when policymakers need to align government budgets to the SDGs.

Several barriers prevent using detailed expenditure data in impact evaluation across multiple interrelated development dimensions, such as those reflected in the SDGs. First, spending categories are usually mismatched with the policy issues covered by development indicators. This drawback means that the mapping of expenditure programmes to the outcome variables is far from perfect.⁵ Second, since open-spending data sets are relatively new, they often come with few observations across time (the same happens for many development indicators). Such “small” data do not meet the technical requirements of methods stemming from econometrics and machine learning to produce impact evaluations.⁶ Third, even when data on spending and indicators are “big”, aligning budgets to the SDGs means that one needs to account for the interdependencies between SDG indicators, which is not an easily scalable task when employing expert analysis or traditional quantitative tools. Fourth, the efficacy of government expenditure varies depending on the institutional context of each country; thus, it is necessary to account for governance and political economy features such as technical inefficiencies and corruption.

Computational frameworks can help overcome these challenges by accommodating the intricacies of multilevel causal chains between government expenditure and development indicators. These analytical tools allow a detailed description (informed by theory and expert knowledge) of the process through which government programmes influence the dynamics of the outcome variables. This level of theoretical content is necessary to fill gaps related to the lack of data. In contrast to structural interventions such as building physical infrastructure or creating anti-poverty programmes, financial interventions mainly focus on the short term because they tend to operate with already existing policies. Thus, computational tools designed to analyse short-term interventions are important to properly understand the scope and reach of policy prioritization via budgets. One example is the PPI research programme, which builds on a type of artificial intelligence known as agent-based modelling or agent computing.

The Policy Priority Inference research programme

The PPI computational model simulates a central Government facing the problem of allocating resources to a set of agencies that must implement the existing programmes. The model considers that the implementation of such programmes may not be efficient since public officials have conflicting incentives (including competing goals). In addition, the effectiveness of these programmes may be limited by long-term structural factors such as poor infrastructure and lack of capacity. Initially, PPI started with a model specifying how Governments formulate policy priorities—in terms of budgets⁷—in a setting with uncertainty and interdependencies. Then, through collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the framework was improved to make it usable with open-spending data of various levels of granularity in the context of the SDGs.

PPI accounts for the interdependencies between indicators and institutional factors that shape a country's quality of governance. Because it is a simulation tool, it enables counterfactual analyses to assess the impact of government expenditure at a high level of disaggregation. This capability is essential for producing multidimensional impact evaluations and quantifying concepts used in discussions on SDG implementation (such as accelerators and bottlenecks). Finally, the algorithmic nature of PPI allows the inclusion of expert knowledge regarding the distinction between policy issues that can be affected by government programmes (instrumental) and those where the Government has limited or no influence (collateral).

PPI has been used in collaboration with local and national governments (including Colombia and Mexico), specialized agencies (such as Public Health Wales and the Office for National Statistics in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland), and international organizations (including UNDP). In some cases, it has been adopted as part of planning processes and assessment exercises. The rest of this contribution elaborates on how PPI has been used to draw new insights related to policy prioritization in various countries in the context of the 2030 Agenda.

Country-level experience: the case of Mexico

The development of PPI has benefited from country-specific studies. Several of them have focused on Mexico (between 2008 and 2021) as its Government holds one of the best expenditure data sets

available in terms of both disaggregation and time coverage. For instance, one of these studies quantifies the concept of accelerators—a policy issue that, if well-funded, can catalyse development in other dimensions through indirect effects. Surprisingly, in Mexico, there are more SDG accelerators than bottlenecks (33 SDG targets out of 75 are identified as accelerators). Among these catalysers, targets 3.7 (ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services) and 16.5 (substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms) stand out as the two most influential targets. The policy implications are self-evident: when considering development dimensions with similar development levels, policymakers should secure funding for the associated targets identified as accelerators to produce systemic impacts.

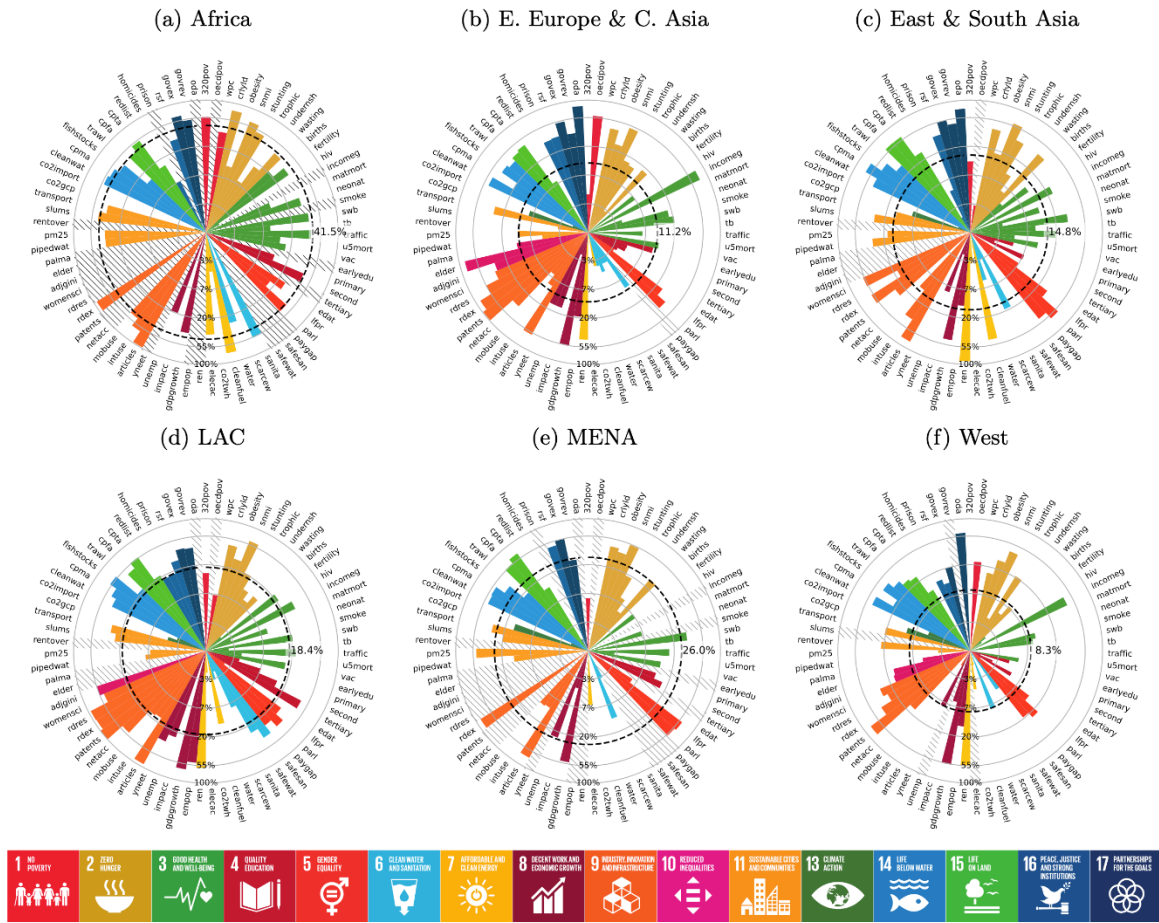
PPI has also been applied to investigate how socioeconomic deprivation⁸ has evolved in Mexico due to the financing of government programmes, remittances, and the domestic income of households. The results show the importance of household remittances in alleviating poverty, not only due to their monetary importance but also because they reach their targets through channels other than those used for public spending. Furthermore, these results indicate that income shocks can severely harm social progress, so Governments would have to implement compensatory measures through focalized public spending.

Finally, PPI was used to analyse SDG implementation at the subnational level, considering the large fiscal imbalances across the 32 Mexican states. The analysis focused on how federal transfers to the states could be reconfigured to reach the aspirations captured by one specific SDG or all of them simultaneously.⁹ These transfers, traditionally justified in terms of compensation for historical inequalities related to poverty rates (SDG 1), are allocated annually through the Fiscal Coordination Act via a mathematical formula. PPI was used to evaluate whether the formula employed by the Fiscal Coordination Act provides the best possible allocation when the government prioritizes SDG 1. The results indicate a high sensitivity of the optimal allocations to the Government's development goals and that federal transfers could be better allocated according to the SDGs that the Government seeks to prioritize.

Why has public spending shown modest impact on the SDGs?

Moving to multi-country studies, the first lesson derived from PPI is not surprising: *the 2030 Agenda is overambitious*. Even without considering the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous development gaps will remain by 2030 (and even by 2040),¹⁰ with the findings suggesting wide disparities across indicators and countries. As illustrated in figure 1, Western countries are expected to experience an 8.3 per cent average SDG gap, Eastern Europe and Central Asia an 11.2 per cent gap, Eastern and Southern Asia a 14.8 per cent gap, Latin America and the Caribbean an 18.4 per cent gap, the Middle East and North Africa region a 26.0 per cent gap, and Africa a 41.5 per cent gap.

Figure 1. Expected development gaps in 2030



Source: Omar A. Guerrero and Gonzalo Castañeda, *Complexity Economics and Sustainable Development: A Computational Framework for Policy Priority Inference* (Cambridge, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2023).

Notes: Each bar indicates the expected gap in a specific indicator in 2030, averaged across the countries in the same group. The striped areas indicate that such an indicator was not available for any country in the group. The dashed ring denotes the average expected gap, and its value appears on the right. The concentric circles and the bars are presented in logarithmic scale, so differences are larger in the outer circles. These estimates use indicator data from the *Sustainable Development Report 2021*; SDG 12 lacks observations in this data set.

The response of development indicators to budgetary changes varies considerably across SDGs, countries and regions. One way to measure the potential impact is through the number of years saved (or lost) to close the gaps through increments (or reductions) in the budget. For instance, in an average country in Latin America and the Caribbean, the largest impact of budgetary increments corresponds to SDG 13, while the smallest one corresponds to SDG 8. In contrast, for the average country in the West, an augmented budget produces the largest impact on SDG 5 and the smallest

one on SDG 1. This type of analysis has implications for Governments in terms of identifying policy issues that respond well to additional public expenditure and could boost SDG implementation.

While there are indicators that respond well to financial interventions, government spending on others is ineffective as a result of long-term structural factors such as poor infrastructure, lack of capacity, or ill-designed government programmes. These constraints create idiosyncratic bottlenecks, which are specific to individual policy issues and vary across country contexts.

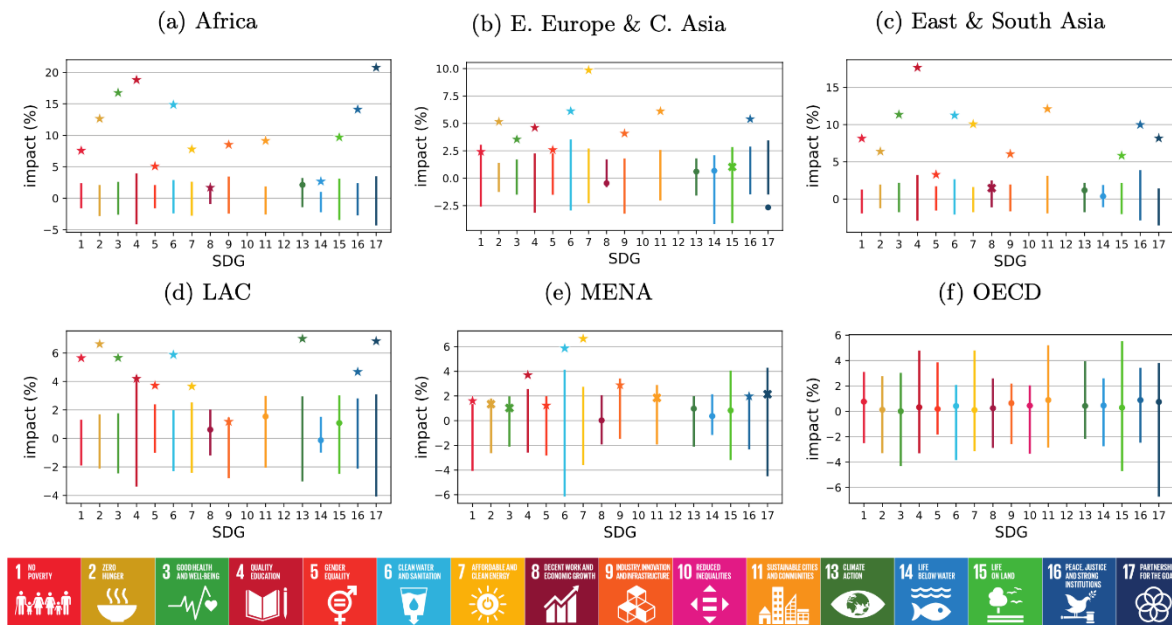
When the estimates from all countries are pooled together, SDG 9 stands out as the most prominent host of potential bottlenecks. On the contrary, there are no bottlenecks related to SDG 8 in any of the six groups of countries. When analysing country groups, Eastern and Southern Asia is particularly salient as the region that exhibits the most indicators subjected to idiosyncratic bottlenecks. Interestingly, countries in Latin America and the Caribbean do not present bottlenecks in programmes associated with poverty reduction (although this is a prevalent issue in the region). Consequently, their poor performance might be related to limited funding. This type of result is crucial to support Governments when determining whether a short-term financial intervention would have a significant impact or if a revamp of government programmes is necessary.

Another relevant finding relates to SDG 16 and the impact of the quality of governance on corruption. Less developed countries face greater challenges in finding the right mix between prioritizing improvements in governance versus other policy dimensions in terms of budget allocations. Additional public expenditure in governance may contribute to higher corruption levels as the underdevelopment of other SDGs may reinforce a corruption-focused strategy of public servants (for example, extracting bribes in service delivery). Finding this balance is more difficult because the interdependencies between SDGs, social norms of corruption, and higher institutional uncertainty create a more volatile environment in terms of how corruption responds to government expenditure. This result is aligned with country-level data showing that corruption has not decreased in the global South despite substantial investments in improving governance (a well-known paradox in the corruption literature).

The contribution of international aid to multidimensional development

PPI has also been used to estimate the SDG impact of international aid. The results show that aid exerts positive impacts across SDG indicators for several country groups, though not for emerging economies within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (see figure 2). When looking at the average impacts on SDG indicators across countries, 52 (out of 74) indicators experience a statistically significant impact. Aid is effective in contributing to progress on several indicators across SDGs 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 11 and 17. In contrast, aid weakly influences progress on indicators related to SDGs 8, 9, 10, 14 and 15.

Figure 2. SDG-level impact of international aid by country grouping



Source: Omar A. Guerrero and Gonzalo Castañeda, *Complexity Economics and Sustainable Development: A Computational Framework for Policy Priority Inference* (Cambridge, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2023).

Notes: The markers (dot, cross and star) indicate the statistical significance level of the impact metric: star = significant at 99 per cent; cross = significant at 95 per cent; and dot = not significant. The vertical line represents the distribution range for the impact metric. The impact metric measures the percentage of development that is attributed to the relevant aid funds; see Omar A. Guerrero, Daniele Guariso and Gonzalo Castañeda, “Aid effectiveness in sustainable development: a multidimensional approach”, *World Development*, vol. 168 (August 2023), 106256, available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2023.106256>. The sample period in this study corresponds to 2000-2013. The data set contains only aid recipient countries. The indicators data were obtained from the *Sustainable Development Report 2021* (SDG 12 lacks observations), the aid flows data from AidData, and total government expenditure from the World Bank.

A call for better data and computational modelling in evidence-based policymaking

Computational frameworks such as PPI have great potential to help Governments address SDG implementation challenges. To harness this potential, it is important that Governments commit to the systematic generation of high-quality data in terms of both indicators and government expenditure. Furthermore, Governments should seek to advance efforts to tag expenditure data to development categories such as the SDGs, which would allow linking expenditure programmes to development indicators. New artificial intelligence methods could support these efforts to scale up budget tagging.¹¹

At present, technical barriers remain for the wider adoption of computational models to inform SDG implementation and sustainable development policies more generally. There are challenges in terms of computational literacy and the understanding of complex systems among both technical

teams in Governments and social science scholars. Thus, Governments and research and educational institutions should further invest in the emerging field of computational social science to endow the new generations of decision makers and social scientists with a mix of skills and interdisciplinarity that would allow them to advance holistic and innovative policies to respond to the global sustainable development challenges of the twenty-first century.

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* Complete list of references mentioned in endnote 2 (see below).

Endnotes

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² Information on the Policy Priority Inference research programme is available at www.policypriority.org.

³ The lessons reviewed in this contribution come from various published academic studies as well as policy reports prepared in collaboration with local governments and international organizations; source details are provided in the Works Cited section of this contribution. Many of the analyses and their technical details have been synthesized in a new book produced by the present authors.

⁴ Two examples are the work of the Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency and the integrated national financing framework developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, *SDG Alignment and Budget Tagging: Towards an SDG Taxonomy--Analysis for Colombia* [UNDP Colombia, 2022], p. 60, available at https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/co/UNDP_Co_POB_Publicacion_SDG_Alignment_and_Budget_Tagging_Methodology_May23_2022.pdf).

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⁸ Socioeconomic deprivation is a recent framework for conceptualizing poverty, inspired by the ideas of Amartya Sen regarding the provision of capabilities and liberties. It considers poverty a problem relating not only to income but also to education, health, housing, nutrition, economic well-being, and social security. The lack of access to one or more of these rights implies socioeconomic deprivation.

⁹ In Mexico, most taxes are collected by the federal Government and then redistributed to the states through federal transfers. The study addressing fiscal imbalances analyses a specific type of transfer called *contribution* as it accounts for nearly 50 per cent of the states’ budgets.

¹⁰ A development gap is measured as the distance between the level of an indicator and the value that the Government aspires to reach. The values for both existing indicators and aspirations are provided by the *Sustainable Development Report 2021* data set.

¹¹ Daniele Guariso, Omar A. Guerrero and Gonzalo Castañeda, “Automatic SDG budget tagging: building public financial management capacity through natural language processing”.

Building Legitimacy for Difficult Policy Choices and Trade-Offs through Open, Transparent and Inclusive Government

*Ole F. Norheim*¹

Introduction

Policy choices often involve difficult trade-offs between competing goals. In the current context of multiple crises, strengthening progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires leveraging synergies and managing trade-offs. Trade-offs vary across countries and across population groups. A trade-off can be seen as a compromise between two or more desirable but competing policy considerations. It thus involves a sacrifice made in one dimension to obtain benefits or ensure respect for rights in other dimensions. Such trade-offs are often inevitable. One way to secure legitimacy and acceptance for the outcomes of difficult trade-offs is through open, transparent, and inclusive decision-making. The full use of public reasoning is hard to achieve and requires political will, institutional reform and a renewed investment in people, time, and resources.²

Recent history has taught the world the painful lesson that protecting a population against a deadly pandemic requires the imposition of substantial burdens on citizens. The trade-offs between the goals of saving lives (SDG 3) and protecting livelihoods (SDGs 1, 2 and 8) generated a distribution of benefits and burdens that was controversial and, in some places and phases of the pandemic, both inefficient and unfair.³ Another relevant trade-off concerns the transition to renewable energy, where, for some countries, protecting employment and income from coal- and fossil-fuel-dependent industries (SDG 8) competes with the goal of net-zero carbon emissions (SDG 13). A third example involves health-care priority-setting. In most countries, demographic change towards a larger proportion of elderly citizens, increasing expectations, and the surging availability of new and often costly technologies (including advanced cancer drugs and treatment approaches) force countries to limit public payments for health services to protect other sectors such as education and infrastructure (SDG 3 versus, for example, SDGs 4 and 9). Health authorities must decide what kind of services they can afford and sometimes proceed to rank them, often based on data on treatment effectiveness and costs and their distribution. These are hard priorities often involving medical, ethical and political disagreement.⁴

Managing trade-offs is based on objective scientific knowledge, but it is also a value-based exercise. It requires building legitimacy and consensus around policy choices and a shared understanding of problems. This requires open, deliberative and inclusive processes. Strong arguments have been made about the importance of making decision-making processes open and inclusive, considering not only science and expert knowledge but also other sources of knowledge, including individual citizens, local communities, Indigenous populations, youth, and the elderly.

Reasons for open, transparent, and inclusive decision-making

Since hard policy choices of this kind are called for on a regular basis, it is important to firmly institutionalize open, transparent, and inclusive decision-making. The renewed importance of managing difficult trade-offs to boost progress on the SDGs in the post-pandemic period highlights the need for institutional and democratic reform.

The most important reasons for open and inclusive decision-making are that they build on democratic principles and political and human rights, they can improve the quality of decisions, and they may enhance trust, legitimacy and policy adherence.⁵ Inclusive decision-making rests on the democratic ideal that all people should have a fair opportunity to participate in decisions that affect them.⁶ It ensures that Governments act in accordance with the rights of political participation enshrined in national and international law, particularly human rights law and the principles of accountable government. Open and inclusive decision-making may lessen social disagreement because, even in the face of polarized opinions about what to do, it may be possible to achieve agreement on fair procedures for arriving at policy decisions. Policies resulting from fair procedures may be accepted even by those who disagree with them on substantive grounds.

