

SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals

UN Report Assesses How Far National Institutions Have Gone for SDGs

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According to a five-year stocktaking by the UN Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government, the first five years of implementation of the 2030 Agenda “have seen unprecedented institutionalization at the national level,” compared to other internationally-agreed development frameworks. The World Public Sector Report 2021 examines countries’ institutional arrangements for SDG implementation, and suggests lessons for national policymakers.

The 2021 edition of the WPSR, titled ‘National Institutional Arrangements for Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals: A Five-Year Stocktaking,’ covers the five years since 2015. The Report assesses “how far countries have gone” to adapt institutional frameworks.

Findings include:

- In both developing and developed countries, the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs have achieved high visibility and political salience as an overarching policy agenda, with most countries establishing high-level coordination arrangements for implementation;
- The number of entry points for stakeholders has increased since 2015, and the entry points have also increased in importance, reflecting “maturity” in the institutional arrangements;
- The voluntary national reviews (VNRs) have catalyzed civil society engagement around the SDGs, even in countries that did not have a strong tradition of engaging civil society in decision-making;
- In some contexts, efforts at SDG localization have borne fruit, including in the form of voluntary local reviews; and
- In many countries, parliaments still do not play a regular role in oversight of government actions to implement the SDGs.

The authors also consider strengths and weaknesses of national follow-up and review systems for the SDGs. As a strength, they find that most countries have conducted assessments to identify the availability of national indicators based on the global SDG indicator framework, and have identified a national set of SDG indicators. An area for improvement is for more countries to identify national targets, baselines, and benchmarks.

Overall, countries have improved in their preparation of the VNRs, an increasing number of external audit reports on the SDGs are conducted, and stakeholder engagement has increased, with contributions from more diverse stakeholders to SDG follow-up and review. Another area for improvement is to address “structural bottlenecks related to communications infrastructure and access to digital devices” in order to ensure inclusive and effective SDG monitoring, follow-up, and review.

The report documents efforts to enhance the capacity of public servants to implement the SDGs. The authors suggest that capacity-building efforts initially were driven by the “supply side,” which increased the range of capacity-building products available, but without coordination resulted in a fragmented landscape of capacity-building activities. Moreover, among the 24 countries examined in the report, few have conducted a comprehensive, government-wide assessment of capacities needed to implement the SDGs.

The report suggests that capacity-building strategies should ensure public servants have guidance and guidelines that enable them to incorporate the SDGs in their daily work.

Finally, the report takes stock of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on national institutions and their implications for SDG implementation. It finds that the pandemic has:

- Directly impacted the ability of national governments and national institutions to steer and monitor the SDGs as a programme of action;
- Created major disruptions to the functioning of governments including in the areas of policymaking, the provision of basic services, law enforcement, and the justice system; and
- Revealed limitations in “cross-cutting dimensions of government action” (e.g. crisis preparedness, science-policy interfaces, communication, and the use of digital government) which greatly affect a government’s capacity to manage a crisis.

The 2021 WPSR was released on 24 August 2021. The Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government is part of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA).