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Key points

- In support of countries' early mainstreaming efforts, UNDG has outlined six key elements for integrating the SDGs into national and sub-national contexts, encompassing issues of policy alignment, prioritization, institutional contexts, financing and budgeting, data and monitoring, and advocacy.

- While ensuring coherence across sectors, the successful mainstreaming of the 2030 Agenda more broadly requires the adaptation of the global SDG framework into national and sub-national policies, backed by the necessary budget allocations, investments in monitoring and evaluation systems, and multi-sector, multi-stakeholder institutions capable of guiding implementation and follow-up.

- Most countries have exhibited notable progress so far across all mainstreaming areas, having adapted national plans and aligned monitoring and evaluation frameworks to the global SDG targets, initiated impressive awareness-raising campaigns, and fostered leadership and accountability through the establishment of inter-ministerial bodies and cross-cutting partnerships.

- Continued leadership, innovation, and adaptation are required to facilitate whole-of-country approaches that respond to the nexus between social, economic, and environmental dimensions of development.

TURNING AN AMBITIOUS VISION INTO AN ACHIEVABLE REALITY: LANDING THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

by Babatunde Omilola

This policy brief focuses on the importance of early mainstreaming activities for positioning countries to achieve an integrated and coherent response in their implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Drawing on a framework proposed by the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) and country experiences to date, the brief examines what must be done, what has been done, and some of the key challenges for landing the SDGs at the national and sub-national levels.

Introduction

Unapologetically ambitious in its scope, the framework embodied by the SDGs reflects a paradigm shift in the global conception of and means of responding to today's most pressing development challenges. Mirroring the complexity of the globalized world order within which they operate, the SDGs capture the interdependencies that exist between all dimensions of development, from the social to the economic to the environmental, as well as between all countries and all people. This initial momentum means nothing, however, if countries are not able to localize the far-reaching vision of the Goals and translate rhetoric into measurable reality. Just as the global discourse on development has shifted to reflect the ever-evolving challenges of sustainability in all its dimensions, the policy frameworks and institutional contexts for implementation must necessarily shift with them for any sustainable and meaningful progress to be made for people, planet, prosperity and peace. Most critically, the implementation of the SDGs must recognize the deep interlinkages and multi-directional relationships that tie them all together.

Landing the SDGs at the national level: what must be done?

As a voluntary framework rather than a binding blueprint, the 2030 Agenda leaves it to governments to decide how the "aspirational and global targets should be incorporated into national planning processes, policies and strategies" (United Nations 2015, p. 13). The critical early work of rendering systems and policies fit for purpose to the current Agenda, described here as 'mainstreaming', carries multiple implications for integration. While there can be no single best approach, the UNDG has developed a universally applicable framework outlining several key processes that are fundamental for mainstreaming the SDGs. Consisting of both immediate activities and longer-term actions to be initiated over time, it identifies the following six focus areas:

1. Aligning the SDGs to national priorities

Adapting the SDGs to the national context requires systematic reviews of the existing policy landscape to assess how national, sub-national and local plans align with the SDGs, identify gaps, map interdependencies between goals, and formulate adapted plans using a systems-thinking approach. With an emphasis on integrating the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of development, these exercises should promote coherence horizontally, or across sectors, as well as vertically, or across different levels of government. Most countries have already demonstrated notable commitments to this critical early mainstreaming activity, bolstered by an increasing proliferation of tools to promote policy coherence. Among these, the Rapid Integrated Assessment (RIA) tool developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has enabled numerous countries to assess alignment between national development plans and the SDG targets, as well as examine the reflection of interlinkages across SDGs within country plans. In Mauritius, for example, the tool revealed that 98 of 107 SDG targets deemed relevant to the country were present in existing policy documents, enabling the government to focus on mainstreaming the SDG targets not yet covered within the existing policy framework. Through addressing integration in all its dimensions, many OECD countries have also taken up efforts to promote policy coherence with a particular focus on the "transboundary impacts" of domestic policies and creating vertical coherence that extends from the local to global (OECD 2016, p. 62).

2. Prioritizing SDG 'accelerators'

While the 2030 Agenda represents an indivisible and interdependent set of goals, governments, faced with realities of limited financial, technical, and human resources, must prioritize selected catalytic measures and actions with the greatest potential to accelerate progress across multiple goals and targets. For instance, one important SDG accelerator applicable to all countries lies in strengthening investments in the empowerment of women and girls, including through economic, legal and political channels, an intervention which has generated proven multiplier effects across other development goals. By targeting national resources in priority areas identified through the mainstreaming process, countries can optimize "opportunities for trade-offs, synergies and win-win solutions", eliminate bottlenecks to implementation, break down silos and inspire cross-sectoral collaboration (Coopman et al. 2016, p. 4). In Jamaica, using the results of the RIA tool, the government identified four entry points for accelerating the SDGs based on its existing national goals, narrowing its focus to bundles of policy interventions relating to the environment, the economy, governance, and human development.