Key principles

The principles of open, transparent, and inclusive decision-making are defined, justified and discussed in an extensive body of literature across different disciplines. While terminology varies and there are differences in the emphasis placed on certain criteria, similar concepts with common philosophical foundations emerge from this literature. A recent report from the health sector identifies three core guiding principles for fair and legitimate processes and seven implementable criteria.⁷

The core principles include equality, impartiality, and consistency. Equality builds on the idea of political equality, mutual respect, and people having equal opportunity to access information and articulate their views during a decision-making process, regardless of social or power status, gender, ethnicity or religion. Impartiality requires decision makers to produce an unbiased assessment. Their decisions should not be driven by self-interest or unduly influenced by stakeholders with vested interests in the outcome. Consistency over time requires procedures for decision-making to be stable and predictable in order to foster acceptance, sustainability and trust. Changes to decision-making procedures should be explained and justified.

The report identifies seven criteria for fair processes that are widely applicable: transparency, accuracy (in information), public reason, public participation, inclusiveness, revisability (in the light of new evidence), and enforcement. If these principles are followed, the process of making hard policy choices can clearly be improved, contributing to enhanced trust, legitimacy, and policy adherence.⁸

Policy decisions are better targeted and more effective if they are informed by accurate descriptions of the circumstances and evidence of what works. Communicating clear rationales and uncertainty and making evidence publicly accessible prevents disinformation. Open and truly inclusive decision-making can build trust and legitimacy. This improves adherence to policies, making them more effective. Greater effectiveness engenders greater trust in policymakers. Open decision-

making can therefore contribute to a virtuous cycle of increasing trust, adherence, and policy effectiveness. In other cases, a fair process may at least prevent the erosion of trust.

Barriers to open and inclusive processes

The pandemic also revealed examples of relative neglect or a lack of open and inclusive processes. For example, a report on the COVID-19 response in Mexico, commissioned by the World Health Organization (WHO) Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response, identified several shortcomings and linked them to the Government's concentration of power, extensive use of discretionary decision-making, and lack of deliberation.⁹ Another report commissioned by the WHO Independent Panel, on the United States response to COVID-19, identified the "trust deficit" as a risk factor that could lead to a poor pandemic response.¹⁰ Even in the Nordic countries, with well-established open and inclusive deliberative bodies, hearings, and public participation mechanisms, reliance on experts became the norm in the first phases of the pandemic. After a few months, though, public health authorities and Governments (in Denmark, Sweden and Norway, for example) became increasingly transparent, providing regular information, updating evidence, and making reasons for policy changes publicly available (through dedicated websites of all reports and recommendations made to the Government). According to the Independent Panel, these mechanisms were identified as enhancing trust.¹¹

There are several well-known barriers to the implementation of deliberative processes. In addition to the obvious fact that more democratic processes will lead to the decentralization of power, they might be time-consuming and costly and might require public entities to coordinate their actions when issues are urgent and complex. Another barrier is the lack of capacity in public institutions. Often, public officials are not really equipped to conduct elaborate deliberative processes. Enhancing their capacity adds to the cost of these processes.

There can be a trade-off between efficiency in decision-making and inclusive governance that takes time and can be costly. A thorough process may involve thousands of participants and may require covering transport costs or providing compensation to enable equal participation and non-discrimination. However, the use of online channels for deliberations may reduce costs and improve impact and voice. All barriers or costs linked to democratic processes must be considered and weighed against the potential gains of improved legitimacy, trust, quality, and adherence.

The role of science

For policy choices involving a high degree of risk and uncertainty (as in the early phases of the pandemic), inclusive decision-making may be perceived as inappropriate and reliance on experts more relevant. Yet, to justify how scientists deal with these uncertainties, they must often appeal to ethical or political values concerning which risks are worth taking more seriously than others.¹² This is a question of risk management. Managing risks involves both individual and collective responsibility among all stakeholders and the public. This is an argument against relying only on experts when risks are higher. Drawing the line between facts and values and finding the appropriate role of experts and citizens in risk management is thus not always straightforward. Interaction between scientists and the public is therefore imperative.

That said, the involvement of experts in decision-making does not run counter to the ideas of deliberative processes. The scientific community not only provides objective data and evidence but also helps build a common understanding of the policy problems based on values and beliefs, as emphasized in recent literature on the science-policy interface.¹³ The neglect or even dismissal of scientific evidence is not in accordance with key principles of deliberative democracy.

Mechanisms

If there is political will, the prospects for open and inclusive processes are positive. There are essentially three mechanisms for institutionalizing and encouraging open, transparent, and inclusive government: inclusive deliberative bodies, systematic hearings, and self-selective public participation mechanisms.¹⁴

Inclusive deliberative bodies are set up to provide space and support for the sharing of relevant expertise, experiences, voices, and interests and to produce well-considered advice. Examples include ad hoc citizens' assemblies, permanent citizens' panels, biotechnology advisory boards, and advisory councils.¹⁵

Systematic hearings are set up in many countries to gather relevant insights from experts and stakeholders on draft legislation and policy. Hearing processes are often closely linked to formal decision-making and can act as a common arena or bridge between civil society, experts and the Government. They have the potential to inform and stimulate public debate and to generate legitimacy for decisions with interested stakeholders. They can expand the points of view and interests considered and improve the quality and acceptance of decisions. Examples are hearings mandated by law or optional hearings.¹⁶

Self-selective public participation mechanisms need not be but often are designed outside government and can enable everyone, in principle, to make their voice heard. Open, self-selective public participation mechanisms include town halls, (face-to-face or online) village meetings, radio and television call-in programmes, petitions, and crowdsourcing.

Various systems and mechanisms set up to facilitate public reasoning are flourishing throughout the world. One notable example highlighted by Dryzek and others is the Irish Constitutional Convention and Citizens' Assembly, whose open and inclusive processes have genuinely engaged people and transformed public discussions and decisions on same-sex marriage and abortion rights.¹⁷ Another example is the Citizens Council in the United Kingdom, where ideas and advice are shared on difficult priority-setting decisions.¹⁸ When the Citizens Council was established, the justification was directly related to ideas of deliberative democracy and the dominant framework called accountability for reasonableness (A4R). A4R is fully or partly embraced in countries such as Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom.¹⁹ Since health-care rationing so obviously creates winners and losers, and there can be legitimate disagreement about which choices are right, these countries have adopted principles from deliberative democracy and institutionalized health technology assessment and implemented open and transparent decision-making. A4R requires rationing decisions to be open and publicly made, with relevant reasons provided (for example, that a service is not cost-effective), with a mechanism for complaints and revisions. The process itself should be institutionalized. If satisfied, these conditions can connect

decisions about health-care rationing to broader democratic processes. These conditions seem to be increasingly accepted, though they are also criticized.²⁰ The institutions in Ireland and the United Kingdom are two examples of inclusive deliberative bodies.

A good practical example of regular hearing processes incorporated into a participatory governance platform is the National Health Assembly (NHA) in Thailand. By bringing in laypeople to hear and assess evidence and voice their own needs, experiences and concerns, the NHA has become a platform for building civil society capacity to engage with the policymaking process and for bringing lived experiences more strongly into policy discussions.²¹

Finally, a good example of self-selective public participation mechanisms is Participedia,²² a global network and crowdsourcing platform for researchers, educators, practitioners, policymakers, activists, and others interested in public participation and democratic innovations.

Building trust and legitimacy is possible

Open, transparent, and inclusive decision-making can improve the quality of decisions and enhance trust, legitimacy and policy adherence. There are barriers, but they can be overcome. Inclusive deliberative bodies appointed by the relevant authorities have been tried and tested successfully in Ireland, the United Kingdom, and many of the Nordic countries. Hearings have been practised in many countries and constitute a feasible, less costly, and transparent way to facilitate the use of public reasoning by all key stakeholders. The key here is to ensure that decision makers are responsive to the views and arguments presented through the hearing process. Self-selective public participation mechanisms provide novel ways to involve people outside government agencies; they often build on strong social activism and advocacy; and they have the potential to be more engaging and effective than government bodies.

The principles and examples presented here offer some key messages:

- One important way to secure legitimacy and acceptance for the outcomes of difficult policy trade-offs is through open, transparent, and inclusive decision-making.
- The most important reasons for open, transparent, and inclusive decision-making are that they respect political rights and can improve the quality of decisions and enhance trust and legitimacy.
- Implementable criteria for legitimate processes include transparency, accuracy, public reason-giving, public participation, inclusiveness, revisability and enforcement.
- Open, transparent and inclusive decision-making must be institutionalized. Governments can establish inclusive deliberative bodies (such as citizens' juries, permanent citizens' panels, biotechnology advisory boards and advisory councils) and systematic hearings with key stakeholders. Outside government, self-selective public participation mechanisms should be encouraged.
- There are costs to implementing deliberative processes. These must be considered and weighed against the benefits.

Endnotes

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¹³ Peter D. Gluckman, Anne Bardsley and Matthias Kaiser, “Brokerage at the science–policy interface: from conceptual framework to practical guidance”, *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, vol. 8, article No. 84 (2021), available at <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00756-3>.

¹⁴ Norheim and others, “Difficult trade-offs in response to COVID-19: the case for open and inclusive decision making”.

¹⁵ Participedia is a global network and crowdsourcing platform for researchers, educators, practitioners, policymakers, activists, and anyone interested in public participation and democratic innovations; for more information, see <https://participedia.net> (accessed November 2020). For further information on relevant deliberative bodies, see Graham Smith, *Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation* (Cambridge, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2009), available at <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511609848>;

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Table 2.A. Expert recommendations to enhance integration and policy coherence for the SDGs

Area	Action points
<i>Global SDG follow-up and review</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage and guide Member States to share experiences on the principle of indivisibility and integration through monitoring and reporting mechanisms at the High-level Political Forum and other global forums. • Facilitate knowledge exchange at the High-level Political Forum on how synergies and trade-offs can be managed in practice and on national processes for managing synergies and trade-offs in SDG implementation (for example, through the voluntary national reviews). • Include the role of risk management in policymaking, priority-setting and the implementation of the SDGs in Voluntary national/local review processes. • Support global innovations to protect the rights of current and future generations (including contributing to a Declaration of Rights of Future Generations, advocating for a strong role for the Special Envoy for Future Generations) through specific governmental actions. • Use the United Nations summits over the period 2023-2025 as an opportunity for advancing the adoption of strategic foresight as the basis for a “new approach” to anticipatory global governance and public administration.
<i>SDG interdependencies, synergies, trade-offs, and prioritization</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess how SDG interactions play out in national contexts, involving local knowledge and supporting decision-making with tools that rest on systems thinking. • Revisit national SDG implementation strategies and action plans based on how priority SDGs support or inhibit progress with interrelated goals and with the vision of the 2030 Agenda in particular country contexts. • Report on how evidence and analytical tools are used to support SDG implementation by Governments and communicate about the policy choices made, their implications, and how to correct course. • Ensure adequate consultation, test new ideas, allow for adequate time, and assess synergies and trade-offs to identify effective policy solutions to improve the delivery of public services.
<i>Transparent and inclusive decision-making to enhance integration and policy coherence</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure transparency of Governments’ policy choices on how prioritizing progress in certain SDGs may have trade-offs with other Goals as well as implications for inequality. • Adopt operational criteria of transparency, accurate information, reason-giving, public participation, inclusiveness, revisability and enforcement to enhance the legitimacy of SDG policy choices by Governments. • Provide the evidence-based rationale for the prioritization method used by Governments, disclosing the methodology applied to identify priorities. • Further institutionalize open, transparent and inclusive decision-making by establishing inclusive deliberative bodies (such as citizens’ juries and permanent citizens’ panels) and systematic hearings with stakeholders. • Encourage self-selective public participation mechanisms (such as town halls and crowdsourcing), including outside government, which enable everyone to make their voice heard.
<i>Budgeting and public financial management (PFM) to support integrated SDG implementation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate development goals/SDGs in all stages of the budget cycle in a sufficiently disaggregated manner. • Consider not only positive but also negative links and spillovers in SDG mapping.

Area	Action points
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advance a systematic link between PFM decisions and development outcomes to enable the identification of budget implications for specific groups and policy agendas and how they are affected by trade-offs. • Form wide coalitions of civil society actors to bring additional power to the budget table, embracing the opportunity to support and engage with global movements, including on gender, climate and other areas.
<i>Data</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote the systematic generation of high-quality budget and public financial management data, in terms of both indicators and government expenditure. • Advance Governments' efforts to tag expenditure data to development categories such as the SDGs, which would allow linking expenditure programmes to development indicators. • Produce open, structured, high-quality data on the administrative, economic and programmatic classifications, which are the pillars for SDG budget tagging. • Strengthen data governance to accelerate the generation of reliable, timely and shared data and to ensure easy access to data through compatible technology.
<i>Foresight and intergenerational approach</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritize a principle of fairness for current and future generations across the public sector and assess policies from the standpoint of intergenerational fairness. • Establish strategic foresight centres of excellence to build an anticipatory governance ecosystem across the executive branch, parliaments, audit bodies, government agencies, and municipal bodies. • Conduct "national listening exercises" led by Governments to connect foresight-enabled intergenerational dialogues about the future to national strategic planning.
<i>Risk management</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn from good practices of piloting structures for SDG implementation on how to effectively integrate risk anticipation in the assessments of trade-offs and synergies. The exchanges of experiences could potentially take place at the regional level. • Exchange good practices in the monitoring and evaluation of risk and crisis management to help address the knowledge gap on what has worked and what should be avoided in the future. • Promote exchange among risk managers in both the public and private sectors and with political leaders on how to best close the impact gap in risk management and advance a risk culture which would raise awareness and understanding of individual and collective responsibilities for preparedness.
<i>Oversight and evaluation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct independent assessments of whether institutional measures make priority-setting and implementation more systemic and enhance capacity to manage synergies and trade-offs. These assessments can help identify measures to resolve or mitigate trade-offs and leverage synergies and apply tools to support systems thinking in SDG decision-making. • Take SDG indicators into account when conducting independent evaluations of budget processes and fiscal policies. . • Consider further adopting an SDG focus in external audits by Supreme Audit Institutions.
<i>Capacity-building and knowledge sharing to support integration and policy coherence</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote collaboration between scientists and decision makers to build capacity on interdependencies (for example, through trainings and knowledge exchanges). • Leverage global networks to promote the dissemination and uptake of analytical tools and models to support policy coherence and integration

Area	Action points
	<p>and to encourage their practical use. Members can learn the value of these tools and acquire the skills needed for using them in practice.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate strategic foresight into civil service training and the education of current and next generations of public officials. • Increase investment in computational social science by Government, research and educational institutions to endow the new generations of decision makers and social scientists with a mix of skills and interdisciplinarity. • Include subnational authorities in ongoing knowledge sharing and joint peer learning exercises to facilitate coordination across levels of government. • Increase the participation of regions, countries and actors historically underrepresented in Global SDG networks to ensure that all voices can equally contribute towards developing practical sustainable development solutions.
<i>Science and research to support integration and coherence for the SDGs</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure better alignment between tools to address SDG interdependencies and trade-offs and decision makers' demands in different contexts. • Illustrate with concrete examples the value of tools to address complex SDG trade-offs and pressing challenges. • Support efforts to scale up budget tagging through new artificial intelligence methods. • Conduct further research into the value budget tagging adds to PFM to document its benefits, showing the net benefit of implementing it across the fiscal policy cycle and its value to various stakeholders. • Engage the scientific community in multi-stakeholder processes in decision-making and priority-setting to help enhance public trust in science and support inclusive knowledge production. • Explore ways to make science systems more inclusive and equitable in order to involve a wider range of voices, institutions, types of knowledge and approaches. • Identify governance models and arrangements that could strengthen science-policy interfaces and accelerate local transformations for sustainable development.
<i>Multilateral organizations and donors' support</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a simple internationally accepted budget tagging and prioritization model with support of international financial institutions, which could be freely used to link budgets and spending with development results. • Provide technical assistance to Governments in integrating a goal-oriented approach throughout the budget process and across the fiscal policy cycle. • Champion a responsible foresight agenda for societal transformation by integrating specific commitments into international standards, programme design, and <i>Our Common Agenda</i> proposals (including intergenerational citizen engagement, especially from the global south, as well as accountability mechanisms to assess the intergenerational distributional impact of policies).

Chapter 3: What Assets and Innovations Can Governments Mobilize to Transform the Public Sector and Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals?

3.1 Introduction

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015 prompted deep reflection on the importance of reshaping and transforming public institutions to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The current context is far less favourable than when the SDGs were originally agreed. Governments face many challenges, such as the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, violent conflict with spillover effects, environmental crises, food shortages, and supply chain disruptions in a context of high levels of debt and shrinking budgets. It is now clearer than ever that the State and effective, accountable and inclusive public institutions have an “inescapable stewardship role” to play in finding innovative solutions to address the repercussions of these overlapping crises.¹ It has been noted that the pandemic has restored the standing of the State as a legitimate authority and even as a “principle of first resort”, with States at the forefront of crisis response.

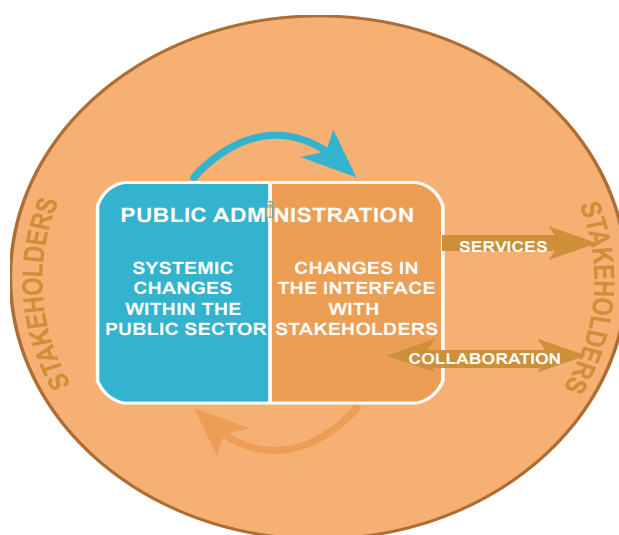
The pandemic brought about abrupt disruptions in the ways of working of public institutions. The urgency to respond in real time loosened institutional constraints² and forced public agencies to quickly experiment with alternative ways to operate,³ both of which accelerated innovation. Beyond the implementation of buffer measures to maintain essential public services, the crisis provided opportunities for transformations in public administration that would have been challenging to pursue in “normal” times. In Italy, for example, the pandemic forced public sector managers to make decisions that usually required a lengthy approval process in a short time, without the guidance of policymakers and amid financial uncertainty.⁴ In some cases, as explored in this chapter, more efficient and effective ways to deliver public services were found, and many of these may become the “new normal”. Nevertheless, it is not clear that this momentum of agile decision-making, experimentation and innovation observed during the pandemic will be carried into the future. This raises the question of how to foster innovation in public institutions once crises are over and regular procedures and processes resume.

For the State to retain public trust, it must innovate and be better prepared to handle future systemic shocks, being proactive enough to address problems before they emerge and become crises. At the same time, the challenges posed to Governments by cascading crises in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic further pressure them to identify innovative approaches to better serve their constituents. Governments can tap into the innovations developed to respond to the pandemic to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Public innovation initiatives, which involve public means to produce solutions with a public purpose, necessitate an inclusive approach that poses the question “For whom does change work?”—an inquiry Governments may not be giving sufficient attention to amid rapidly unfolding crises.⁵

While innovation undoubtedly plays a pivotal role in enhancing institutional effectiveness, it is important to acknowledge that it is one element of a broader picture. To earn people’s trust, public institutions need to fulfil their responsibilities, provide services in an effective and equitable manner, and be accountable for the effective management of public funds. Critical requirements for this are that public institutions are adequately funded and possess the necessary competencies. Public institutions also need to be accountable to the public and transparent. As illustrated in this and other chapters of the present report, not only do participation and engagement facilitate the development of policies and services that are robust enough to tackle complex social issues and emergencies, but they are also critical ingredients of shared trust between people and Governments. The establishment of an inclusive, gender-balanced and diverse public service that accurately reflects the population it serves is also an essential element. A public sector that enjoys people’s trust can leverage the expertise of non-State actors to create a joint agenda that meets the public's needs and frames processes and services that are beneficial for all in the post-pandemic “new normal”.

With these considerations in mind, the present chapter focuses on how Governments can mobilize successful innovations that emerged in the public sector during the pandemic for the development of longer-term strategies and policies to achieve the SDGs. To address complex crises and accelerate progress toward the SDGs, Governments need to pursue innovative approaches in two distinct yet interconnected dimensions. The first dimension relates to policy innovations as well as administrative, organizational and systemic change within public administration itself. The second dimension is about transformations in the interaction between Governments and stakeholders, in particular at the interface between people and public institutions in relation to public service delivery. The next sections of this overview examine these dimensions.

Figure 3.1. Innovation in the public sector to deliver the SDGs and build resilience to crises



Source: Author’s elaboration.

3.2 Policy innovations and changes within public administration

Much is still being discovered about how to promote innovation in the public sector and which abilities, techniques and assets are needed to do it successfully, particularly when innovation emerges during a crisis. The public sector has an important role to play in creating the right environment to nurture and institutionalize innovation.⁶ Developments observed during the pandemic suggest that assets such as public accountability, coherence among different levels of government, enhanced capabilities and professionalism of public servants, and digital transformation should be considered by Governments as building blocks of strategies to foster transformative change within public administration (see figure 2). This section explores these four elements in turn.

