National institutional arrangements for implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals: A five-year stocktaking, World Public Sector Report 2021

Book review by DAGMAR RADIN[*]
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To assess progress towards the goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) has issued the 2021 World Public Sector Report with a focus on the national institutional arrangements in twenty-four countries. The 2021 Report differs from the 2019 one as it focuses on the evaluation of the progress made since the beginning of the implementation in 2016. It takes into consideration the challenges set forth by the COVID 19 pandemic and its effects on the ability of public institutions to respond while upholding the principles and adjustments needed for the achievement of the SDGs. The Report focuses on: the evolution of institutional arrangements for SDG implementation; the development and performance of monitoring and evaluation systems for the SDGs; and evaluation of the efforts made by governments and other stakeholders to boost public servants' capacity for SDG implementation.

Five years into the implementation of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, the UN DESA has completed the *2021 World Public Sector Report,* which focuses on the evaluation of national institutions in their ability to move towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Institutions represent a key element in countries' abilities to achieve the SDGs as they represent the framework for, and one of the first steps in, the successful achievement of the goals as strong institutions are a necessary precondition for economic and political development resistant to exogenous shocks.

Given that 2021 marks one-third of the way into the implementation process of the Agenda, evaluation of the progress of the institutional arrangements is timely and appropriate, particularly because, since the last Report, of 2019, the emergence of the COVID 19 pandemic is likely to represent a significant disruptor of this process. Thus, it is extremely important to take stock of the progress that has been made as the Report can be used by countries to self-assess and recalibrate their own progress while taking into consideration the new lessons to be learned from the pandemic shock.

The Report is focused on three areas of SDGs implementation: the first chapter evaluates the development of institutional arrangements, the second one evaluates the progress and development, in addition to the strengths and weaknesses of the monitoring strategy, while the third chapter analyses the efforts by governments and other stakeholders to increase the capacity of public servants. The fourth, and final, chapter looks at the impacts of COVID-19 on national institutional arrangements for SDGs implementation.

The Report focuses on a sample of 24 countries and was created by a desk review based on multi-sourced, tiered approaches that relied significantly on voluntary national reports, national sustainable goal strategies, legal and policy documents, academic articles, reports and evaluations produced by NGOs in different languages. Thus, the level of analysis is at the national level. The countries were then

compared using a matrix that made it possible to compare the diverse data and sources. For the area of monitoring and review evaluation, the team additionally administered a questionnaire filled out by international organizations active in these fields.

The Report begins with the Executive Summary presenting, in a concise but provocative manner the main outline of the chapters and their findings but without giving too much away in terms of the conclusion, thereby inviting the reader to delve deeper. The first chapter evaluates the institutional settings and their changes and developments since 2016. It outlines the diversity of the paths that countries have taken in their institutional progress, pointing out that there is no specific right or wrong path or pattern to the approach to institutional framework development. Some similarities are noted, such as the need to identify and establish high-level coordination structures, but in order to compare different cases, the authors focus on the following: adaptation of legal and regulatory frameworks at the national level; the integration of the SDGs into national strategies; the development of the SDG implementation roadmaps; the creation of piloting governmental structures; and the development of national monitoring and reporting including SDG evaluation frameworks and hubs. Other areas included are SDG implementation financing and capacity building, both important as they indicate the level of commitment national governments have to supporting the successful implementation of the Agenda. While the Report uses graphs and charts to depict the level of progress and how countries measure against one another on this issue, the textual part of the Report depicts more in-depth examples in order to illustrate different approaches to institutional development, through the explanation of the development of a particular legal framework, which allows for a direct comparison of two countries. Such is the case of Colombia and Spain, which both established a high-level body by executive decree. In addition, the Report makes use of separate and highlighted text boxes to identify country cases: Mongolia's Law on Development Policy and Planning as a basis for the implementation of the SDGs, Brazil's executive actions, coordination structure examples from different countries, and so on. These cases provide great examples. detailing the otherwise macro level view of the Report and contributing to a better understanding of the countries in the study. The second chapter focuses on the analysis of the countries' monitoring, follow up and review system integration into existing structures to avoid parallel structures. The analysis shows the different degrees of countries' institutionalization, how they inform policy makers in the progress towards the goals, and where there is room for improvement. The resources for the chapter come from secondary literature as well as from an in-depth analysis of audits, evaluations, and other assessments. The chapter defines the key concepts measured (monitoring, evaluation, follow-up, review, and reporting) to clarify the starting points. In the process of analysing the structures of the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system, they make distinctions among the four different models of mechanism that most of the 24 countries fall into, differentiating them with respect to level of complexity and institutionalization. In evaluating the progress of the M&E systems over time, the