3. Fostering multi-stakeholder institutional arrangements and coordination

Progress at the policy level will stagnate if silos still exist between government ministries or between national and sub-national governments. For integrated policies to transcend to outcomes, this equally vital work rests in reforming institutional arrangements and applying multi-stakeholder approaches to provide a conducive environment for implementation and follow-up processes. As "one of the first countries to align its national planning processes to the 2030 Agenda", Uganda has made strides in promoting integrated implementation in line with policy adjustments by setting up a task force for inclusive participation and coordination mechanisms, including defining clear roles for different ministries (UNDG 2016, p. 16). Similar examples of countries leveraging formalized institutional mechanisms, such as inter-ministerial coordinating bodies, to foster "horizontal coherence, integration and partnerships across government sectors" may be found in Bhutan, Finland, and Columbia, among others (UNDG 2017, p. 66).

4. Financing and budgeting for the future

If commitments to develop comprehensive planning documents do not extend to budgeting, with a view to ensuring stable multi-year financing, then strong partnerships and institutions will only go so far. Achieving the necessary levels of funding to implement the ambitious development goals requires countries to diversify their resource bases and adapt domestic budgets to increasingly incorporate results-based, participatory approaches. The Addis Ababa Action Agenda, to which world leaders committed in 2015,

provides a comprehensive framework for aligning financial flows to the current Agenda, proposing policy actions that draw on "all sources of finance, technology, innovation, trade, debt and data" (UN DESA, 2015). Among other countries, Cabo Verde is exploring "options to re-orient existing public expenditures and make them more efficient", along with actions to mobilize new revenue through both domestic and external as well as public and private sources (UNDG 2017, p. 84). Some of the most innovative examples of early mainstreaming have also appeared in fragile contexts, including in Sierra Leone, which, while "still reeling from the effects of the Ebola crisis" and economic difficulties, has "mainstreamed all the SDGs into its national budget" (UNDG 2016, p. 4).

5. Investing in data, monitoring and reporting

While aligning the SDGs with national policies represents one component of integration, countries' ability to implement the policies in a coherent and effective manner will largely depend on the coherence of the selected targets and indicators behind the prioritized goals and the ability to track progress towards the envisioned outcomes. It is particularly essential in the early stages of mainstreaming for governments to establish strong coordination between the lead SDG-implementing government body or bodies, such as ministries of planning, and the agencies in charge of national statistics, data collection, and monitoring to ensure that "the statistical systems, capacities, methodologies and mechanisms are in place to track progress and ensure accountability, with the engagement of citizens, parliaments and other national stakeholders" (UNDG 2017, p. 100). In Egypt, for example, the "national statistical agency, CAPMAS, established an SDG Coordination Unit to contextualize and set the national indicator framework necessary to monitor and track Egypt's progress of SDGs" (UNDG 2017, p. 101). As many governments continue to face data gaps and limited national statistical capacity, including for data collection, disaggregation, analysis, and sharing, scaling up investments in monitoring and evaluation for the SDGs must be urgently prioritized. Countries can benefit from developments at the global level in support of these efforts, such as the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data, which brings together actors in government, international organizations, and all sectors of society to help countries improve the use of data, fill gaps, and mobilize political will and resources (Global Partnership, 2016).

6. Advocacy and engagement

Integrating the participatory, inclusive, and universal approaches that gave rise to the SDGs into the implementation and follow-up processes requires significant investments in outreach and awareness-raising activities. Advocacy campaigns should be both inwardly and outwardly focused, on the one hand raising public awareness of the goals to facilitate accountability, while on the other, sensitizing all stakeholders within and outside government to foster common understanding and to maximize political will. One effective platform to facilitate public engagement at the national and sub-national level, as a successor to the former UN Millennium Campaign, is the UN SDG Action Campaign launched by UNDP, which provides "simple entry points for citizens and organizations not only to become aware of the SDGs, but also to play an active role in implementation and ensuring accountability" (Clark 2016). Innovative approaches to facilitate two-way communication in support of the SDGs, with an emphasis on providing platforms to raise the voices of marginalized groups, women, and youth in shaping the Agenda at country level, include an initiative called UN70 Belarus Express for SDGs. Using a train as a "platform for numerous discussions and events focused on the SDGs", the initiative in Belarus engaged more than 150,000 people, including parliamentarians, students, religious leaders, and vulnerable groups (UNDG 2017, p. 26).

Conclusion and way forward

While these early mainstreaming efforts, touching on all aspects of integration, signal an encouraging start to the implementation of the SDGs, the complexity of the task at hand means that their achievement will take more than commitment alone. Much of the challenge for successful mainstreaming derives from the fact that we are entering unchartered territory, moving beyond the old ways of doing business that failed to capture the interconnectedness of all spheres of development. A major challenge for all countries lies in ensuring that the "SDGs become a 'whole-of-government' program" (O'Conner et al. 2016). Within this objective, one of the biggest tests for this new development agenda will be countries' capacity to effectively mainstream the environmental dimension along with the social and economic aspects, and achieve development that is both just and sustainable in the long run. While innovative policy tools and approaches have already provided an important basis for creating greater horizontal and vertical policy coherence, they "require considerable effort and strong leadership to apply" and thus still remain limited in their application (UNDG 2017, p. 63). Such inputs cannot be neatly captured by any one tool or approach. From building consensus and harmonization among different stakeholders to promoting attitudes of consistent learning, knowledge creation, and adaptation, all whilst being sensitive to the surrounding political economy, existing systems, and entrenched social or cultural norms, the task of mainstreaming the SDGs ultimately calls upon countries to focus on the concrete along with the intangible: to change attitudes as well as policies.

About the Author

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