3.2.1 Innovation versus transformation

The literature suggests that innovation can come about as incremental improvements or disruptions and transformations that alter or replace processes or services.⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic pushed Governments to quickly find solutions to adapt to the drastically changed context. According to the World Bank, effective public sector agencies experimented with new ways to operate, including strengthening crisis management and preparedness through a coordinated response often led by the centre of government (see box 3.1).⁸

Box 3.1. Coordination of the response to COVID-19 in Cambodia

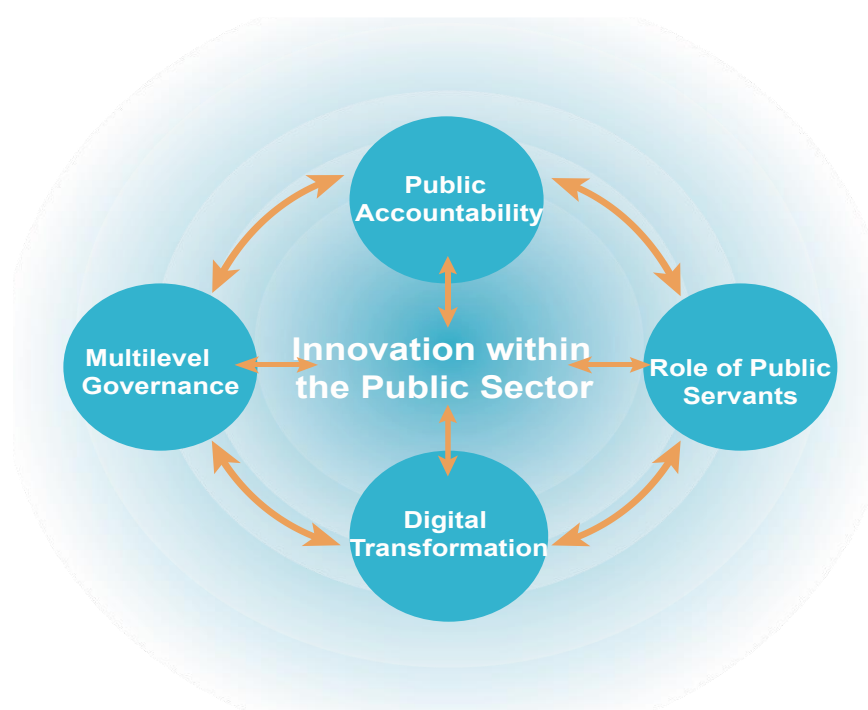
The Government of Cambodia set up the National Response Committee, chaired by the Prime Minister, to identify a national policy and strategy in response to COVID-19 and lead implementation plans to control the pandemic.^(a) The Committee was also responsible for minimizing socioeconomic impacts as well as leading and facilitating the implementation of multisectoral and interministerial measures at the national and subnational levels.^(b) An assessment of the COVID-19 response in Cambodia highlights the country's swift action and effective control measures during the initial year, leading to the successful containment of the pandemic. Additionally, by the second year, Cambodia had achieved extensive vaccination coverage.^(c) The assessment underscores the crucial role of strong leadership and transformative governance in the country's response.

Sources: ^(a) Jana Kunicova, "Driving the COVID-19 response from the center: institutional mechanisms to ensure whole-of-government coordination", World Bank Governance Global Practice (Washington, D.C., World Bank Group, November 2020), available at <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/944721604613856580/pdf/Driving-the-COVID-19-Response-from-the-Center-Institutional-Mechanisms-to-Ensure-Whole-of-Government-Coordination.pdf>, pp. 24 and 42; ^(b) *ibid.*, p. 42; ^(c) Srean Chhim and others, "Descriptive assessment of COVID-19 responses and lessons learnt in Cambodia, January 2020 to June 2022", *BMJ Global Health*, vol. 8, No. 5 (n.d.), available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2023-011885>.

Beneficial, one-off innovations triggered by crises may not be sufficient to foster transformation in the long run and accelerate the pace of implementation of the SDGs. Experts argue that Governments need to be able to adapt to the changing environment and systemically embed innovation at the heart of policymaking and public administration.⁹

An increased pace of SDG implementation may require the rethinking of the model of operation of the public sector, as elaborated in the contribution of Geert Bouckaert. Experts underscore that new models should be shaped by people-centred and inclusive approaches based on the central principle of the 2030 Agenda to leave no one behind and on integrity and ethical behaviour.¹⁰ New models of operation for the public sector may combine enhanced capacities for crisis management with a change from hierarchical, static and siloed structures to dynamic collaborative and enabling approaches.¹¹ The impact of innovation in the public sector, especially when it has been developed in reaction to a crisis, must be considered in terms of improved effectiveness, resource optimization, and inclusive access to public goods and services within a sustainability perspective.

Figure 3.2. Policy innovations and changes within public administration



Source: Author's elaboration

3.2.2 Innovation and public accountability

Transparency and accountability are key determinants of the effectiveness of public institutions and cannot be ignored in transformation processes. As noted in the *World Public Sector Report 2021*, the responses to the pandemic increased risks for integrity violations in the allocation and use of public resources and core government functions. The pandemic necessitated the rapid scaling up of service delivery and social protection, which brought with it new pressures and challenges to public oversight. Emergencies were used to justify the use of legislative and administrative shortcuts, sometimes limiting transparency and compromising the ability of oversight institutions such as parliaments and supreme audit institutions to demand accountability

from Governments. Nevertheless, oversight institutions found ways to utilize innovation to promote access to information, transparency and accountability.¹² In this context, it has been noted that the pandemic hindered the increasing trend of cooperation between supreme audit institutions and organized citizens, which is an important channel for enhancing public oversight (see the contribution by Jonathan Fox in this chapter).

In his contribution, Fox notes that the institutional resilience of transparency, participation and accountability reforms was challenged when national emergencies necessitated swift policy decisions rather than collaborative regulation and public oversight. He cautions that legal measures alone may not be enough to ensure the stability of the related mechanisms and systems during crises. Anchoring those at multiple levels of government can strengthen the durability of policy changes over time. This creates of a system of checks and balances and allows committed policymakers at different levels of government to counteract the impacts of inaction or changing priorities at other levels of government.

3.2.3 Multilevel governance and innovation at the subnational level

Context-based policy responses to crises are witnessed at the national and subnational levels.¹³ During COVID-19, subnational governments (including states, provinces and municipalities) were at the front line of crisis management and continued to play a central role during the recovery period. Innovation at the subnational level has in some cases promoted a more agile and responsive reaction to crises by leveraging closeness to citizens.¹⁴ Box 3.2 provides examples of local-level responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Latin America. In other cases, results may have been mixed because of lack of capacity at the subnational level. In a post-pandemic context, public sector agencies may consider how to incorporate and scale up innovative practices coming from the subnational level that have the potential to transform pre-pandemic standards. However, this requires dedicated processes for detecting, assessing and institutionalizing innovation, which may not exist.

Box 3.2. Local-level response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil and Chile

On 26 February 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Brazil, after which the virus spread rapidly throughout the country's main cities. Lack of direction from the central Government pushed states and municipal councils to coordinate sanitary measures, including supervising quarantines, redeploying the health workforce, and financing vaccine research. Sapopemba is a district in São Paulo where approximately 20 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line, often lacking access to essential services such as piped water supply and proper sewerage infrastructure. City commissioners and congressional members supported citizens in holding meetings with municipal government departments to identify and jointly coordinate preventive actions. These included handing out face masks donated by companies, coordinating educational activities, and organizing talks with school communities about returning to class. Areas presenting a high risk of infection were identified, as were the impacts of the pandemic on residents' lives. The collaboration between communities and local authorities allowed the effective identification of priority responses in a participatory manner.

In Chile, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed on 3 March 2020. At that time, the country was facing a social and political crisis, with massive unrest and citizens demanding social justice and equity. This created institutional instability at the national level. Several initiatives were organized at the local level to support those in need. Interventions focused on addressing food insecurity, providing recreational and self-care activities, sanitizing public spaces, and manufacturing and distributing masks. The measures implemented helped ease the burden on public health authorities and fostered community mobilization, resilience and unity in addressing the COVID-19 crisis, reminiscent of the collective efforts witnessed during the economic downturn of the 1980s. According to a survey conducted in the country, one third of the individuals engaged in community-driven initiatives reported collaborating with local health teams or authorities. Despite the prevailing distrust towards public institutions during the pandemic, community involvement continued to serve as a means of collaboration with the Government.

Source: Christian R. Montenegro and Felipe Szabzon, “Co-production? We do community participation: experiences and perspectives in the context of the COVID-19 crisis from Latin America”, in *Rapid Response: COVID-19 and Co-Production in Health and Social Care Research, Policy, and Practice—Volume 1: The Challenges and Necessity of Co-Production*, Peter Beresford and others, eds. (Bristol, United Kingdom, Bristol University Press/Policy Press, 2021), available at <https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/covid-19-and-coproduction-in-health-and-social-care>.

In his contribution, Louis Meuleman observes that the centralization trend induced by COVID-19 and other crises has put high pressure on the relations between national and subnational governments. He argues that the pandemic brought to light and reinforced the challenges of multilevel governance arrangements, exposing the fragmentation which hampered the impact of government responses. Bouckaert echoes this idea in his contribution. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) affirms that some Governments have set up mechanisms for multilevel dialogue, coordination, collaboration and funding to reduce fragmentation. Hinging on the availability of reliable and timely data, multilevel collaboration mechanisms aim to enhance crisis management, response and information-sharing. In Greece, Italy and the United Arab Emirates, the Government has bolstered the collection and aggregation of data to drive evidence-informed policymaking. Other experts add that coordination across levels of government is even more relevant in the context of revenue generation and spending imbalances among the different tiers of government in the aftermath of the pandemic.¹⁵

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Ghana adopted a flexible yet centralized approach that relied on information and directives from the central Government to the local governments.¹⁶ To provide the necessary urgent response, the central Government delegated authority to local state agencies, with the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development tasked to coordinate local activities and promote compliance with health protocols. This approach resulted in strengthened and unified policy design and execution throughout the country.

Transformative strategies require coordinating bottom-up and top-down approaches, adapting and adopting successful innovations that emerged in response to the crisis. In his contribution, Meuleman notes that in Germany, the importance of a two-tier crisis management system was more pronounced during than before the pandemic. He argues that collaboration across levels of government helped foster innovation while addressing capacity and resource constraints, and notes

that coordination with the national level is also critical for effectively integrating innovative local experiences into multiscale governance approaches.

3.2.4 The role of public servants

Transformation relies on the capabilities and performance of public officials, as well as the effective management of the public sector workforce. The COVID-19 pandemic showcased the crucial role of public servants in ensuring the uninterrupted delivery of public services and continuity in essential functions of the State, highlighting their adaptability in the face of challenges.¹⁷ Public servants were also essential in furthering innovation during the pandemic, devising new modalities for delivering public services and leveraging data and tools to further the attainment of the SDGs.

In the light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid influx of refugees as a result of the security crisis in Ukraine, the public sector in Romania identified the need for a comprehensive approach to skill development and learning, as well as changes in hiring criteria and competency frameworks, to incorporate the soft skills needed by public servants to promote innovation. Skill development is a key feature of a comprehensive strategy or systemic approach¹⁸ that embeds “innovative capacities into the framework, culture and processes of government” to support the implementation of impactful policies and the design of service approaches that can handle complexity.¹⁹

Because building the capacity of public servants was a challenge during the pandemic, training methods had to be innovative, as illustrated in the contribution of Odette Ramsingh and Carlien Jooste and that of Ankita Meghani and Taryn Vian. In South Africa, for instance, health workforce training had to be transformed, and reliance on online platforms increased dramatically. Governments can leverage this transformation beyond the pandemic as an affordable or complementary alternative to in-person training while ensuring inclusive access to capacity-development opportunities.

Common narratives about innovation in the public sector emphasize the need for an enabling environment with appropriate regulation and infrastructure, as well as innovation-oriented organizational cultures, mindsets, capabilities and tools. They also emphasize that public servants need to be properly equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to promote innovation, so it is important to ensure that workforce competencies are strong in areas such as technology, strategic anticipation, crisis management, adaptability, resilience and change management.

During the pandemic, public sector managers and staff often departed from this general conception and did not wait for all these elements to be in place before engaging in innovation. This reflects one of the key differences between “normal” times and crises. In normal, non-emergency conditions, public servants may not often be allowed to experiment with innovation, learn from unsuccessful attempts, or understand how to manage the risks associated with innovation failure. They may also lack the optimism, influence and motivation necessary to explore new ways of delivering public services and capitalizing on data and tools that can foster innovation. All of this can drastically change during crises.

Ramsingh and Jooste relate that the Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University in South Africa experienced a surge in collaboration and unity among its public servants during the pandemic, allowing innovation to take place much faster than would have been possible in normal circumstances based on standard transformation management approaches. The need to react to the crisis generated a strong sense of determination and purpose among the staff and as a result, the digitalization of the University, which was to have been carried out as part of a five-year strategic plan, was accomplished in under six months. Additionally, the University's human resources team issued working-from-home protocols within a day of the national lockdown announcement to ensure the safety of its personnel and students.

3.2.5 Digital transformation

During COVID-19 lockdowns, public sector agencies tapped digital technologies to continue their operations and deliver services. For example, some public institutions started conducting interviews online to fill vacant positions—a practice that had not previously been employed in many cases. As noted by Ramsingh and Jooste, the shift to increased digitalization at the Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University in South Africa resulted in a more than 50 per cent reduction in the administrative and logistical costs of recruitment and greater collaboration among different administrative functions.

As the pandemic progressed, policymakers responded through new systemic approaches leveraging digitalization. An example is the technology-enabled transformation of processes and core functional systems implemented by the United States Department of Commerce to address the pandemic. The innovation consisted of the design and implementation of a multifunction model encompassing the Department's human resources, financial management, and information and communications technology (ICT) functions across all 12 of its constituent bureaus.²⁰ Box 3.3 illustrates how Singapore designed a systemic approach to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of public service by leveraging digitalization in response to the pandemic.²¹

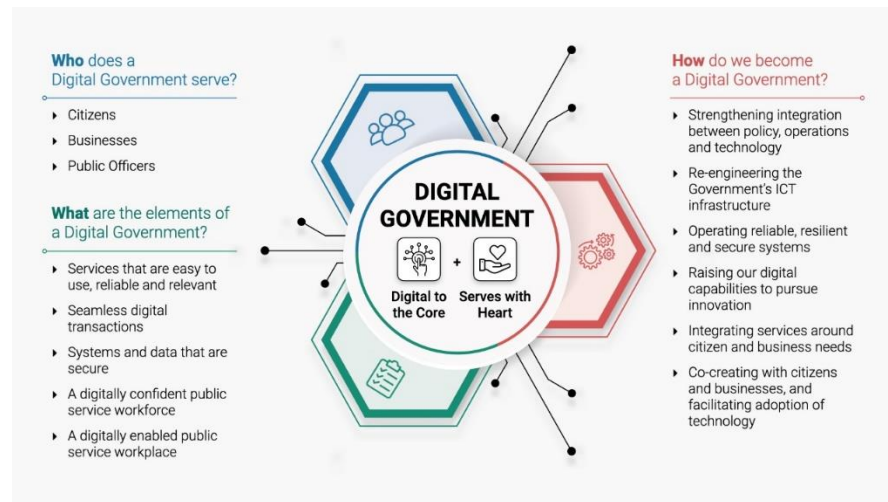
Box 3.3. Systemic approach to digitalization in public service delivery during the pandemic in Singapore

Singapore turned the disruption brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic into a catalyst for accelerating public innovation. The Government took proactive measures, developing digital solutions that utilized data collection and integrated operations and technology to combat the virus. This approach was rooted in the country's commitment to embracing innovation as a core value, fostering collaboration among public agencies, and adopting an agile approach to deliver services using a whole-of-government strategy.

Transforming the delivery of government digital services, with a focus on meeting citizen and business needs, also contributed to the effective containment of COVID-19. The Government Technology Agency of Singapore established workflows and processes to ensure that people's needs were prioritized. These efforts were guided by the country's Digital Government Blueprint and supported by the Singapore Government Tech Stack, a set of digital tools designed to streamline and simplify application development. The Tech Stack enables government agencies to accelerate digital application development by leveraging reusable code across the entire government.

The pandemic also stimulated the crowdsourcing of digital solutions. Issues such as isolation and mental health were addressed within this context, and the solutions adopted—including offering assistance to seniors in accessing health care and addressing the educational needs of students—were aimed at leaving no one behind.

Singapore: Digital Government Blueprint



Sources: Singapore, Government Technology Agency (GovTech), “Digital Government Blueprint”, available at <https://www.tech.gov.sg/digital-government-blueprint/>; Ang Hak Seng and Sueann Soon, “Transformation in the Singapore public service: emerging stronger from the pandemic”, *Ethos*, a publication of the Civil Service College Singapore, issue 22: Learning from Crisis, Tharman Shanmugaratnam, ed. (June 2021), available at <https://www.csc.gov.sg/articles/transformation-in-the-singapore-public-service-emerging-stronger-from-the-pandemic>; Singapore, GovTech, “Singapore Government Tech Stack”, available at <https://www.tech.gov.sg/products-and-services/singapore-government-tech-stack/>; Singapore, GovTech, “How techies can facilitate the post-circuit breaker economy”, *technews*, 22 May 2020, available at <https://www.tech.gov.sg/media/technews/how-techies-can-facilitate-the-post-circuit-breaker-economy>.

Digital technologies played a significant role during the pandemic. In some countries, they supported the efficient disbursement of social protection benefits and the identification of beneficiaries, especially in countries that had pre-existing systems in place (see the contribution by Fox in this chapter). Digital technologies allowed policymakers to access and analyse data related to behaviours to identify trends and patterns, including those linked to health and lifestyle choices, as highlighted in box 4. Such data supported decision-making on, for example, lockdown strategies requiring changes in people’s behaviour to cope with the pandemic. Experts warn, however, that extracting data to fuel algorithmic decision-making processes may potentially create or amplify discriminatory outcomes.²² Furthermore, because the changes digital technologies produce are not predictable in all contexts, oversimplified narratives of their positive impact on SDG implementation are misleading. Experts refer to ICT as part of the solution but not a solution in itself. Contextual approaches are needed, especially at the local level.²³

Box 3.4. The use of digital technology to analyse health and lifestyle habits during the pandemic in Poland

The Chief Sanitary Inspectorate in Poland developed the System of Records of the State Sanitary Inspection (SEPIS), which integrated multiple systems across national and local branches of the Inspectorate and enabled real-time information exchange to effectively mitigate the spread of COVID-19. The Inspectorate used multiple channels, including websites, helplines and mobile applications, to undertake epidemiological interviews and collect information about people's health and lifestyle habits to better understand the spread of the disease. SEPIS allowed users to register information on the outbreak and update their vaccination records. It also helped improve the quality of the Inspectorate's work as measured, inter alia, by the shorter time required to handle public requests. The data collected via SEPIS enabled decision makers to analyse the changing epidemic situation, which contributed to mitigating the spread of the virus in the country.

Source: United Nations, Public Service Innovation Hub, United Nations Public Service Award winners for 2022, featuring the Chief Sanitary Inspectorate of Poland and its initiative relating to the System of Records of the State Sanitary Inspection (SEPIS), available at <https://publicadministration.un.org/unpsa/database/Special-Category-on-covid-19-response/SEPIS>.

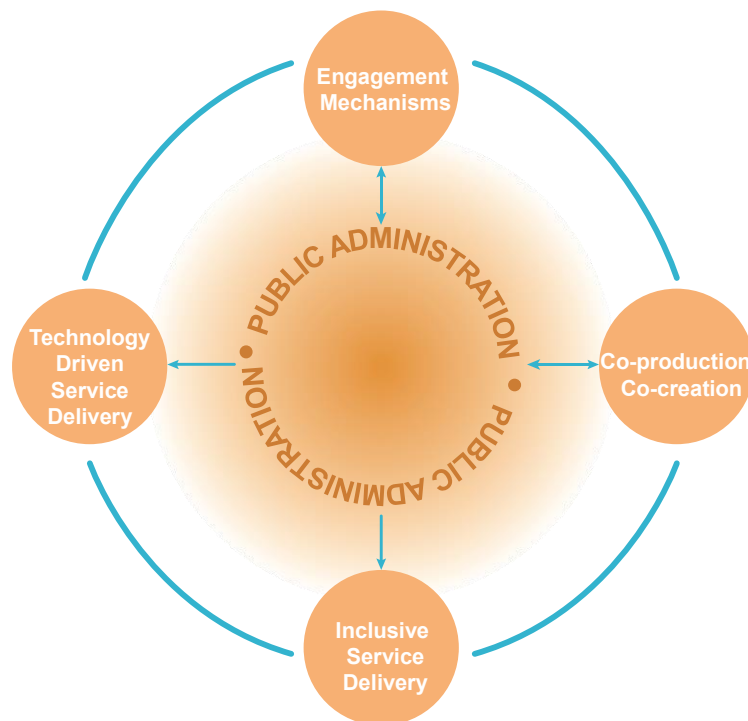
3.3 Transformations in the interactions between Governments and stakeholders and the delivery of public services

Engaging and collaborating with non-State actors has long been recognized as important for Governments, both to enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of policy decisions and to improve the responsiveness and quality of public services. Chapter 1 of this report examines elements of the broader relationships between Governments and other actors, including voice, fiscal fairness, justice, information, and digital transformation, while chapter 2 addresses collaboration between policymakers, citizens, and the scientific community in the context of policy integration and policy coherence.

Innovations in response to the coronavirus emergency have placed a new emphasis on systems thinking and the role of Governments in “building an innovative society and in inventing solutions to emerging issues”.²⁴ Nigeria, for example, established a national emergency response system that brought together a group of stakeholders with academic, health policy and service expertise to assess how response measures such as lockdowns affected living standards and business activities in the country.²⁵

In the context of multiple intersecting crises, the public sector is increasingly being called upon to create an ecosystem of innovation that promotes dynamic linkages among multiple organizations and across sectors.²⁶ This section explores transformative changes in the interaction between Governments and stakeholders through engagement, co-production, co-creation and enhanced service delivery.

Figure 3.3. Transformations in interactions between Governments and stakeholders and the delivery of public services



Source: Author's elaboration.

3.3.1 Innovative and resilient engagement mechanisms

During the pandemic, existing institutions, mechanisms and structures were used to deliver new or adapted services, as Fox highlights in his contribution. The conditional cash transfer (CCT) programme in the Philippines is a social protection programme managed by the Department of Social Welfare that reaches 4.4 million households. The programme, which has also been promoting civic awareness, is supported by a broad-based autonomous membership organization made up of its beneficiaries. During the pandemic, the Government used the CCT delivery mechanism to deploy a new social amelioration programme that benefitted a record number of households. As another example, the City Council of Madrid, through the Decide Madrid portal, offered new options in an existing public space to allow citizens to put forward solutions and provide feedback on public services during the pandemic and propose solidarity initiatives to cope with the quarantine.²⁷

There have also been new and innovative engagement mechanisms which have emerged since the start of the pandemic that allow individual citizens and communities to participate in decision-making and co-design public policies. To give structure to such participation during the pandemic, the Berlin Senate in Germany developed the Berlin Engagement Strategy 2020-2025. The Strategy is designed to strengthen the partnership between the Government and civil society and encourage

the voluntary commitment of Berliners to jointly shape a vibrant and solidary society. The Strategy includes measures such as strengthening dialogue between the Government and civil society and providing support for the digitalization of civil society organizations.²⁸

For engagement mechanisms to be successful, they need to be rule-based and embedded in the regular processes of public administration. Key elements that public sector organizations need to consider are the outcome and impact of participatory decision-making and collaborative innovation.²⁹ Public administration needs to be aware of diverse motivational determinants to create favourable conditions for collaboration and develop incentives, particularly for a quicker and more effective response to a crisis.³⁰ Having a broader understanding of needs is instrumental for optimizing the impact of innovations beyond the immediate results of participation and for accelerating the pace of change for those who are engaged.³¹

3.3.2 Co-production, co-creation and changes in service delivery

Governments have long utilized co-production and other forms of collaboration with businesses, charities, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders in designing public policies and delivering services. Co-production allows for an equal partnership between service providers and users—with the latter not only receiving services but also having a hand in creating them.³² Pre- and post-pandemic examples of public service co-production have been seen in a variety of sectors, including agriculture, education, health care and law enforcement.³³

With interactions between the public sector and recipients of public services heavily disrupted during lockdowns, many countries and institutions moved rapidly and drastically to co-production in health care, social protection, transport and education, as noted by several experts in their contributions. The pandemic presented Brazil with unprecedented difficulties, including a dramatic increase in social vulnerability. The Sesc Mesa Brasil food bank programme leveraged the benefits of co-production to help ameliorate some of the most urgent challenges. This initiative catalysed the efforts of community and civil society organizations to address the food and health security crisis and enabled social organizations to supplement State efforts to meet the needs of the population.³⁴ In the area of education, a study on public universities in Tunisia shows how the beneficiaries of distance learning co-created value with the service provider during the pandemic. Students became co-producers and shaped the quality of distance learning services based on their specific needs during lockdowns. The study claims that this form of collaboration positively impacted the outcome and level of satisfaction for web-based learning.³⁵

It is difficult to measure the impact of co-production on the responsiveness, innovativeness and efficiency of public services.³⁶ In a broad sense, however, the pressures on public expenditure and the multiple challenges public institutions are facing to maintain high standards of service delivery in the wake of the pandemic have highlighted the importance of collaborating with multiple actors to address policy and operational challenges. Some models of co-production that evolved during the pandemic offer promise for the future. In Japan, pandemic-induced collaboration between service providers, community members and recipients as equal partners in long-term elder care not only improved service delivery during the health crisis but, according to experts, may also

serve as the basis for a new post-COVID model of health-care co-production on a larger scale in the country.³⁷

In their contribution, Meghani and Vian emphasize that co-production with the private sector was critical in the COVID-19 response. The formation of public-private partnerships enabled the rapid development of COVID-19 tests, treatments and vaccines, among other advances. Through collaboration with the private sector, laboratory capacity and testing were increased in Ghana, Nepal and Nigeria, and hospital capacity was expanded in Ghana, Nepal and Bangladesh. These examples demonstrate the potential of partnerships and co-production to create a more resilient future and enable a “transformative co-productive approach” to rebuilding post-pandemic.³⁸

Despite the potential benefits of co-production,³⁹ the process of scaling up remains a challenge. Governments that wish to transition from temporary measures to systematic approaches to incorporating co-production into their standard operations in order to foster a collaborative culture, strengthen the capacity for collaboration, and ensure their preparedness for future crises must consider institutional elements such as legislative frameworks that enable co-production arrangements as well as transparency and accountability, which affect stakeholders’ willingness to co-produce.⁴⁰ Governments must also address challenges surrounding co-production that have been particularly prominent during the pandemic, including tensions between users and providers, cost pressures, incentive-related issues, and the attitude of public service officials who may feel uneasy about the increased role of stakeholders in public sector decision-making (see the contribution by Ramsingh and Jooste).⁴¹

3.3.3 *Inclusive service delivery*

In the wake of the pandemic—given the adverse trends relating to poverty, inequality and vulnerability—Governments are under even greater pressure to provide public services that are accessible and affordable for all.⁴² This is particularly true for services that are essential for the well-being of the population, including those linked to health, education, water and sanitation, nutrition and social protection.

The pandemic accelerated health-care innovation, with a number of creative solutions adopted to reduce the burden on health-care systems.⁴³ Several examples showcase innovations that have not only broadened access to health-care services but also promoted inclusion and participation. The Republic of Korea has made health-care services more accessible to low-income and socially isolated older persons through partnerships with clinics, welfare services, and care service providers. According to a self-assessment, the programme has contributed to reducing the percentage of the population with unmet medical treatment needs to a mere 8.7 per cent. Through this collaborative effort, more than 90,000 cases have benefited significantly.⁴⁴ The United Arab Emirates launched a national programme to administer tests to persons with disabilities in their homes during the pandemic.⁴⁵ In the United States, the Health+ Long COVID programme has employed people-centred design to create patient-centric solutions in collaboration with individuals who have been affected by the virus. This includes the organization of “Healthathons” to swiftly develop and implement solutions with the help of the community.⁴⁶

In the education sector, many countries have implemented new initiatives designed to expand opportunities for students. Over the last three years, the Prefecture of the District of Jaboatão dos Guararapes in Brazil has improved inclusiveness by granting access to secondary-level technical schools to students from low-income families with low education levels. According to a self-evaluation, the programme has made a substantial impact on the enrolment of district students in technical schools. Moreover, the dropout rate among students having completed middle school has declined by 27 per cent and now stands below the national average.⁴⁷ Botswana enhanced inclusiveness by creating a web-based interactive platform accessible to both learners and teachers. This collaboration resulted in more inclusive and equitable quality education as well as improved learning opportunities and service performance.⁴⁸ Ghana increased the ICT education and ICT exams pass rate of junior high school students by bringing hands-on mobile computer classes to remote and under-resourced schools.⁴⁹ Ireland appointed caseworkers to cater for the specific requirements of underprivileged children. Customized plans developed by caseworkers have addressed learners' needs and facilitated their access to online education. This has included providing laptops, broadband connectivity and digital literacy training. As a result, disadvantaged children have been empowered with the necessary tools and support to actively participate in online learning—which has contributed to bridging the digital divide.⁵⁰

3.3.4 Technology-driven service delivery

The use of digital technology helped public institutions transform service delivery and enhance responses to COVID-19.⁵¹ In the health sector, Rwanda promoted the use of drone technology to transport medicines in rural settings and the use of robots to carry out medical tasks. Other innovations in public service delivery include the expansion of telemedicine and telehealth platforms, the creation of online portals to facilitate the vaccination process and access to mobile health applications, the use of data analytics, and the targeted application of artificial intelligence to strengthen public sector responsiveness (see the contribution by Meghani and Vian).⁵² Digital technology was also used during the pandemic for online schooling, judicial proceedings, e-voting in parliamentary proceedings, and (in India, for example) creating links between citizens' bank accounts and mobile phones to facilitate the disbursement of COVID-19 cash relief.⁵³

Innovation has also been observed in approaches to digital government at the whole-of-government level. Greece developed online systems and promoted e-governance after the outbreak of COVID-19 to enable citizens to gain virtual access to public authorities and to allow public servants to work remotely. Through these reforms, citizens were able to communicate with government authorities and deal with official documentation in real time, with less red tape, and with no risk of spreading the virus. This innovation led to the launch of a unified digital portal in 2020 as a new form of public management to allow citizens and businesses to access digital services easily and in a centralized manner.⁵⁴

In the post-pandemic context of increased socioeconomic and digital disparities, shifts to digital operations to keep Governments running and reduce costs may have further worsened inequalities in some contexts. The sudden increase in the usage of digital technology has exacerbated the digital divide within countries related to gender, age, disability, geography and socioeconomic status. As many essential services became virtual, those without broadband Internet access have been

excluded, and the consequences could be long-lasting. This is especially prominent in the least developed countries, landlocked developing countries, and small island developing States, where Internet and mobile phone access remain low for a significant portion of the population.⁵⁵ Experts emphasize that a nuanced and contextual approach to digitalization leverages the advantages of technology while addressing digital divides;⁵⁶ such an approach might include, for example, narrowing the digital skills gap among older people⁵⁷ and enhancing accessibility for persons with disabilities.⁵⁸ The *United Nations E-Government Survey 2022* emphasizes the importance of identifying the diverse needs of men and women and leveraging technology to deliver targeted solutions and improve the quality and range of public services provided to marginalized and vulnerable groups. The *Survey* shows examples of measures aimed at addressing digital divides in post-pandemic contexts, including the broadening of accessibility to mobile applications in Japan and the Republic of Korea and the development of more accessible websites in New Zealand.⁵⁹

A just and inclusive digital transformation that leaves no one behind includes hybrid models of service delivery.⁶⁰ Blended or multi-channel service delivery that coordinates and integrates online and offline options allows the Government to provide a seamless experience for all users, including those in underserved areas and vulnerable groups.⁶¹ In 2020, the Ministry of Health in Panama employed a blended service delivery approach for managing a national vaccination campaign. This enabled offline access to the vaccination system for people in remote areas with limited or no Internet connection. The system allowed for offline applications and the local storage of vaccination records, which vaccination centres in remote areas could then upload to the government cloud.⁶²

The rapid acceleration of digitalization during and following the pandemic has heightened the urgency of regulating digital services. Relevant policies should allow innovation to flourish but also protect the rights of users and ensure that digital services are secure and equitable—for instance, by protecting women from the increased online violence they have experienced since COVID-19 emerged.⁶³

3.4. The way forward

The pandemic and post-pandemic periods have emphasized the necessity of moving beyond crisis management and addressing complex long-term issues. In order to tackle these challenges within the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a new approach to innovation and transformation is required. This approach should be centred around effectiveness, accountability, inclusivity, collaborative governance and equity, drawing upon knowledge from various sources both within and outside public administration.

Public institutions need to evolve into innovative, technology-savvy entities that have the capacity to engage and co-create with non-State actors. As the pandemic illustrated, this may involve shifting away from the conventional emphasis on efficiency and minimal government intervention towards more participatory and multi-stakeholder forms of governance. Through investment in transformative public-sector change programmes, organizations can unlock their capabilities to go beyond merely responding to disruptions. Fostering transformation and adaptive mindsets will be key to enabling them to anticipate and effectively address the pressing challenges within their

societies, even in complex and dynamic environments.⁶⁴ To ensure equal accessibility to quality public services for all and to harness assets and innovations that Governments can utilize to achieve the SDGs and enhance preparedness for future crises, it is essential to place men, women, older persons, youth, persons with disabilities and vulnerable populations at the centre of public service design.

The contributions comprising the remainder of this chapter further explore innovative solutions that emerged during the pandemic to revamp the public sector's current model of operation, support collaboration across different levels and actors, and improve the delivery of public services—including developments relating to co-creation and hybrid learning. In the contribution by Fox, governance transformation and public service provision are examined from an institutional resilience perspective. Meghani and Vyan provide an overview of innovations in health-care systems and service delivery. Meuleman examines innovative forms of multilevel government coordination and preparedness after COVID-19. Ramsingh and Jooste examine hybrid learning modalities adopted in a university in South Africa and their influence on innovation and performance. Bouckaert reflects on rethinking the current model of operation of the public sector after COVID-19. Thijs and Berryhill offer a view on co-production from an OECD perspective. A summary of the key recommendations arising from the contributions is presented in a table at the end of this chapter.

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Expert contributions to Chapter 3

Governance Reform and Public Service Provision: Institutional Resilience and State-Society Synergy

*Jonathan Fox*¹

For more than two decades, national and international policy reformers have sought to improve public service provision by applying transparency, participation and accountability innovations. Relevant initiatives often pursue collaborative governance strategies to bring public servants, citizens and civil society organizations together to generate feedback and promote problem-solving from the front lines. These efforts support the pursuit of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets 16.6 and 16.7, which respectively call for developing “effective, accountable and transparent institutions” and ensuring “responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels”.

Sceptics point to social science field experiments that find little evidence of impact—yet those evaluations only address tool-led, localized interventions.² These “light touch”, micro-level tests of governance innovations leave open the question of the possible impacts of larger-scale, more strategic reforms of public service delivery. Yet both sceptics and advocates of open-government, participation and accountability reforms are likely to agree that their institutional resilience is uncertain—especially when reform champions leave office, or when national crises prioritize rapid policy responses over participatory co-governance and citizen oversight. Meanwhile, numerous multilateral efforts have yet to be independently evaluated to assess their longer-term impacts—as in the notable cases of the World Bank’s mandate to include citizen engagement measures across all of its investment projects or the Open Government Partnership’s national action plans.

Even before the pandemic, this international wave of transparency and accountability reforms faced increasingly inhospitable national policy environments in many countries. Then pandemic-driven urgency to scale up service delivery and social protection added new burdens and threats to public oversight and co-governance reforms. For example, the pandemic slowed what had been growing international momentum towards greater collaboration between supreme audit institutions and organized citizens as a pathway to more effective public oversight.³ Indeed, one of the most promising of such innovations—“citizen participatory audits” in the Philippines—continued to win international accolades even after it stopped publishing the results of collaborative efforts.⁴ At the same time, some public oversight and co-governance innovations managed to survive recent challenges at both the national and subnational levels. Indeed, explanations of national pandemic response success stories such as the Republic of Korea underscore the key role of State-society synergy.⁵

This brief review of institutionally resilient participatory oversight reforms in four countries spotlights how hybrid, collaborative governance can work in practice—in cases where innovations have already been scaled up. That said, assessment of the impact of these reforms is complicated by frequent implementation and evaluation gaps. High degrees of variation across subnational territories and sectors underscore the relevance of identifying positive outliers—in contrast to the

conventional policy evaluation search for average impacts, which render invisible both breakthroughs and bottlenecks.⁶

The Mitadin community health worker programme in India, launched in 2002 in the very-low-income state of Chhattisgarh, stands out as distinctive because of its large-scale, socially embedded participatory approach to front-line service provision.⁷ The state programme's 70,000 community health workers are grass-roots women leaders from socially excluded communities with a strong ethos of commitment to public service and accountable local leadership. The programme is supported by the State Health Resource Center, which is governed by a joint government-civil society board. The Mitadin programme is especially distinctive because it encourages community health workers to go beyond the conventional provision of basic preventive health services. The programme participants actively engage in defending the rights of the socially excluded—including access to the health-care system, redress of grievances, responses to gender violence, access to government food programmes, and the defence of forest rights—often with support from other community health workers and/or their programme supervisors. During the pandemic, the state's Health Department drafted the Mitadin health workers to participate intensively in the government's crisis response, including high-risk contact tracing and vaccination, with a commitment to supplemental compensation. When the government did not deliver on its promise, the Mitadin community health workers engaged in a broad-based work stoppage that underscored their remarkably high degree of public legitimacy and job stability—while still earning less than half the minimum wage.

Brazil has long been internationally recognized for its municipal participatory budgeting innovations and its contribution to anti-poverty efforts; this recognition has persisted abroad even though those reforms have long faded within the country.⁸ In contrast, since the 1990s, State-society partnerships have promoted federal laws and regulations that have steadily constructed a much more deeply institutionalized, comprehensive participatory policy regime in which powerful multilevel municipal councils jointly implement key large-scale social programmes that focus on priorities such as health, welfare and children's rights.⁹ The policy council system's combination of federal mandates, civil society collaboration, and municipal embeddedness have enabled their institutionalization across most of Brazil, independently of the party in power at the federal level. In 2019, a Supreme Federal Court ruling blunted the effects of a hostile national Government's effort to decree the elimination of the federal policy councils. The policy council system demonstrated a high degree of institutional resilience. A recent assessment found that one third of the federal-level councils survived unchanged, another third were damaged but survived, just over one fifth were dismantled, and 15 per cent were already inactive.¹⁰ One of those federal councils, the National Health Council, played an especially notable role in promoting governmental responses to the pandemic at subnational levels in the absence of a federal science-based policy from the Ministry of Health. With support from the mainstream media, the National Health Council issued numerous recommendations for pandemic protection measures—including the protection of health workers—and contributed to a coordinated response across the health system's multiple levels. A new national Government is expected to revive the prior secular trend of further institutionalization of the municipal council social policy regime.

The conditional cash transfer (CCT) programme in the Philippines is the largest social protection programme in the country and the third largest in the world, reaching 4.4 million households. The Department of Social Welfare and Development launched the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) in 2002, and the Government has sustained it now across four presidential administrations—in contrast to other high-profile anti-poverty programmes.¹¹ Unlike most CCTs, the 4Ps include family development and youth development training programmes that promote civic education and elements of social accountability (at least in some regions). Even more notable, the Philippines is perhaps the only country in the world where the CCT programme is supported by a broad-based, autonomous membership organization of the beneficiaries themselves. Launched in 2016, this organization of 77,000 beneficiaries campaigned for a law to protect the 4Ps programme from future policy reversals; the law passed in 2019.¹² To mitigate the effects of the pandemic shutdown, the Government of the Philippines used the CCT programme's existing delivery mechanism to deploy a new, scaled-up social amelioration programme. This pandemic social protection programme reached more than four times as many households as the 4Ps programme—more than 17 million—and most within two months.¹³ Following the pandemic crisis, the organization of CCT beneficiaries remained alert to possible government plans to reduce the rolls, ready to use the new law for accountability.

In Colombia, the 2016 Peace Accord not only demobilized the country's largest armed resistance, but also committed the Government to addressing the conflict's underlying causes by bringing democratic governance and absent social services to territories in conflict. Particularly noteworthy was the Accord's inclusion of an innovative Ethnic Chapter. The Accord underscored the direct relevance of both new and existing official citizen oversight institutions to encourage government implementation of policy commitments.¹⁴ The Accord also included its own multi-stakeholder monitoring commissions, including a forum to oversee and encourage respect for ethnic rights—grounded in broad-based Afrodescendant and Indigenous social organizations. Even though the Accord was legally designed as a 15-year commitment by the State of Colombia, a 2018 change in government de-emphasized implementation of the reform commitments and slowed the launch of the official hybrid oversight institutions.¹⁵ Nevertheless, despite the pandemic and weak government compliance with the Accord, the national ethnic rights policy oversight body survived and managed to present its own independent assessment of the Accord's Ethnic Chapter to the President and senior officials in September 2021.¹⁶ When a newly elected Government recommitted to implementing the Peace Accord, this innovative multi-ethnic oversight forum was poised for reactivation.

The diverse cases of institutional resilience illustrated above share a key characteristic: they survived the twin challenges of the loss of national policymaking allies and the pandemic crisis. Some hung on to policy allies still within the government—embedded either in subnational governments or in technical agencies that recognized policy commitments addressing SDG targets 16.6 and 16.7. Yet in contrast to governance reform innovations that rely exclusively on high-level champions of change or civil society notables with ready access to the media, these four cases of reform resilience share another key characteristic: they are grounded in sustained, substantive engagement with large numbers of organized citizens. These cases suggest the following key propositions:

- Partnerships between policy reformers and autonomous broad-based social organizations can bolster the resilience of policy innovations that prioritize responsiveness to citizens—especially when they have legal backing, as in Brazil, the Philippines and Colombia.
- The idea of State-society synergy suggests that partnerships between policymakers, public servants and organized citizens can generate the capacity to adapt in response to shocks to the system—whether they are pandemics or major changes in the national policy context. When governance reforms involve efforts to include the socially excluded, they can be bolstered by organizations that represent the people the SDGs were designed to reach—as in the cases of conditional cash transfer beneficiaries in the Philippines, health councils in Brazil, community health workers in India, and Afrodescendant land councils in Colombia.
- These organized social constituencies, with their legitimacy and oversight capacity, can bolster reform agendas by identifying bottlenecks, responding to backlash, and holding policymakers accountable. Their potential for power shifting and public accountability contrasts with widely adopted governance reforms that are limited to individual citizens, including many feedback or grievance redress mechanisms that leave responsiveness to the discretion of government officials.¹⁷
- Multilevel governance reforms also contribute to resilience, so that when reform champions leave national office, committed policymakers who remain in subnational governments can limit the further rollback of reforms. In the face of crises such as pandemics, multilevel institutionalization of participatory oversight can buffer the effects of national policy inaction.

In summary, innovations in the governance of public services are more resilient in the face of challenges when they are grounded in State-society synergy.¹⁸

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Uplifting Innovation through Co-Creation: From the Local to the Global Level

Nick Thijs and Jamie Berryhill¹

Co-creation as a foundation for public sector innovation

The scale and complexity of the challenges Governments are facing today are compelling public institutions to adopt novel ways to think and implement public policies. This means being able to develop innovative responses to tackle long-term transformations. Governments need to understand, test and embed new ways of doing things through public sector innovation. Engaging with the public and co-creating public sector policies and services with citizens and residents is a foundational element of effecting change.² This has been emphasized by 43 countries around the world through their commitment to the 2019 OECD Declaration on Public Sector Innovation.³ The Declaration incorporates the following key priorities:

- Bring public, private, not-for-profit and individual actors together to engage in partnerships, collaboration and co-creation to develop new approaches or solutions to problems.
- Create partnerships and link into existing networks of exchange inside, outside and across the innovation system to increase the capacity to innovate.
- Develop a spectrum of engagement and co-creation practices and use different forms of co-creation to ensure that innovation efforts are informed by lived experience and relevant expertise.
- Look for opportunities to partner with other countries on cross-border challenges requiring innovative approaches.
- Listen for new and emerging voices to pick up weak signals that things might be changing, as this can help identify an emergent need or opportunity for innovation.

Co-creation empowers people to take an active role in issues that affect them, and it can strengthen the legitimacy of government programmes and build public trust, which has been near record lows in recent years. This can contribute to reinforcing democracy.

While Governments have been increasingly leveraging co-creation over the past several years, the COVID-19 pandemic underscored its necessity, as Governments had to act quickly to put in place processes and services that functioned in the “new normal” context while also meeting people’s needs. One of the most critical lessons from the pandemic is that Governments must place citizens and inclusion at the centre of policymaking.¹⁴

The OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (OPSI)⁵ and the Support for Improvement in Governance and Management (SIGMA) programme⁶ have sought to explore innovative co-creation approaches leveraged by Governments, how they are enabling the public sector to meet the unprecedented challenges of today and tomorrow, and what lessons may be learned from these efforts. Much of the information gathered is included in OPSI reports on government innovation trends,⁷ the COVID-19 Innovative Response Tracker,⁸ and the Case Study Library,⁹ a constantly growing repository of over 700 case studies where public servants can learn about innovative projects around the world and even reach out to the teams behind them to learn more. The cases referred to below can be found in these reports.

Co-creation in practice

The COVID-19 crisis served as a catalyst for public sector innovation in many ways, and there emerged creative and fantastic ideas and initiatives for both short-term response and long-term recovery. Co-creation has been one of the leading approaches, as illustrated in the following examples:

- Hack the Crisis began as a 48-hour hackathon in Estonia to bring together civic-minded citizens and government agencies and was duplicated around the world, leading to the Global Hack. In some countries such efforts have been embedded in government more long-term, as in the case of UpdateDeutschland in Germany.¹⁰
- In the United States, the Health+ Long COVID programme uses human-centred design to co-create patient-centred solutions with those impacted, with efforts including Healthathons designed to rapidly prototype and deliver solutions with the community.
- In the wake of COVID-19, a Philosophy of Care was co-created in South Australia to underpin mental health-care provision. The new care standard centred on people with lived experiences of distress and crisis emergency.
- Representing a form of cross-border innovation, the Global Cities Innovation Collaborative has enabled cities around the world to discuss issues of mutual concern and to launch global open innovation competitions for individuals with great ideas to co-develop pioneering solutions for shared COVID-19-related challenges and economic recovery.

While Governments are still grappling with the effects of the pandemic, they must also now deal with the shocks caused by the events in Ukraine, as well as with issues such as climate change, digital disruption, and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Examples of innovative co-creation by Governments and their partners that focus on issues beyond COVID-19 can be seen in a multitude of policy areas.

In re-imagining communities, both in times of crisis and for enhanced community spaces, Ukraine, Estonia and Colombia are exemplary. ReStart Ukraine¹¹ is an open collective exploring ways to restore afflicted areas in a post-war scenario using a co-created toolbox to empower municipalities.

Avalinn AR¹² in Estonia enables residents to use an augmented reality app to co-create urban development solutions. The city of Bogotá in Colombia is co-creating public spaces to improve neighbourhoods.¹³

Climate change remains a key concern across the globe. In Denmark, crea.visions enables the public to co-create with AI thought-provoking visions of utopias and dystopias to raise awareness about climate change challenges. On a European Union scale, the Citizen and Multi-Actor Consultation on Horizon 2020 (CIMULACT) project¹⁴ brought together more than a thousand citizens in 30 countries to co-create visions for sustainable futures and transform them into innovation recommendations.

In the policy area of protecting marginalized groups, the Activation Anti-Displacement programme in Austin, Texas, combats homelessness by co-creating anti-displacement strategies and data-driven equity tools to mitigate displacement risks. In Georgia, the Government's ServiceLab worked with individuals with hearing impairments to co-design an emergency services hotline with video chat and sign language capabilities.

Digital disruption can be used as a means to co-create. The NHS AI Lab¹⁵ in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is bringing together cross-sector stakeholders and the public for co-creation and experimentation around AI to revolutionize health care. CitizenLab, a civic technology company in Belgium, empowers civil servants with AI-augmented processes for analysing citizen input and strengthening collaboration. In Colombia, the *Emerging Technologies Handbook*¹⁶ promotes innovation and co-creation through the use of emerging technologies to advance the SDGs.

These cases represent just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to Governments using innovative methods to co-create with their people to help address practically every type of challenge societies face. The key to moving forward is embedding such practices in the routine business of government and building a new collaborative capacity and culture at all levels—from the smallest teams to national systems and even beyond, to transnational and global ecosystems.

Box. Sources of inspiration: Toolkit Navigator and Innovation Playbook

In addition to the hundreds of examples of public sector innovation collected in the OPSI Case Study Library, there are many other tailor-made resources that can help Governments successfully employ co-creation approaches. The OPSI Toolkit Navigator provides support by orienting users around a vast collection of innovation toolkits (including the Open Government Partnership's Participation and Co-Creation Toolkit, Co-design Canvas, the Neighbourhood Ideas Exchange Toolkit, and the Partnership Co-design Toolkit) so that users can find those best suited to their situational needs.

A variety of quality resources other than the Toolkit Navigator exist to promote and enable co-creation. The Innovation Playbook offers actionable instruments for the implementation of the Declaration on Public Sector Innovation, including a key line of action focused on cultivating new partnerships and involving different voices.

Sources: OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, “Toolkit Navigator: putting innovation theory into practice”, available at <https://oecd-opsi.org/toolkit-navigator>; *Innovation Playbook: Your 3-Step Journey to Put the Declaration on Public Sector Innovation into Practice* (April 2022), available at <https://oecd-opsi.org/publications/innovation-playbook>.

Note: In the Declaration, ministers and other national representatives affirm their commitment to five key action areas for public sector innovation, one of which is cultivating new partnerships and involving different voices.

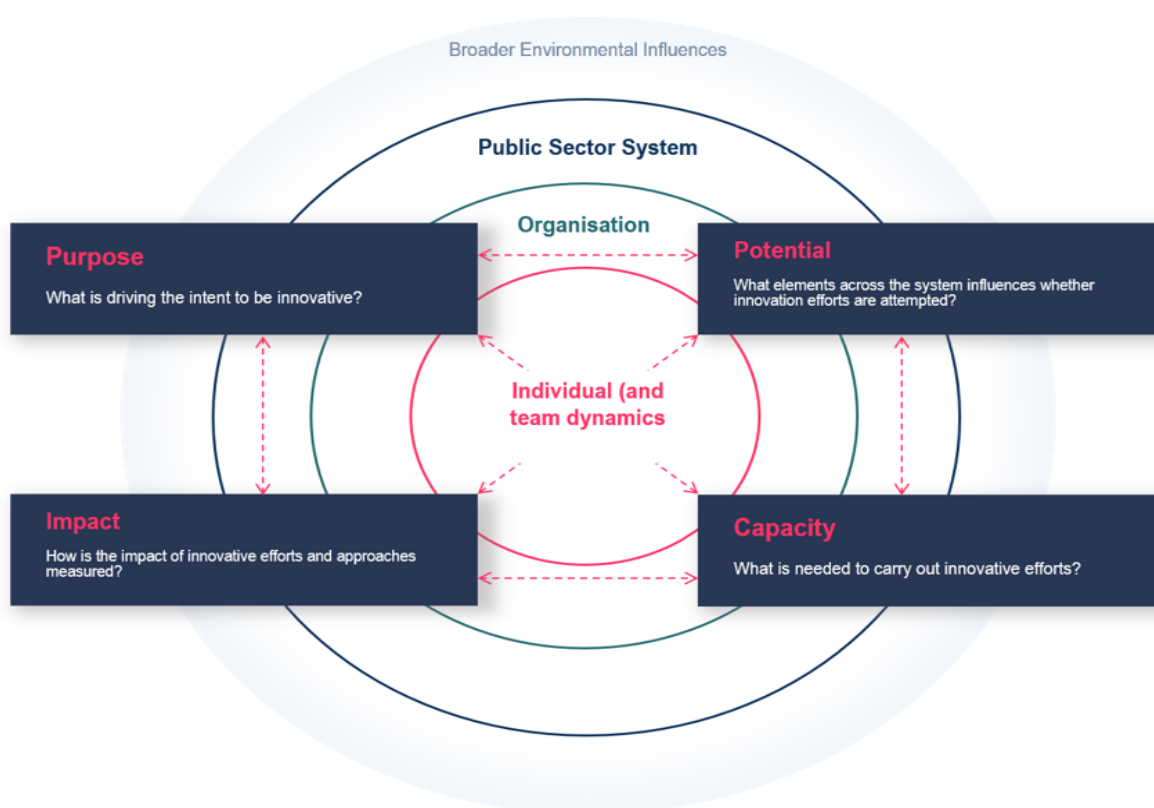
From ad hoc to systems approaches for today and tomorrow

Governments shifting from COVID-19 response to longer-term recovery are turning their attention towards emerging new challenges as well as enduring priorities such as achieving the SDGs. When it comes to co-creation, Governments are increasingly recognizing that critical insights and good ideas often come from outside the walls of government. A key challenge Governments face, however, is moving beyond one-off ad hoc solutions in narrow environments. For innovative capacity to flourish, Governments need to move away from innovation as a sporadic activity (fuelled predominantly by crises) to systemically embedding innovation at the heart of policymaking and public administration.

To achieve this, Governments must enhance their systemic capacity to innovate. OPSI has developed the *Innovative Capacity of Governments: A Systemic Framework*¹⁷ to facilitate this process. The Framework supports three levels of analysis (individuals and teams, organizations, and whole systems) through four innovation lenses (purpose of innovation, potential for innovation, capacity to innovate, and impact of innovation). While this Framework is broader than co-creation, Governments will need to promote collaboration-relevant capacities and align processes to take innovative co-creation to the next level. The SDGs are systemic in nature, and Governments will need to ensure their co-creation activities are aligned to match cascading transversal effects.

While it can be overwhelming for Governments to deal with the crises and challenges of today, they must also prepare themselves for the future, working with citizens and residents in anticipating what may be necessary but has not yet emerged—and in some cases, even shaping future possibilities to build a bright future for the generations that follow. This approach hinges on harnessing collective imaginations. Ideas and life experiences must be able to permeate across organizations both inside and outside of government, and then be heard and acted upon, even when the return on investment may not be clear. Thus, in addition to strengthening their capacity to innovate, Governments should seek to build up good anticipatory innovative governance so that they are prepared to withstand and cope with future shocks.¹⁸

Figure. Innovative Capacity Framework



Source: Misha Kaur and others, *Innovative Capacity of Governments: A Systematic Framework*, OECD Working Papers on Public Governance, No. 51 (Paris, OECD Publishing, 19 September 2022), available at <https://oecd-opsi.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/innovative-capacity-wp.pdf>, adapted from figure 1, p. 22.

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⁸ Information on the COVID-19 Innovative Response Tracker is available at <https://oecd-opsi.org/covid-response>.

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Innovations in Health-Care Service Delivery during the Pandemic

Ankita Meghani and Taryn Vian¹

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted health service delivery as countries implemented lockdowns and issued stay-at-home orders. Despite attempts to make essential health services available throughout, the pandemic strained health systems and resulted in rampant shortages of health commodities, beds and health-care staff. There were concomitant declines in tuberculosis screening, HIV testing, and maternal and child health services.² However, the global pandemic also accelerated the pace of innovation. Some initiatives served as stopgap measures implemented to maintain health services, whereas others helped leapfrog progress in the areas of health information systems, telemedicine, and regulatory policy, bringing efficiencies that could be applied even beyond the public health emergency. This contribution presents examples of some innovative approaches that were implemented during the pandemic and reflects on their applicability in a post-pandemic context.

Innovations in regulation and generic manufacturing

The pandemic presented new challenges in regulatory policymaking at the national and global levels while also offering lessons to be learned from key innovations. Regulators and policymakers learned about the importance of strengthening regulatory collaboration and harmonizing regional regulatory policies to facilitate the approval of and access to COVID-19 diagnostics and therapeutics. Examples of regulatory innovations included relying on the World Health Organization's Emergency Use Listing Procedure and regulatory decisions made by stringent regulatory authorities,³ providing conditional approvals,⁴ and having regulatory agencies accept rolling submissions rather than the usual approach of accepting submissions only once all the data have been finalized. Partnerships through the Pharmaceutical Inspection Cooperation Scheme (PIC/S),⁵ a network of select regulators, also supported the harmonization standards for good manufacturing and distribution practices for medicines. PIC/S was seen as an important platform for promoting regulatory convergence and cooperation that could ultimately help countries at various levels of regulatory maturity ensure access to quality, safe and efficacious drugs.

Learning from COVID-19 vaccine inequity, Governments and multilateral organizations began focusing their attention on leveraging and strengthening manufacturing capacity in several low- and middle-income countries to facilitate the rapid scale-up of generic manufacturing. This inspired the development of a global platform known as the COVID-19 Technology Access Pool,⁶ which was launched to allow developers of COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics, and other health products to share intellectual property and data with qualified manufacturers. Through this process,

patent holders voluntarily licensed their patents, which were then sub-licensed to qualified and vetted generic manufacturers that paid royalties on the sale of the medicines.

Innovations in testing and disease surveillance

The pandemic necessitated innovations in the areas of testing, contact tracing, and disease surveillance. Asymptomatic transmission of SARS-CoV2 meant that mass testing was needed for disease control; however, countries faced challenges in administering polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing due to complex logistics and infrastructure requirements. The City of Vienna started the Everything gurgles! (Alles gurgelt!) initiative to address these challenges.⁷ The initiative allowed students, workers and other residents to access home PCR test kits by registering online, accessing a bar code, and picking up the test through hundreds of participating drugstores. Samples could be submitted at 680 supermarkets, drugstores, and gas stations. The postal service took the samples to laboratories, and results were emailed within 24 hours.

The authorization of over-the-counter (OTC) fully at-home diagnostic tests for COVID-19 using rapid antigen testing was also a game changer. The Singapore Ministry of Health provided guidance on how to use OTC antigen testing for screening before large gatherings such as sports events, concerts, weddings, and funerals, allowing people to gather more safely and return to their normal lives.⁸ The Government of the United States of America required private insurance to cover the cost of the testing. Germany, Austria, and England included rapid tests as part of their strategy to control COVID-19, providing them through schools, pharmacies, and volunteers going door-to-door.

Finally, 50 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas engaged in COVID-19 digital data surveillance and tracking using the District Health Information System (DHIS2) open-source health management information platform developed and coordinated by the Health Information Systems Programme (the HISP Centre) at the University of Oslo.⁹ The Ministry of Health, Nutrition and Indigenous Medicine in Sri Lanka developed eight modules for COVID-19 tracking—including a digital vaccine certificate—within four months. The open-source modules were designed to allow countries to monitor transmission, detect new cases, conduct risk assessments, and aggregate data to guide preparedness and response decisions by national and local government and other stakeholders. Another open-source application—the Surveillance Outbreak Response Management and Analysis System (SORMAS)—was developed by a German non-profit foundation. It supported public health authorities in identifying and monitoring individuals who might have been exposed to an infected person and following them for testing and treatment. The SORMAS-ÖGD application was used by several federal health departments in Germany, France, Switzerland, Nigeria, Ghana, and Fiji.¹⁰

Innovations in service delivery

During the initial phase of the pandemic, health departments developed COVID-19 triage systems to rapidly manage the demand for services and provide patients with appropriate care depending

on the severity of illness. Some countries, such as India, Pakistan and Japan, set up a centralized system through which COVID-19 patients were directed to a broader network of private and public hospitals based on the severity of illness.¹¹ These hospitals were staffed with relevant medical experts and equipped to provide a specific level of health services based on a patient's medical classification (mild, moderate, major, or extreme severity of illness).

The number and volume of telehealth services increased dramatically during the pandemic as video conferencing tools, telephones, and online platforms were leveraged for remote health-care provision. In India, for example, telemedicine became an instantaneous adaptation to allow doctors to stay connected with patients when the nationwide lockdown took effect in March 2020. This experience paved the way for the development of inaugural policy guidelines for telehealth in India.¹² In some countries, including the Republic of Korea, formal policy changes allowed telemedicine to be practiced exceptionally during a public health emergency. Current policy discussions in the Republic of Korea suggest that telemedicine will become part of the new normal.¹³ In the United States, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services expanded telemedicine access from only Medicare patients living in rural areas or in specific health facilities to all patients. This expansion of telemedicine has been shown to increase health-care access to people living in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods.¹⁴ More broadly, the pandemic also spurred demand for telepsychiatry services, which has been growing across various countries.¹⁵

Another innovation was in the area of health workforce training, which was provided via online platforms. Findings suggest that online training increases learning opportunities without affecting training quality and knowledge acquisition and is an affordable and convenient alternative to in-person training, particularly in low- and middle-income settings.¹⁶

Finally, the pandemic led to increased reliance on innovations such as the use of drone technology to bring vaccines and treatments to areas with limited access to transportation. In Rwanda, for example, the public health sector partnered with a for-profit drone company to deliver medicines to cancer patients living in rural settings.¹⁷ While the scalability, feasibility and applicability of this approach over the longer term is unclear, it nonetheless offers important lessons on how non-traditional technologies may be used to solve problems in the health sector.

Digitalization of data management

The pandemic inspired critical innovations in the digitalization of data for managing supply chains and tracking vaccinations and to speed up the compilation of data for decision-making. India expanded its Electronic Vaccine Intelligence Network (eVIN),¹⁸ developed in 2015 to track vaccines in the country's Universal Immunization Programme throughout the supply chain, to provide data on who was getting vaccinated and to send reminders to those who had not yet received their shots. Panama developed a system called Panavac19, which included a portal for residents to make vaccination appointments and download a digital vaccination certificate.¹⁹ The system was expanded to include laboratory results as well. The Saudi Data and AI Authority and

Ministry of Health developed a COVID-19 digital tracking system called Tawakkalna to help people access testing and to safely begin opening up access to services post lock-down.²⁰

Digital vaccination IDs were used during the pandemic to provide information on what vaccine a person received, when they received it, and when they should get their booster dose. This helped ensure that vaccines were in stock and could be accessed where and when they were needed. A digital identification system called Simprints was used in Ghana to record COVID-19 vaccination delivery in areas where many births are unregistered and people lack formal identification.²¹ China and the state of South Australia used a health QR code system that required citizens to upload personal information through a cell phone application to evaluate exposure risk. Though effective, some of these systems were considered controversial because the information gathered could be used to restrict people's movement and access to facilities or to impose quarantine.

Partnering with the private sector

Partnerships with the private sector were critical to the COVID-19 response. Collaborations ranged from vaccine development and strengthening capacity for diagnostics to supporting service delivery for COVID-19 patients. Operation Warp Speed, in which the United States Government invested \$18 billion, supported the development and early manufacturing of COVID-19 vaccines meant for the United States population,²² while the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations expanded global access to COVID-19 vaccines with a \$1.4 billion investment. These efforts stimulated a market for accelerated vaccine manufacturing. In the future, such public-private partnerships may be leveraged to study long-term vaccine safety and virus mutations and to strengthen pandemic response capacity globally.

During the pandemic, public-private collaboration often produced a synergy that drove innovation and accelerated progress. Working with private hospitals and laboratories helped expand access to care for COVID-19 patients and access to testing for the general population. In Uttar Pradesh, India, the Government rapidly engaged and mobilized private laboratories and enlisted private hospitals to provide COVID-19-related services.²³ In the Netherlands, a public-private consortium rapidly designed and implemented a high-throughput diagnostic platform for SARS-CoV2.²⁴ The open-source Systematic Testing using Robotics and Innovation during Pandemics (STRIP) platform allowed 14,000 tests per day, forming the basis for a nationwide infrastructure and strengthening preparedness for future pandemics. Similarly, public-private partnerships expanded laboratory capacity and testing in Ghana, Nepal, and Nigeria and extended hospital capacity in Ghana, Nepal, and Bangladesh—countries where urban populations rely heavily on private health-care providers.²⁵

Private companies helped convert private spaces for use during quarantines, made financial and in-kind contributions to provide the supplies and equipment needed for treatment, organized mass COVID-19 communication campaigns, and provided food relief.

Mobilizing human resources and expanding workforce capacity

The high demand for health services during the pandemic led to a concomitant need to expand the health workforce. In some cases, temporary workers were hired to support crisis management efforts, while in others, a pathway was created to integrate temporary workers into the Government's permanent health workforce cadre.²⁶ In Thailand, for example, the Ministry of Public Health converted 40,000 of its 150,000 temporary medical employees to permanent civil service staff to recognize their crucial contributions to the country's pandemic response.²⁷

India launched a call for Covid Warriors—including retired doctors, armed forces medical staff and private sector medical professionals—to support the COVID-19 response.²⁸ Final-year medical students and paramedical students were also brought in to conduct screenings and contact tracing and administer vaccinations. Similarly, Brazil encouraged final-year medical students to support COVID-19 health services and reinstated the medical licenses of Cuban medical professionals who were living in Brazil.²⁹ Mexico began contracting foreign health workers to expand the domestic health workforce and called on doctors from various specialties to participate in the COVID-19 response.³⁰

Conclusions

Innovations flourished during the pandemic. Some innovations were implemented spontaneously as stopgap measures, while others, such as telehealth and digital health technologies, tended to be implemented systematically by national Governments and institutes of public health. Lessons from the innovations implemented suggest that engaging in partnerships with the private sector, maintaining a strong health workforce, strengthening national regulatory systems, and leveraging advances in telemedicine and other digital health technologies were particularly critical in responding to the pandemic. As lessons and experiences continue to be gathered and chronicled, it will be important for countries to assess the applicability and adaptability of these innovations to their local contexts so that they are prepared for the next health crisis.

Endnotes

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Innovative Multilevel Coordination and Preparedness after COVID-19

*Louis Meuleman*¹

How COVID-19 put multilevel governance under pressure and what innovations have come out of that

The COVID-19 pandemic and the simultaneous occurrence of many other crises—including climate-induced disasters, economic crises, and (geo)political conflicts—have changed the scope and course of government at all levels. National and subnational authorities have suddenly found themselves back in the driver’s seat following (in many countries) decades of efficiency-driven measures which ultimately led to diminished capacity to address key societal issues. Whereas national Governments have often taken the lead in overall crisis management, subnational governments (at the state, provincial and municipal levels) have been on the front lines of street-level, hands-on governance. They have been confronted with the complexity (or “wickedness”) of the challenges and compelled to deal with the paradox that many large challenges can simultaneously be crises (requiring immediate action) and complex problems (requiring multi-actor involvement and long remedial processes with many “small wins”). The cascade of crises in recent years has led to the realization that new and existing challenges surrounding multilevel governance need more attention.

Many countries reported in their voluntary national reviews (VNRs) of progress made towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that the pandemic had compelled them to make changes in their institutional structure.² Argentina established the Federal SDG Network for Provincial Governments to facilitate the exchange of ideas and strategies among governing authorities at this level for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The pandemic also accelerated the use of scientific data in decision-making processes. It prompted countries such as Greece, Italy, and the United Arab Emirates to leverage the development of digital services for the collection and aggregation of data to drive evidence-informed policymaking.

Although the levels of government within a country are usually legally and politically separated, they are still intertwined and engaged in multilevel governance. Generally, national Governments are well placed to observe the linkages between local and supra-local challenges at the subnational level and may be best equipped to respond to larger-scale challenges. Local governments are closer to residents and are often the first to identify emerging economic, social and environmental challenges. They may be best positioned to address such problems before they grow to a national scale.

While each country has its own politico-administrative, sociocultural and historical context, all countries share certain similarities. The current poly-crisis has forced national Governments to mobilize financial and other resources on an unprecedented scale. Because crisis and disaster management has been driven by extreme urgency, standard rules and procedures have in some cases been suspended for the sake of expediency; Governments have taken legislative shortcuts—

sometimes bypassing legislators and key stakeholders and forgoing evidence-informed regulatory impact assessment to facilitate rapid implementation. National Governments, confronted with the continuation of crises, may feel the need to establish crisis governance as the “new normal”. This would have consequences at the national level. For example, there would be less investment in the long-term strategies needed to achieve the SDGs and other aspects of sustainable development by 2030 (and beyond). The key principle of leaving no one behind would have lower priority. Policies would be less informed by scientific and stakeholder evidence. At the subnational level, the national focus on crisis management could imply a more restrictive legal framework in which to operate, less funding (with the diversion of more budgetary resources to national crisis management), and less freedom to use available budgets. Overall, the centralization trend induced by COVID-19 and other crises has exerted heavy pressure on relations between national and subnational governments. However, in such situations, there are always innovative practices that emerge—as (almost) everything becomes fluid under pressure.

Federal systems often have a powerful second level of government, and the federal Government cannot intervene in many policy areas. This can create tensions in a multilevel system. Belgium has three Regions that are each responsible for their own regional, provincial and municipal government; Germany has sixteen federal subdivisions (*Länder*) and Austria has nine; and Spain has 17 Autonomous Communities, each made up of provinces and municipalities that also have a certain level of autonomy. These and other countries with similar administrative structures are part of a multilevel governance system that is not primarily hierarchical. In such cases, important responsibilities relating to the SDGs often lie with the regional government, so appropriate mechanisms and structures need to be in place to facilitate effective multilevel governance in order to achieve the SDGs.³

From fragmentation to collaboration

The allocation of responsibilities and tasks to different levels of government, which is usually regulated in the national constitution, can represent either “fragmentation” or “specialization”, depending on the circumstances. Fragmentation has a negative connotation and specialization a generally positive one. Specialization becomes fragmentation when the parts are not communicating and coordination is difficult. Fragmentation happens vertically between government levels and horizontally between policy sectors and their institutions. Ideally, vertical and horizontal fragmentation should be tackled together. In a fragmented institutional framework, the organizational—and mental—silos make it very difficult to adopt the holistic approach needed for the SDGs. Building trust is an important way to overcome silo thinking. Beyond this, trust is an important indicator of how people perceive the quality of government institutions in democratic countries and how they interact with them.⁴

As evidence of its commitment to counter fragmentation and promote collaboration between the different levels of government, Italy included in its 2022 VNR a thematic analysis of efforts to localize the SDGs. The VNR also included voluntary local reviews (VLRs) prepared by local authorities cooperating with central institutions in the implementation of the National Sustainable Development Strategy. Italy has decided to institutionalize policy coherence by including a

national action plan on policy coherence for sustainable development as an annex to its National Sustainable Development Strategy.

From slow progress to real-time collaborative multilevel governance

As a reaction to the inflexibility and sluggishness of traditional rule-based relations between national and subnational governments, some countries have started to engage in real-time collaborative multilevel governance. The Netherlands, with its long-standing participative governance culture, has such a mechanism for addressing strategic policy issues, including the SDGs. Intergovernmental dossier teams have been established to discuss what each of the three tiers in the country's administrative system (national, provincial and local) can contribute to addressing challenges with a strong multilevel dimension. The three governance levels come together in real time to discuss how to tackle specific pressing problems. This is an additional approach that in no way undermines the subsidiarity principle or the legal hierarchy between the levels. In other countries, multilevel collaboration might not look the same; comparative research on urban sustainability transitions has shown that multilevel relations can differ among national governance cultures.⁵

Another example of real-time collaborative governance can be found in Colombia, where multilevel processes have supported the allocation of budget resources across territories and the establishment of common reporting formats.⁶

A review of VNRs shows that the SDGs are being used to incentivize better collaboration between national and subnational governments.⁷ In Cabo Verde, 22 local platforms have been established as multi-stakeholder spaces to link national and local SDG strategies. In Spain, the Network of Local Entities for the 2030 Agenda integrates 317 local actors and aims to promote the coordination of actions at the local level to implement the 2030 Agenda.

A crisis is a good time to observe real-time collaborative multilevel governance. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal Government of Germany used a two-level pandemic crisis management mechanism: the Conference of Premiers of the federal states of Germany (*Ministerpräsidentenkonferenz*), with the participation of the Federal Chancellor (*Bundeskanzler*). The Conference played a leading role during the pandemic (a role that was unusual when compared with normal times), holding frequent meetings and taking decisions. Some of the decisions were implemented successfully, whereas others were not;⁸ outcomes were mixed, and at times citizens felt confused by the complex results.

Between top-down governance and voluntary local reviews

Traditional multilevel governance is top-down. The local government tends to have little power, especially in presidential systems. The top-down approach can be fast in times of crisis, as observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is otherwise typically slow. National laws and policies might require years of preparation and even more time before they become locally embedded and practised. For example, the local implementation of new European Union legislation can take up to six or seven years from the time the initiative is adopted by the European

Commission, in part because the rules first need to be translated into national legislation, linked to relevant action items, then delegated across the different levels of government.

The subsidiarity principle (as defined in article 3b of the Treaty establishing the European Community) limits the top-down approach to some extent. Subsidiarity aims to ensure that decisions are taken at the most “appropriate” level, with appropriateness referring to the capacity of public authorities at each level of governance to make decisions on issues of direct relevance to them and to implement related policies. The empowerment of local government makes bottom-up governance more effective since measures can be taken at the lowest level at which they can be implemented effectively.

VNRs presented at the 2022 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development offer evidence of a growing trend towards localizing the SDGs.⁹ The Government of Eswatini recognized an urgent need to decentralize functions and devolve powers to the local level in order to fast-track developmental projects and programmes and reduce disparities. A more centrally steered approach has been chosen by Indonesia to strengthen coordination between the national and subnational levels for the implementation of the SDGs.¹⁰ There is a formal requirement to integrate the SDGs and the national medium-term development plan into medium-term regional and local plans. A roadmap is also required for implementation of the SDGs and other action plans, annual reports, and biannual monitoring systems at the subnational level. The VNR of Italy highlights the effective multilevel governance initiatives enacted by its regions, autonomous provinces and metropolitan areas to implement national sustainability objectives at the local level. For this, coordination mechanisms have been established between central and local authorities. The Government of the Philippines reports that it has sought to foster a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach to SDG integration through cross-sectoral SDG programmes, activities and projects implemented at the various subnational levels.

The adoption of the SDGs in 2015 seems to have encouraged subnational governments to become more involved in the global sustainable development discourse. Even before the SDGs were launched, cities belonged to international networks such as the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy, Local Governments for Sustainability, and United Cities and Local Governments. Many cities have taken the lead in tackling social challenges and in addressing climate change and other environmental issues. Frontrunning large cities often perceive government at the national level as opposing innovation and blocking progress. At the very least, this points to a lack of effective collaboration and communication in a multilevel governance context.

Local and subnational governments have become more vocal, ensuring that their voices are heard through channels such as VLRs and voluntary subnational reviews (VSRs) of SDG implementation. Only four VLRs were launched during the July 2018 meeting of the High-level Political Forum (by Kitakyushu, Shimokawa, and Toyama in Japan and by New York City in the United States), but such reviews have become increasingly popular; in 2022, 26 VLRs were presented at the Forum. The United Nations provides guidance and other support for the preparation of the VLRs.

Multilevel capacity-building

Level-specific governance frameworks may come into play with the division of tasks between national and subnational governments because different types of problems require different governance styles and tools. When tackling a climate-induced flood disaster, coordination is usually needed at a level above local authorities; when dealing with very complex problems, being close to citizens provides a better understanding of the challenges; and certain routine issues should not be dealt with bureaucratically or through lengthy dialogue but might benefit from outsourcing to an efficient private operator. Such level-specific governance approaches should be synergistic but can also be divisive and undermine progress if relations between the levels are not managed well. Capacity-building at all levels is needed to help authorities at each level understand the circumstances and responses from other levels of government.

Various SDGs (especially SDG 11) require implementation at the urban level and thus depend on strong engagement from local actors and institutions. This may require additional decentralization and devolution so that municipal powers are concomitant with responsibilities. The complexity of managing 17 interrelated SDGs may present difficulties for municipalities with capacity constraints or similar challenges.¹¹

National action plans to increase policy coherence for sustainable development—in line with SDG target 17.14—can help Governments strengthen the capacity for effective coordination across government levels. Italy is currently one of the frontrunners in this area.¹²

Conclusion

Traditional multilevel governance—in which national Governments exercise control over subnational governments—has not disappeared and may even have become stronger as a result of the need for central crisis management in recent years. Nevertheless, more collaborative and bottom-up approaches are gaining momentum. This is important because, for a number of reasons, multilevel governance for sustainable development requires combining top-down and bottom-up approaches as well as the integration of the horizontal, cross-sectoral dimension.

Endnotes

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Blended Learning in Medical Higher Education: New Modalities Driven by the COVID-19 Pandemic and Their Influence on Innovation and Performance in a Public University in South Africa

Odette Ramsingh and Carlien Jooste¹

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic irrevocably altered the fabric of society. Developed and developing countries alike were confronted with infrastructure and community-related problems that had to be solved almost overnight once COVID-19 started to spread across the globe. No sector escaped unscathed, and the by-products of the unprecedented pandemic left all sectors—including community-based sectors such as health care and education—in uncharted waters. Within the global education sector, the shutting down of formal and informal learning environments (including schools) affected 94 per cent of the world's student population.² Statistics further show that 99 per cent of students from low- and lower-middle-income countries were impacted by the effects of COVID-19 on their national education systems.³

In South Africa, the Government imposed a national lockdown on 20 March 2020, closing all schools and impacting the education of approximately 17 million learners at levels ranging from early childhood development (pre-school) to secondary school.⁴ In higher education, defined as post-school education and training, approximately 2.3 million students were affected.⁵ The announcement of the lockdown brought the education system to a very abrupt halt in a country whose Constitution emphatically states that everyone has the basic right to education⁶—a sentiment echoed in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which calls on Governments to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

The suddenness and ferocity with which COVID-19 took hold shook organizations out of their momentary paralysis, resulting in a new kind of agility.⁷ Educational organizations of all sizes had to adjust to new ways of working. Some changes, such as amending timetables, involved fairly straightforward logistical shifts, but educational institutions were also required to rethink the way students were taught and to develop new pedagogical methods that would serve the needs of students learning mainly from home. It was at this juncture that crisis met innovation as educators rallied to pursue the best possible learning outcomes during a period of extended uncertainty and upheaval. Educational institutions were compelled to become more innovative if they wanted to preserve their educational integrity and continue to provide a quality learning experience. Teachers, lecturers, administrators and managers had to adapt and learn, harness their innovative spirit, implement new plans at great speed, and endeavour to navigate unintended consequences. Most educational entities made the decision to move forward with digital learning strategies. All 26 universities in South Africa, which were at different stages of implementing digitalization and hybrid learning, had to develop educational approaches that would rescue the remainder of the academic year and ensure continuity in the face of an extended crisis. However, there were a number of obstacles to overcome. In a country such as South Africa, the decision to pursue this

approach highlighted the lack of information technology infrastructure, the high cost of digitalization and digital access, and the depth of digital inequality. Students from low- or lower-income households had to either find alternative ways of accessing information online or not study at all. Even though 77.5 per cent of households in the country had access to the Internet, mostly via cell phones, only 10.4 per cent of households could access the Internet at home using fibre optic or asymmetric digital subscriber line technologies, which allow fast data transmission at a high bandwidth.⁸ Some universities were able to sign agreements with mobile providers in South Africa for data access for their students, while others received government funding to meet this requirement and address other technological needs such as the lack of laptops for students and teaching staff. Universities shifted budget priorities and received COVID-19 funding from the Government, which enabled them to provide data access to students so that they could engage in online learning. Institutions responsible for educating tertiary-level students were among those tasked with developing logistical and learning innovations. The management of these institutions had to maintain employee productivity, help staff navigate a blended learning environment, and meet educational and organizational objectives in order to save the academic year and prepare for an uncertain future. While this period was filled with urgent challenges, it also showcased the innovation, resilience and performance capabilities of institutions.

As an illustrative case study, this contribution examines the pandemic-driven approach adopted by a health sciences university in South Africa mandated to educate and graduate students committed, as future health-care professionals, to ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages (SDG 3). During the pandemic, Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University had to attend to the theoretical aspects of the students' education but also to accommodate those completing practical work in hospitals and other medical facilities in the country. The University had to ensure staff and student safety as well. This contribution speaks to the SDGs on health and education and is anchored in the observations made in a public health sciences university setting, where the pandemic threatened to derail the academic year and impact the University's national imperative around transforming health-care sciences in the communities and the country. A sub-question guiding the present contribution is this: In a challenging, under-resourced environment faced with an unprecedented crisis, how can employees and students be inspired to rise above the attendant challenges in the provision of health education and services, understanding the threat to the larger goal should they fail?

Innovation within health sciences education

Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University has various on-campus facilities for practical learning and a teaching hospital next to its main campus. Students are predominantly from rural areas and low-income households and depend on government education grants from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme to pursue their tertiary studies. When COVID-19 hit and subsequent restrictions were imposed on the institution, the University had to redefine its engagement with its students and help staff adapt to a new way of teaching. During the pandemic, health-care professionals classified as essential service providers had to report to work, so the Government of South Africa allowed students within this field to continue their practical studies, while theoretical teaching had to take place online.

With this concession, the University was able to develop a fit-for-purpose protocol that saw a reduction in student numbers on campus and in practical environments and the introduction of an online platform to present the theoretical aspects of the courses. Teaching online involved a combination of traditional and innovative methods; academic professionals not only provided standard lectures but also managed group discussions and utilized interactive media and videos facilitated by the online platform. Lectures were recorded and made accessible to students, who could view them at their convenience to review materials and prepare for activities and exams. Digitalization—originally part of a five-year strategic plan—was achieved in under six months. The University also entered into partnerships with private companies to provide data access for staff and students, and a courier service was engaged to deliver laptops to students in rural areas. Within 24 hours of the lockdown announcement, working-from-home (WFH) protocols were issued by the University's Human Resources Department; line managers and staff members were provided with guidance, and they and their families were offered access to national and University psychosocial services. Communication between the University, lecturers and students became a top priority, as did the coordination of various on-campus activities.

As the University had students on campus and medical students working in the field, the institution's faculty and administrators understood the need to ensure the safety of the staff and students. One of its academic professionals developed a COVID-19 screening application (digital app), which was released within three months of the nationwide lockdown announcement. The app aimed to contain the virus and monitor reported symptoms among staff and students.⁹ Through the app, students and staff were able to conduct a health self-check before entering campus by answering questions related to known symptoms associated with COVID-19. The app further recorded information on possible exposures and testing among students and staff members.¹⁰ After capturing all the information, the app offered a risk assessment with relevant recommendations.¹¹ The take-up of the app was phenomenal, which was not surprising given the high levels of fear and anxiety during this period, so no lengthy change management plan was required for implementation.

Performance management in the time of COVID-19

Innovation requires implementation to bear fruit, and to achieve this an organization must rely on its people. To create the appropriate setting and space for innovation, the impact of the pandemic on the working environment at the University had to be considered. The suddenness of the lockdown and WFH instructions shook employees and line managers out of their complacency, challenging conventional approaches to identifying and setting objectives, driving and measuring performance, and interacting with fellow employees. New realities called for “redefining productivity in a fragmented work setup”.¹² Employees scrambled to restore a sense of order, familiarizing themselves with digital technologies and online tools that would be needed for communication, teaching and learning, and leadership and management.¹³

Whether because employees were very conscious of their obligation to support the University's health professionals or because they were on the front lines of the crisis and worried about the rising fatality statistics, there was a rallying response from within the institution to move forward quickly. Online teaching and learning were implemented, with challenges being addressed faster than the strategic plan envisaged. The university started conducting online interviews (a practice

not previously considered), which resulted in a more than 50 per cent reduction in administrative and logistical costs for recruitment. There was also greater collaboration among different administrative functions and self-driven accountability to deliver results. Employees managed their assignments independently with no need for continuous monitoring by supervisors, even though the latter could check their progress and performance online with the push of a button. There was often too much communication as a balance between intrusion and neglect was sought.¹⁴

A combination of factors conspired to drive strong performance. The anxiety and urgency surrounding the crisis spurred innovation and a collective sense of purpose and collaboration. Concerns surrounding status and hierarchy became secondary to working together to overcome emerging challenges and deliver the best education and support possible in a fluid environment. Traditional performance indicators and performance management were revised to focus less on logistics and more on quality and adaptability.

Conclusion

It has now been more than three years since the shock waves of the pandemic first ripped through institutions. These years have allowed time for introspection on how the pandemic and its attendant challenges offered an opportunity to innovate, how sustainable the innovations proved to be, and whether the shifting approaches to performance management have been maintained post-crisis. Some lessons and observations from the case study include the following:

- Many new opportunities were created by the pandemic, and a number of positive changes were made that were long overdue. One of the University's most important decisions was to commit substantial resources to setting up and strengthening digital capabilities and online systems, as this will have a long-lasting impact on areas such as institutional flexibility and performance management.
- The role of certain traditional performance measures (such as clocking in and fulfilling time requirements) diminished during the pandemic. Results orientation became increasingly tied to performance objectives that were largely driven by a sense of individual responsibility and accountability.
- The traditional culture at many universities is characterized by something of a silo mentality, with a focus on discrete change-management projects. The crisis created an *esprit de corps*, bringing the University's internal stakeholders together to work collaboratively on overcoming urgent challenges and achieving common goals.
- Strategic plans with time projections are important, but faster and better outcomes can be achieved when there is strong staff buy-in.
- Technology is a game changer in terms of educational delivery, costs and access, and the use of digital learning tools can help bridge the inequality gap. During the pandemic, students were provided with access to laptops and data to enable them to join online classes and continue with their studies.

Endnotes

¹ Odette R. Ramsingh is on the Executive Committee of the Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University responsible for Human Resources, and Dr. Jooste is the Director of Internationalisation at the same University.

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⁶ South Africa, *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996*, available at <https://www.gov.za/documents/constitution-republic-south-africa-1996>.

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¹⁰ Ibid.

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¹² Discovery Health, “Tips for employers to support their teams during COVID-19” (20 July 2020), available at <https://www.discovery.co.za/corporate/covid19-tips-for-employers-to-support>.

¹³ Andrew R McIlrairie, “Performance management in the time of coronavirus”, *Human Resource Executive*, 19 March 2020, available at <https://hrexecutive.com/performance-management-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/>.

¹⁴ Daantje Derks and Arnold Bakker, *The Psychology of Digital Media at Work* (New York, Psychology Press, 2012), available at <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203074145>.

Rethinking the Current Model of Operation for the Public Sector after COVID-19

*Geert Bouckaert*¹

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an immense impact on societies around the world, but this major health emergency is just one of a series of global crises that have seriously undermined progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the plan of action for people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnerships elaborated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The world's societies and the challenges they face are becoming increasingly complex, and an obvious question is whether the current model of operation for the public sector is fit for future purposes. As part of this analysis, it is fair to ask whether the public sector has handled the recent crises effectively, as a review of actions taken can provide an indication of existing competencies. A related question refers to how the world can prepare for future crises, even though it is known that preventing a crisis is better than having to resolve one. It is (hopefully) a shared belief that achieving most or all of the SDGs can help prevent future crises—or at least increase the capacities of societies and the resilience of institutions so that they can better navigate any crisis that may occur.

The recent global crises have had a mixed impact on public sector operations. During the pandemic, the core functions of public institutions—including service delivery, lawmaking and policymaking—were negatively affected in a number of ways. However, this was also a period of promising advances, as managing the pandemic brought about innovations in administrative management and stakeholder engagement, increased transparency and accountability, and a growing awareness of the need for new systems and approaches.²

Public sector systems and institutions differ in terms of their legal framework, their historical development, and the cultural traditions on which they are based. A certain level of variability is expected; however, there are agreed-upon international standards—including the United Nations principles of effective governance for sustainable development—that provide a strong framework and solid benchmarks for good public administration, management and governance.³ Having an objective point of reference makes it possible to assess what works and what does not work under which conditions so that Governments can learn from one another's experiences. A review of effective COVID-19 responses highlights the importance of three key objectives:

- Responding rapidly to crises;
- Managing crises effectively;
- Establishing fit-for-purpose systems to prepare for future systemic shocks.

While most Governments now have a good deal of experience with crisis response and management and have integrated and institutionalized successful innovations in public sector operations, relatively few have experience with future crisis planning. As illustrated by recent crises, systemic shocks require robust public sector responses since these shocks destabilize entire societies and States and can even affect other countries and have global repercussions. One of the major lessons learned from recent crises is that it is vital to prepare for what may be referred to as

“turbulence governance”⁴ by setting up systems capable of containing and handling systemic shocks.

Rapid crisis response is essential

Risk and impact assessments indicate that rapid response is essential for reducing negative impacts. Experience with recent crises shows that few public sectors can list a fast reaction time as one of their key competencies.⁵ In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, many developed countries demonstrated a lack of readiness—even with risk assessments, national modelling and scenarios, and roadmaps based on previous disasters.⁶ Some of the countries in Asia that had previously dealt with SARS were a step ahead in some respects as they could institutionalize some of their earlier response strategies, particularly with regard to monitoring, testing and tracing.

Evidence to this point suggests that the speed with which Governments react to a major disaster and make decisions to move forward with significant interventions depends on the following:⁷

- Rapid recognition of crisis status, a strong understanding of its implications, and acknowledgement of its urgency among relevant decision makers;
- The conviction that crisis policy measures are available and appropriate;
- The status of the decision-making architecture (actors and their relationships).

Certain other variables can also affect the speed of response, including the degree of centralization or decentralization, the extent of fragmentation or coordination, whether the governance culture is characterized by tradition or adaptability, whether there is an openness to learning and a willingness to experiment and innovate, and where the public sector stands in terms of crucial capacity.

In her 150-country comparative study on crisis response times, Marlene Jugl observes that having a dedicated ministry tasked with crisis response can have “a substantial accelerating effect of several days on crisis response”.⁸ She cites evidence indicating that countries with a separate health ministry, for example, are able to respond more rapidly to health crises. When future crises hit and there is no distinct ministry or agency capable of fast monitoring and response, reaction times may be slower.

Horizontal fragmentation and specialization can have positive or negative implications for response time, depending on the level of coordination and prioritization. For example, specialization can be an advantage if it is linked to the type of crisis occurring, though efforts are sometimes concentrated in one area at the expense of other, related policy domains (with health being prioritized over economics and education, for example). Vertical fragmentation and decentralization can inhibit fast response, though decentralization (depending on the degree of autonomy) can also allow some regions to act more quickly.

Governments may learn from their own or others’ past experiences with similar or different types of crises. In the case of COVID-19, it seems that “intra-crisis cross-border learning was more significant than inter-crisis learning from own experience with past epidemics”.⁹

There are some important lessons that can be learned from past experience. One of the main takeaways here is that having a dedicated crisis-related agency can speed up crisis response. Since crises take many forms and can have a serious impact on specific sectors, it would be wise for

Governments to create a flexible matrix-type tool to set up permanent specialized task forces for different types of possible crises such as cyber collapse, extreme weather events and pandemics.

Managing and containing “classical” crises

The design of regulatory systems governing health and other crises varies across countries.¹⁰ When the pandemic hit, many of those with traditional crisis management systems in place were initially resistant to change; however, innovative solutions were needed to address the unique challenges associated with this unprecedented crisis. There emerged a greater willingness to explore and experiment with new ideas and to introduce changes in the administrative and managerial culture within the public sector; thinking outside the box and creative problem-solving were often encouraged. Ad hoc solutions that proved successful need to be formally integrated and made part of standard operating procedures in crisis management systems. Steps should be taken to institutionalize innovations relating to digital readiness, adaptability, simplified procurement, co-creation and co-production, citizen engagement and participation, staff mobility, and communication.¹¹

Digital readiness improved during the pandemic, as evidenced by the increased use and relative normalization of, for example, virtual meetings, electronic signatures and digital identification, paperless decision flows, and online health-care provision (telemedicine). However, the digital divide became more apparent in key areas, including education (online teaching and learning), health-care access, and mobility (the transportation of people and goods). Digital privacy also became a major issue, as a key component of the pandemic response involved accessing and sharing personal health data. There were concerns that database connections used for contact tracing could be used for other purposes as well. In some countries, special legislation was adopted to protect digital security and privacy.

Logistical speed and efficiency became particularly important during the pandemic. Governments were able to simplify procurement processes without compromising tendering procedures. Governments invoked force majeure to introduce changes intended to streamline operations. Systems were created to ensure the delivery of critical goods and services, and administrative processes—including those governing tenders and public procurement—were adapted to improve speed and flexibility within the public sector.

Co-creation, co-production, engagement and participation were assigned greater priority during the pandemic. The lockdowns and other restrictions on public movement and contact disrupted social interactions—including those between the public sector and the users of public services. Many countries and their institutions acted quickly to establish participatory processes in a number of sectors, including health, education and mobility.

Staff mobility within the public sector improved significantly during the pandemic. Under the traditional system, personnel assignments and movements tended to be sclerotic and to occur within silos. However, when gaps needed to be filled to ensure effective governance and business continuity, new opportunities opened up for staff reallocation and reassignment (driven by both institutional exigencies and individual volunteerism).

The lessons learned with regard to adjusting traditional practices may be summarized as follows: Governments should establish a problem-solving culture that supports and facilitates innovation, and flexible but transparent procedures should be adopted for the creative allocation of human resources, for maintaining a tendering system that allows public institutions to make best use of

all available capacity in the market, and for actively promoting different productive partnerships between national and local governments, non-governmental organizations and private sector actors to strengthen service delivery.

Preparing public sectors for future global and systemic crises

Classical bureaucracies need to introduce systemic changes not only for crisis management but also for the implementation of “turbulence governance” for crisis preparedness. Growing public awareness that the State and the public sector were not only part of the solution but were actually best situated and qualified to take the lead in addressing crisis-related challenges went a long way towards restoring the legitimacy of State authority. To maintain the trust of the public and its belief in the dedication and competence of government authorities and institutions, the public sector will need to consolidate innovations into a fit-for-future-purpose governance system that can handle systemic shocks and turbulence while also maintaining effective day-to-day service delivery. The three reforms suggested below can support the creation and maintenance of such a system.

Shift from sequential thinking (normal-crisis-normal-crisis-normal governance) to simultaneous thinking (combining normal service delivery with sustained crisis governance).

Governments should take steps to modify their public sector systems and operations so that they are flexibly able to combine routine service delivery with key elements of crisis governance. This will require some innovation around the allocation of personnel, project structuring, horizontal budgeting, and the creation of peer learning opportunities both within and outside institutions, sectors and countries. Public administrations should prepare themselves to engage in more complex decision-making based on improved access to different and more granular data.

Implement the United Nations principles of effective governance for sustainable development¹² in order to strengthen and preserve public trust.

National and subnational governments that are invested in promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels (SDG 16) will have the tools they need to achieve the other SDGs and handle major crises.

The United Nations has set out 11 principles of effective governance for sustainable development that are aligned with the objectives of SDG 16 (and all other SDGs). There is strong emphasis on enhancing public trust in government by focusing on responsibility, accountability, effectiveness and inclusion—four key concepts highlighted in SDG 16. Trust in public institutions and belief in their legitimacy are needed to implement the necessary societal and institutional changes.¹³

The Committee of Experts on Public Administration has produced a variety of strategy guidance notes that provide numerous concrete examples and cases illustrating front-line best practices.¹⁴ The United Nations recognizes noteworthy achievement through its annual Public Sector Award. The 10 winners for 2022—Thailand, the Philippines, Ukraine, Brazil, India, Canada, Saudi Arabia, Poland, Panama and Ireland—offer a look at creative best practices that integrate the principles of effective governance for sustainable development to ensure that public service provision is inclusive and equitable and that public sector institutions are effective and responsive.¹⁵

Practise whole-of-government strategies within whole-of-society approaches

Within public administrations, horizontal and vertical concertation, coordination, cooperation and integration generally intensify when there is a crisis to be managed and become even stronger

when there is a systemic shock that needs to be addressed. However, individual practical experiences do not necessarily offer definitive solutions, as the structural features of government systems vary widely, and what works in one setting might not work in another. Across the board, however, horizontal interactions need to be consolidated within a whole-of-society approach, while a whole-of-government approach should inform vertical interactions. Institutionalizing stakeholder engagement for the pursuit of a shared objective is crucial.¹⁶ Special attention should be given to strengthening and supporting local governments because of their proximity to citizens. A whole-of-government/whole-of-society approach will require more diversity and flexibility to promote collaborative governance within the public sector and between the public sector, the private sector and social networks.¹⁷

Endnotes

¹ Geert Bouckaert is a professor at the KU Leuven Public Governance Institute.

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⁸ Ibid., p. 14

⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁰ Geert Bouckaert and others, “European coronationalism? A hot spot governing a pandemic crisis”, *Public Administration Review*, vol. 80, No. 5 (2020), pp. 765-773, available at <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13242>.

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¹² United Nations, Economic and Social Council, “Principles of effective governance for sustainable development”, para. 31.

¹³ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government, *National Institutional Arrangements for Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals: A Five-Year Stocktaking—World Public Sector Report 2021*, p. 146.

¹⁴ United Nations, Committee of Experts on Public Administration, “CEPA strategy guidance notes”, available at <https://publicadministration.un.org/en/Intergovernmental-Support/Committee-of-Experts-on-Public-Administration/Governance-principles/Addressing-common-governance-challenges/CEPA-strategy-guidance-notes>.

¹⁵ The list of 2022 UNPSA winners and a description of their initiatives are available on the United Nations Public Service Innovation Hub website at <https://publicadministration.un.org/unpsa/database/Winners/2022-winners>. More information on the Public Service Innovation Awards is available at <https://publicadministration.un.org/unpsa/database>.

¹⁶ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Public Administration and Development Management, *Working Together: Integration, Institutions and the Sustainable Development Goals—World Public Sector Report 2018* (Sales No. E.18.II.H.1), p. 7.

¹⁷ Xabier Barandiaran, Maria-José Canel and Geert Bouckaert, eds., *Building Collaborative Governance in Times of Uncertainty: Pracademic Lessons from the Basque Gipuzkoa Province* (Leuven, Belgium, Leuven University Press, 2023), available at <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/61606>.

Table 3.A. Expert recommendations to transform the public service and achieve the SDGs

Area	Action points
<i>Governance transformation and public service provision</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen institutional resilience for public service provision through innovations in transparency, participation and accountability, backed by legal frameworks. • To increase the resilience of institutional mechanisms, consider anchoring them at different levels of government so that they can effectively withstand the departure of reform champions within the Government or the prioritization of rapid policy responses during times of crisis. • Governments need to balance crisis response with long-term strategies required for the achievement of the SDGs. To do so, they need to promote evidence-based decision-making. Prioritizing the principle of leaving no one behind should not be compromised. • Governments need to establish effective anticipatory capacity to prepare for and manage future shocks. • Governments need to strengthen their systemic capacity to innovate. This requires moving beyond one-off, crisis-driven solutions to embed innovation in policymaking and public administration processes. • Public institutions need to prioritize participatory governance and citizen oversight to enhance accountability, even during crises such as the pandemic. • Consistently pursue collaboration between supreme audit institutions and organized citizens to improve public oversight, transparency, and accountability.
<i>Co-creation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governments should aim to capitalize on the insights gained from the catalysing effects of COVID-19 in fostering innovation in co-production and co-creation. • Actively involve citizens in decision-making processes and ensure that policies and services meet their needs. • Governments need to align their co-creation activities with the systemic nature of the SDGs. Collaborative initiatives should be designed to have wide-ranging and interconnected impacts that contribute to the achievement of the Goals.
<i>Health-care service provision</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governments should actively support the utilization of telehealth and digital health technologies and other innovative solutions while also assessing and adapting pandemic-driven innovations in testing and disease surveillance to improve service delivery, expand health-care access, and address challenges in underserved areas. • Governments could prioritize and strengthen collaboration with the private sector to leverage resources, expertise and infrastructure to ensure effective health-care delivery. • Governments should invest in and promote the use of online platforms for health workforce training to ensure continuous professional development beyond emergencies, particularly in low- and middle-income settings.
<i>Multilevel coordination and preparedness</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenges in multilevel governance require more attention. Efforts should be made to navigate the tensions between national and subnational governments caused by crises such as COVID-19. • Governments should encourage a culture of collaboration and innovation across all levels of governance. • Governments should embrace collaborative approaches, combining both top-down and bottom-up relations, as well as horizontal, cross-sectoral integration.

Area	Action points
<i>Hybrid learning modalities and their influence on innovation and performance management</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public organizations should capitalize on the opportunities they had during the pandemic to foster collaboration and a sense of purpose among their staff and redefine productivity based on objectives and outcomes. This shift could allow for greater flexibility and performance management during and beyond crises. • Organizations should ensure that their strategic plans incorporate the perspectives and input of employees to enhance their engagement and commitment. • Academic professionals should be encouraged to think creatively and develop tools and applications that can address specific challenges in their organizations. • Academic organizations should recognize the transformative power of technology and invest in online learning systems and platforms to enhance teaching and engagement with students. They could collaborate with private companies to acquire technology and explore ways to overcome inequalities and improve access to resources.
<i>Rethinking the current model of operation of the public sector</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governments should consolidate crisis innovations into a resilient governance system capable of handling systemic shocks, incorporating successful ad hoc solutions adopted during the pandemic into new standard operating procedures. • Transformed institutional frameworks need to consider digital readiness, adaptability, simplified procurement, co-production, participation, staff mobility, and effective communication. • Encourage a problem-solving culture within the public sector that promotes innovation. • Activate flexible and transparent procedures for allocating human resources, conducting tenders, and forming partnerships with local governments, non-governmental organizations and private actors to deliver services effectively. • Move away from sequential thinking and adopt approaches that combine routine service delivery with crisis governance to ensure that both aspects are given equal attention and resources. • Adopt whole-of-government strategies and combine them with whole-of-society approaches. This includes engaging citizens, organizations and other stakeholders in crisis management and decision-making processes.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

The *World Public Sector Report 2023* examined the following questions: (a) How can Governments reshape the relationship with people and other actors to enhance trust and promote the behavioural changes required for more sustainable and peaceful societies? (b) How can Governments assess competing priorities and address difficult policy trade-offs that have emerged since 2020 and may emerge in the future? (c) What assets and innovations could Governments mobilize to transform the public sector and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

This final chapter aims to synthesize key cross-cutting messages coming from the research done by the report team and the contributions of experts in the preceding chapters. Section 4.1 briefly reviews some of the changes that seem to have occurred during and after the pandemic in the expectations of people and societies regarding the objectives and practices of governance. Sections 4.2 to 4.5 summarize lessons from the body of evidence examined in the report, grouped under four headlines: increasing participation and engagement at all levels; changing the modes of operation of the public sector to allow public institutions to simultaneously deal with crises and pursue the SDGs; building the capacity of Governments and non-State actors to move the 2030 Agenda forward and manage crises; and preserving the positive changes that emerged during the pandemic in “normal” times. The chapter concludes with considerations on how the international community should think of the role of public institutions as it embarks on the second half of the 2030 Agenda implementation period. The reader is referred to the tables at the end of the first three chapters of the report for specific recommendations put forward by the experts in their contributions.

4.1 Changed expectations of people and societies with regard to the objectives and practices of governance

In many ways, the pandemic and its negative economic and social impacts acted as a revelator and accelerator of tensions building up in social contracts between people and their Governments. It highlighted profound issues in trust between people and their institutions. In many countries, there appears to have been a significant shift in public perceptions of the goals of governance, particularly with regard to societal values, the role of the State, and inclusion and participation. The report points to several areas that require attention.

The pandemic brought immense hardship to people around the globe, with its most adverse impacts disproportionately affecting individuals and groups that were already disadvantaged. The expectation of fairness within societies is growing—which directly supports calls for renewed social contracts that will enhance people’s relationships with their Governments. The present report examines a number of areas where fairness has been at the centre of discussions on how to move forward; these include the administration of justice, taxation systems, public services and, more broadly, respect for human rights both offline and online.

As inequalities continue to rise and the fiscal situation of Governments deteriorates, the legitimacy of the decisions made by Governments about difficult policy trade-offs—and more broadly about

long-term societal choices—is increasingly being called into question. The current discussions surrounding austerity policies, for example, are reminiscent of those witnessed in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007/08—with the difference that the fiscal and policy space in many countries is much more restricted now than it was then. The set of alternatives facing Governments at present also involves apparent trade-offs between short-term imperatives and the longer-term pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals, making long-term visions and strategies aligned with the Goals all the more needed. As State-society relations are redefined, building consensus and legitimacy on the paths chosen for SDG implementation is paramount.

In many contexts, citizens are also calling for more accountability from their Governments. Accountability and transparency were challenged during the pandemic, as documented in the *World Public Sector Report 2021*.

The pandemic and other recent crises have served as a reminder that tackling major challenges and achieving societal goals require contributions from all stakeholders. As a precondition for public engagement, Governments need to preserve and expand civic space—the environment that enables people and groups to participate and exercise their civic freedoms and that forms part of the social contract. The steady contraction of civic space was documented even before the pandemic, which only accentuated this trend. The stifling of voice and restrictions on human rights lead to frustration and alienation, undermining the social contract and trust in government. They also preclude people’s engagement in the common endeavour to realize the 2030 Agenda, a necessary ingredient for its success.

Digital technologies played a key role during the pandemic, enabling Governments and other stakeholders to continue to provide public services and in many cases transforming the ways services were delivered. For instance, the disruption caused by the lockdowns provided a strong impetus for the digitalization of justice systems in a number of countries. Another crucial role of information technologies during the pandemic was that of platforms for work and collaboration. However, the accelerated shift to digital government has also placed in stark contrast the existing digital divides both within and across countries. In addition, the digital transformation has highlighted risks to privacy, freedom of expression, information integrity and non-discrimination, and has deepened concerns about surveillance, privacy and data protection, underlining the connection between human rights online and offline. Legal and regulatory frameworks have not kept pace with the rapid development and application of digital technologies. There is an urgent need for proper safeguards and oversight, including within public administration.

Taken together, the trends highlighted here and others that are outside the scope of this report amount to serious challenges to existing social contracts. Adopting a comprehensive approach to rebuilding and strengthening social contracts will better position societies to achieve stronger relationships and social cohesion, greater resilience to crises, and accelerated progress towards the SDGs. Governments alone cannot reshape their relationships with other social actors. However, as a crucial first step towards enhancing public trust, they need to create an enabling environment for strengthened relationships by, for example, promoting transparency, respect for human rights, public engagement, and the exercise of voice. Critically, they also need to demonstrate trust in other actors even as they seek greater trust.

Drawing from the research done for the report and the contributions of experts, the sections that follow examine innovations and changes in practices of governance and public administration that emerged during and after the pandemic in relation to these trends, and their potential to inform strategies to address them.

4.2. Increasing participation and engagement at all levels

The need for Governments to be more inclusive, participatory and responsive to people's needs and aspirations is a thread that runs through the three main chapters of the report. Examples illustrating how enhanced participation and engagement delivered societal benefits during the pandemic, and how they could enhance societal outcomes in the future, cover the full spectrum of participation, which progresses from information to consultation to involvement to collaboration and ultimately to empowerment.¹

The dissemination of accurate information plays a critical role in fostering trust and enabling participation and engagement. Two critical issues that came to the fore during the pandemic were the rise of misinformation and disinformation and the need for appropriate communication during crises. Combating misinformation and disinformation has been pushed even higher on the international policy agenda in the wake of the events in Ukraine, and efforts to curb them are under way at various levels, including within the United Nations. Efforts to ensure the integrity of information have demonstrated the importance of media literacy and the potential of partnerships between different actors, including the media, fact-checking organizations, other civil society organizations, and Governments. Improving government communication during crises is also an important axis of progress for the future, where more open and inclusive processes are likely to lead to more effective outcomes.

Consultation, collaboration and empowerment are critical principles that Governments need to embrace to build the legitimacy of policy choices. For instance, engaging key stakeholders in budget choices not only helps to build support for those choices, but can also enhance fiscal outcomes and trust in public institutions. The institutionalization of open processes based on transparency, information, participation, inclusiveness and revisability does not happen spontaneously. It requires institutional reform, as well as commitment, time and resources. In vision-setting exercises and in other contexts, public institutions should take care to avoid (real or perceived) tokenism, as this can lead to disenchantment with participation and further estrangement of people from their Governments.

Collaboration between States and non-State stakeholders in the form of co-production and co-creation also offers opportunities, of which the pandemic period offered many examples. As documented in the *World Public Sector Report 2021*, civil society stepped up to support continuity in the delivery of public services, reach out to disadvantaged segments of society, provide legal information and aid, fight misinformation and disinformation, and engage in many other

¹ The IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation, developed by the International Association for Public Participation, helps define the public's role in public engagement processes, with the progressive categories reflecting increasing public impact on decisions; for more information on this scale, see https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.iap2.org/resource/resmgr/communications/11x17_p2_pillars_brochure_20.pdf.

interventions. In some contexts, co-production and hybrid models of service delivery emerged as innovative solutions. Under the right conditions, partnerships between public institutions, the private sector and organized citizens can improve government responsiveness to people's needs and help societies cope with shocks. Countries should evaluate the suitability and adaptability of innovations from the pandemic period within their local contexts, ensuring that the needs of marginalized populations are prioritized in public service design. Partnerships need to be supported by adequate legal frameworks, and their success often hinges on Governments understanding the diverse determinants of the willingness of other actors to engage and providing the right incentives for engagement.

To some degree, empowerment is necessary for all types of participation and engagement. It should come first and foremost in a renewed ethos for the public sector. Directly deriving from this principle are the need to preserve civic space and the need to increase opportunities for individuals and civil society to be involved in monitoring and oversight, which is key to strengthening government accountability.

The pandemic offers important lessons for preserving civic space going forward. Some Governments applied guardrails for emergency measures, ensuring their necessity, proportionality, legality and non-discriminatory impact and involving oversight institutions in the review of these measures. Public participation was facilitated through measures such as inviting public input and feedback on pandemic-related challenges and policies and including civil society representatives in policymaking committees and parliamentary debates. Protecting freedom of peaceful assembly and safeguarding the right to privacy were important considerations for some Governments. Civil society played a vital role in monitoring and raising awareness of rights violations, forming networks and coalitions, advocating for the removal of criminal sanctions, engaging Indigenous communities, and challenging emergency measures through strategic lawsuits.

4.3 Changing the modes of operation of the public sector to allow public institutions to simultaneously deal with crises and pursue the SDGs

The pandemic and its aftermath have prompted discussions on the need to rethink the modes of operation of the public sector. In the face of the disruptions that occurred in the functioning of public institutions and organizations, in policy choices, and in public service provision, there is a sense that public institutions need to be able to simultaneously anticipate and deal with crises and remain focused on longer-term goals, including the SDGs. This implies a need for better coordination and collaboration across sectors in Government, as well as for rethinking the way public services are delivered, focusing on people, users and beneficiaries rather than on bureaucratic structures and processes.

Making public administration more inclusive

Representation within public institutions influences their relationships with society. A public administration that is a reflection of the public it serves is better able to meet societal needs and gain public trust. In particular, gender equality in public administration remains an unfinished agenda. Adjusting to a "new normal" and refocusing on gender equality in public administration

will require simultaneous action on several fronts. This includes remembering lessons learned prior to the pandemic and reenergizing efforts to adopt and implement proven good practices in the areas of data, transparency, training and mentorship, as well as special measures such as targets and quotas. It is also important to assess the gender implications of changes made during the pandemic in the areas of remote work, hybrid work, attention to work-life balance and mental health and to consolidate and integrate positive changes into future gender equality commitments in public administration. Decision makers must put gender equality at the centre of future crisis recovery efforts and ensure that women are fully integrated into—and are given opportunities to lead—permanent bodies tasked with crisis response and management. These efforts should be part of broader actions by Governments to regain momentum so that Goals 5 and 16 can be achieved by 2030 and should inform other efforts to make public administration more inclusive of all segments of society.

Changing mindsets in public administration

Placing people at the centre of public administration's actions will require changes in the mindsets of public servants, which are necessary to support changes in processes. This was perceived from the very beginning of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda but is now clearer. As public institutions shift from working on the basis of ad hoc, temporary changes put in place during the pandemic to sustained modes of operating, there is an opportunity to think about transforming public administration in a holistic way. For instance, in the justice sector, it is important to organize transformation efforts around people's experience of conflicts or injustice; to involve judges and human rights defenders in the design of solutions; and to embrace legal processes that enable early resolution and create informal approaches to dispute resolution.

Better navigating the trade-offs that arise in SDG implementation

To better navigate the trade-offs that arise in SDG implementation, Governments need to progress on several fronts. Sustainable development challenges cannot be tackled through technocratic solutions. They require compromise on competing policy considerations based on the values and principles reflected in the 2030 Agenda. There is a need to build legitimacy and consensus around policy choices to promote a virtuous circle of trust, policy adherence and effectiveness. Conducting systematic assessments of SDG synergies and trade-offs can help policymakers identify innovative policy solutions and address systemic bottlenecks that undermine the effectiveness of public services in specific contexts. Policy trade-offs should be addressed in an equitable and transparent manner, and the evidence base used to determine priorities and choices should be openly and transparently communicated. At minimum, the distributional impacts of policy priorities and choices should be communicated by Governments in a transparent way.

SDG prioritization should be transparent, supported by science, and informed by assessments of risks and SDG interactions that take into account their dynamic and contextual nature. There is a need to make science systems in support of SDG implementation more inclusive, equitable and socially relevant by involving a wider range of voices, institutions, sources of knowledge, and approaches to knowledge generation and learning. Systems modelling, scenario analysis, strategic foresight and other tools can support more integrated priority-setting and policymaking and help

policymakers navigate the challenges of achieving the SDGs and address technological and environmental transitions. The United Nations' work on integrated national financing frameworks (INFFs) provides practical guidance for countries to enhance policy coherence in various SDG sectors. Government capacity was a key determining factor of the effectiveness of countries' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the future, development cooperation could play a key role in building such capacities—for example, in national health systems, social protection systems, or crisis response systems. INFFs could serve as a tool to align such international support with national priorities and needs.

Budgets and public financial management are central and powerful tools for the prioritization of policy choices and resource allocation for the SDGs. Budget information helps weigh policy choices. Strengthening public financial management systems is critical for improving the efficiency and equity of public expenditure and for the integrated implementation of the SDGs. This includes monitoring the efficiency of budget execution and ensuring that Governments spend according to their approved budgets. Understanding the impacts of public spending on sustainable development outcomes is crucial to effective SDG implementation. Budget tagging, by linking financial resources in budgets to development goals and targets, enables targeted resource allocation and provides a basis for linking public finance decisions to development outcomes. This approach allows Governments to track and measure the impact of public spending, which can potentially lead to improved societal outcomes. It enables civil society and stakeholders to contribute to budget development, supports monitoring and evaluation, and lends itself to prospective analysis and international comparisons.

Commissioning independent assessments (including through external audits), improving monitoring, and enhancing the quality and availability of data and information are critical for leveraging the potential of these entry points for systemic SDG implementation.

Incorporating risk management in the regular processes of public administration

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of risk management but also revealed weaknesses in risk anticipation and preparedness. Effective risk management can better support systemic SDG implementation by enhancing the integration of risk considerations into SDG coordination and steering structures, investing in risk anticipation capacities, promoting stronger interagency cooperation, and reducing the gap between risk anticipation and actual preparedness. Integrating risk management into the existing priority-setting architecture, such as centres of government, requires addressing gaps in risk management systems and overcoming constraints in priority-setting processes. International cooperation can help Governments advance the role of risk management by, inter alia, setting policy priorities, sharing good practices, closing the impact gap, and facilitating coordination across levels of government.

Fostering innovation in public administration

The pandemic period witnessed occurrences of increased collaboration among public servants and other stakeholders and an accelerated pace of innovation. Innovations and changes that had positive impacts on the effectiveness, responsiveness and accountability of public institutions, for instance, in terms of digital readiness, public procurement, co-production, and staff mobility,

should ideally be preserved and consolidated and should inspire further change. This requires proper institutionalization of initially ad hoc initiatives—that is, translating them into the processes and standard operating procedures of public institutions. This has been a long-standing challenge in most countries. With a longer time frame in mind, equipping public institutions with the capacity to anticipate future challenges and manage crises while still performing their regular functions requires a systemic approach based on innovation ecosystems that promote dynamic linkages among multiple organizations, stakeholders and sectors. Very few countries have been able to achieve this.

Managing digital transformation

As mentioned previously, the accelerated shift to digital government since 2020 has provided new opportunities and benefits but has also heightened risks and generated new challenges. Governments have the chance to leverage digital transformation in a way that puts human rights, inclusion and the imperative to leave no one behind at the centre. After promoting “digital only” approaches to digital government, many countries are now moving to approaches that recognize the need for integrated, hybrid models of service delivery that can offer a seamless experience to all users, particularly those in underserved areas. Governments should adopt “inclusion-by-design” strategies and consider targeted, localized and contextual approaches, as not all excluded groups are confronted with the same barriers.

The rapid acceleration of digitalization has heightened the urgency of regulating digital services and the use of digital technology. Relevant policies should allow innovation to flourish while also protecting the rights of users and ensuring that digital services are secure and equitable, taking into consideration the effect of the growing digital divide on the most vulnerable. Such policies are needed, for example, to safeguard women from the increased online violence they have experienced since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Adjusting the relationships between levels of government

Collaboration and coordination among different levels of government are crucial for crisis management and response. The pandemic exposed the challenges of fragmentation and highlighted the need to enhance multilevel governance approaches. The changes in the relationships among different levels of government observed during the pandemic can inspire a reconsideration of institutional arrangements along critical dimensions such as the degree of autonomy of different levels of government to act on specific subjects, the allocation of resources in support of the SDGs, collaborative arrangements, and coordination mechanisms, including crisis management mechanisms.

4.4 Building the capacity of Governments and non-State actors to move the 2030 Agenda forward and manage crises

The previous sections highlight various areas where there is potential for Governments to make progress in restoring legitimacy and trust, advancing participation and engagement, making public administration more effective, accountable and responsive, and improving the delivery of public services. Moving forward on these fronts will require enhanced capacity, not only within

Governments and public institutions, but also among other actors. The present section illustrates some insights from the report in this regard.

Enhancing the capacity of Governments to plan and prioritize

There are many opportunities for Governments and public institutions to enhance their capacity to plan and prioritize. It is important to train staff in public institutions on how to use available tools to assess trade-offs and synergies, including aspects such as how to produce actionable advice for policymakers. For example, strategic foresight and scenario analysis can be integrated into civil service training and into the curricula of schools of public administration to educate the next generation of public officials and civil servants. Artificial intelligence and computational models can support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda by analysing the linkages between government expenditure and development outcomes. Capacity-building is also needed in public financial management in a broader sense, including in specific areas such as budget tagging.

Fostering the capacity for innovation in public administration

Much is still being discovered about how to promote innovation in public institutions from a systemic perspective and about the abilities, techniques and assets needed to do it successfully. Common narratives about innovation in the public sector emphasize the need for an enabling environment with appropriate regulation and infrastructure, as well as innovation-oriented organizational cultures, mindsets, capabilities and tools. They also emphasize that public servants need to be properly equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to promote innovation, particularly in areas such as technology, strategic anticipation, crisis management, adaptability, resilience, and change management. However, the pandemic illustrated that other factors, such as agency and intrinsic motivation among staff and their willingness to meaningfully engage with other actors, also play a crucial role.

During the pandemic, public institutions had to come up with innovative training methods. In South Africa, for instance, health workforce training needed to be provided on online platforms. Governments can further such transformations as an affordable or complementary alternative to in-person training, while also ensuring inclusive access to capacity development opportunities.

Building the capacity of non-State actors

Even though the present report focuses on public institutions, examples from the pandemic period highlight the continued relevance of building the capacities of other stakeholders. This is consistent with the call for increased engagement and participation, which is at the core of this report. For instance, in order to fully participate in and benefit from vision-building initiatives, stakeholders need to be trained on both the underlying substantive issues and the use of relevant tools—lest participation become tokenistic. At a basic level, education on the SDGs is critical for their achievement, and initiatives at the school and university levels can contribute to operationalizing sustainable development. Increasing the digital literacy and media literacy of the general public—starting early, ideally within schools—is an example of the kind of foundational capacity development that should accompany and support broader capacity-building efforts undertaken by Governments.

Sharing experiences and practices

The exchange of experiences and practices across countries can help address the knowledge gap on what has worked and what should be avoided in the future. Transnational professional or civil-society-led networks are valuable resources for supporting the integrated implementation of the SDGs. They can contribute to capacity-building and collaboration at the individual, organizational, and enabling environment levels. Global and regional networks can also promote the dissemination and uptake of analytical tools and models to support policy coherence and integration and encourage their practical use.

4.5 Moving from crisis to normal: preserving and leveraging the positive changes and innovations that emerged during the pandemic

The pandemic and other recent crises have prompted institutional changes that have had positive impacts on SDG progress, showing how crises can also be windows of opportunity. Yet in many areas, there is a risk of policies and institutional changes with a positive impact being abandoned once crises are over as part of the drive to “move back to normal”—especially if their impacts are not carefully assessed. For instance, some of the new workplace policies for public employees had positive impacts on gender equality, but these impacts may not have been recognized by managers or decision makers or may not be considered important as they prioritize a return to the status quo ante. Similarly, while more effective ways for different levels of government to collaborate were experimented with during the pandemic, they may lose traction and be abandoned as the end of the emergency compels all actors to fall back to prescribed or traditional ways of working. This underscores the importance of evaluation to assess the performance of institutional innovations, enable course corrections, and focus efforts on effective practices in public administration.

The same applies to situations where rapid, positive change was achieved largely through collective mobilization, collaboration stemming from a renewed sense of common purpose, and the intrinsic motivation of individuals. This reflects key differences between normal times and crises. In non-emergency conditions, public servants may not be allowed to experiment with or learn from unsuccessful attempts at innovation or to understand how to manage the risks associated with failure. They may also lack the optimism, influence and motivation necessary to explore new ways of delivering public services and capitalizing on data and tools that can foster innovation. All this can drastically change during crises. During the pandemic, public sector managers and staff often departed from general preconceptions and did not wait for all the traditionally recognized enabling elements to be in place to innovate.

The question thus arises of how to preserve positive changes so that they continue to benefit society in normal times. As reflected in the examples included in the report, fostering transformation and innovation requires intentional actions at different levels—actions that involve individuals (including staff of public entities and their partners), organizations, and institutions, up to the enabling environment. As emphasized above, the capacity of public institutions to institutionalize change in a durable way, translating it into changes in standard operating procedures of public administration, is crucial, as is the ability of public organizations to deal with uncertainty and risk. So are the mindsets and attitudes of public servants and those with whom they interact. Going

forward, creating a renewed sense of purpose within public institutions and public administration—one that is shared with stakeholders and put at the service of a genuine commitment to participation and engagement—will be necessary.

4.6 Looking forward: Can the lessons from the pandemic inform institutional change to better support the realization of the SDGs?

Looking forward, what are the lessons from the pandemic period in terms of how institutions at the national level could be transformed to support the achievement of the SDGs and make societies more resilient to crises? The role played by Governments in COVID-19 responses has reinforced the legitimacy and centrality of the State as a societal actor—a 180-degree turn away from the minimalist conceptions of the role of the State that had dominated the mainstream economic discourse since the mid-1980s. At the same time, the current social, economic and environmental challenges are immense, and the level of trust between public institutions and those they serve is low. This conjunction offers a clear opportunity to rethink how public institutions work for people and how they can best support progress on the 2030 Agenda. Such conversations should be held at the national level but also at the international level when appropriate, given the commonality and interdependence of challenges across countries in many areas. The lessons from the pandemic could also help Governments manage other emergencies, such as the climate emergency, which require long-term transformations in policies and drastic policy choices, as well as putting rights and justice considerations at the centre of policy decisions.

Broadly speaking, institutions at all levels need to become more inclusive and responsive. This encompasses empowering different segments of society, including women and youth, to meaningfully contribute to the creation of shared visions and strategies for sustainable development, including participating in key policy choices. There must be a sustained and integrated focus on human rights, including those of future generations, with more attention given to how changes in institutional design and rapid technological progress may impact them, both in times of crises and in “normal” times.

To support faster progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, institutions need to be better equipped—starting with adequate funding and human resources. Key areas for consideration include the capacity of the public sector to identify and manage synergies and trade-offs among the SDGs, to better integrate uncertainty and risk into key processes, to manage digital transformation, to better use budget and public financial management in support of informed policy choices, and to foster and institutionalize innovation both in the internal processes of public organizations and at the interface with people in service delivery. The changes required are not limited to those of a technical nature; they include changes in the mindsets of public servants and the norms of public institutions and specific organizations to genuinely value the empowerment of other actors, engage in co-production and effectively manage participation; to put gender equality and human rights at the centre of policy and institutional design; and to elevate the principle of leaving no one behind as a central tenet of public service.

The examples featured in the report provide glimpses of fast and sometimes radical change (in the health and justice sectors, for instance), but they also offer insights into persistent obstacles and

challenges that often precluded more than incremental changes during the pandemic (in areas such as the preservation of civic space, the engagement of non-State actors in policymaking, and the fight against misinformation and disinformation). While a comprehensive assessment across sectors was not the objective of this report, the general picture is not that of a broad, systemic transformation of public institutions that could help facilitate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Many of the challenges highlighted in this report are therefore likely to remain relevant in the coming years. More research could be devoted to systematically taking stock of which sectors, policy areas and types of institutions have experienced more drastic or disruptive changes, and to assessing the potential for those changes to positively impact progress on all the SDGs. Such assessments should be carried out at the national level, as circumstances and contexts vary widely across countries, and also at the international level, as rapid changes in some sectors—such as new mechanisms for cooperation during health emergencies or new ways of addressing misinformation and disinformation—may impact international relations.

Some of the positive changes that emerged during the pandemic period may not be sustained going forward as policies and processes get pulled back to pre-pandemic “default” positions. The intrinsic motivation of public servants, civil society and individuals may in some cases have been the determining factor behind many of the positive changes driven by the pandemic. Whether and how such motivation can be sustained post-pandemic should now be of key concern to Governments.

Many of the issues examined in this report are currently being addressed within the United Nations, some through intergovernmental processes set in motion as a follow-up to the Secretary-General’s report, *Our Common Agenda*. A number of the expert contributions in this report highlight the high expectations attached to United Nations-led processes aimed at addressing these issues, including the SDG Summit, the Global Digital Compact, the Declaration on Future Generations, and the Summit of the Future. This is a great opportunity for the United Nations, as it testifies to the commitment of non-State actors to contribute to these processes and enrich them, and more broadly to the faith that is still placed in the multilateral system. It is also a reminder of the importance of securing meaningful outcomes to these processes.

The World Public Sector Report 2023 examines the role that national institutional and governance innovations and changes that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic can play in advancing progress towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The consequences of the pandemic and its aftermath threaten to further derail progress on the 2030 Agenda and make the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) more difficult to achieve in the short and medium terms. Yet the pandemic also sparked rapid innovation in government institutions and public administration that could be capitalized on; positive changes were observed in the internal workings of public institutions and in the way they interact with one another and broader society, including through public service delivery. Against this backdrop, the report focuses on three main questions: How can Governments reshape their relationship with people and other actors to enhance trust and promote the changes required for more sustainable and peaceful societies? How can Governments assess competing priorities and address difficult policy trade-offs that have emerged since 2020? What assets and innovations can Governments mobilize to transform the public sector and achieve the SDGs? The report addresses them in chapters composed of short overviews followed by a set of in-depth contributions (23 in total) from a wide range of experts which examine institutional changes observed in different contexts, sectors and policy processes and explore the potential of those with a positive impact on the achievement of the SDGs to be sustained beyond the pandemic. The report aims to draw attention to institutional change as a key component of the societal transformations required to realize the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

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