Report indicates that most countries have been significantly focused on the identification of indicators for M&E, which has taken considerable time and is still ongoing. Thus, the level of maturity of the SDG monitoring and evaluation indicators is at different stages, with several countries having no indicator framework set up as of 2019. The chapter further details segments of the analysis for each country as well as the level of progress achieved in tables and charts showing that the most progress (in 96% of countries) has been made in the assessment of the availability of national indicators. What makes the chapter rich in content and diverse in its approach is the variety of examples of countries and samples of countries for M&E segments: the disaggregation of indicators for various SDGs in Costa Rica, the challenges of mainstreaming SDGs in Colombia and the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) by region, as well as the illustration of the detailed VNR process in Finland. What is notable at the end of each section of the second chapter is the special reference made to how the COVID 19 pandemic has affected each segment of the analysed M&E process. Among many of the interesting findings of this chapter, the authors remark that federal and highly decentralized states present a more institutionalized monitoring system, while some unitary or highly centralized states present examples of strong subnational monitoring frameworks and highlight the increasing development of the subnational monitoring systems.

While the previous chapters look at the institutional framework and capacity to implement and to monitor such implementation of the SDGs, the third chapter looks at the progress in public servant capacity building at the national level. The objectives of the chapter are to describe the environment of actions undertaken to build capacity of public servants, and to evaluate the results and impacts of such actions in the meeting of the country needs. When talking about capacity building, the chapter focuses on actions targeting public servants implemented by any actor at the international and national level, rather than the financial aspects of SDG implementation. The chapter relies on information published by key institutions and focused on different thematic areas of the activities. The first part of the chapter looks at the assessment of the needs for national capacity where it seems that the biggest capacity gaps as reported by the VNRs are in the above-mentioned monitoring and reporting capacity, followed immediately by institutional capacity. The section that follows analyses the national strategies for capacity building for SDG implementation in public administration, focusing on the case of Spain which seems to clearly stand out as country with the adoption of a government-wide approach to strengthening the capacity of public administration. Looking at the actors involved in capacity building, the chapter highlights both national and international actors that have taken important roles in collaborating and operating at different levels such as the collaboration of the UNDP and other UN agencies with other national and international organizations, as well as the collaboration between civil society organizations and development agencies. The analysis of capacity building extends to other subnational actors such as the university and school level capacity assessment in terms of their pedagogical inclusion, raising awareness of the SDGs among public servants, and incorporating the SDGs into

continued public servant training. Finally, the chapter assesses the guidelines for the achievement of long term development planning with the inclusion of the SDGs at the domestic level, as also addressing how to localize the efforts of SDG implementation, strengthen the national statistics with respect to SDG reporting, and other things. This chapter, in line with those before it, includes numerous country-specific examples at different stages of the analysis, as well as a toolkit and examples on how to strengthen capacity building of public servants in specific segments, such as raising awareness. The chapter concludes with a set of recommendations targeted towards various actors.

The fourth thematic chapter of the Report focuses on the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on the progress made by public institutions in implementing the SDGs. More specifically, the Report looks at how the pandemic has disrupted progress towards the implementation of the SDGs from the perspective both of the ability of governments to prioritize SDG implementation in light of the crisis and of the support and steering national governments are able to provide to institutional arrangements in moving towards the goals. The first part of the chapter looks at the risk of the loss of salience of the SDGs at the international level, the impact on governmental capacity to manage and monitor progress towards the SDGs and the risk of losing the financing to accomplish it. The second part of the chapter focuses on how the pandemic has affected the work of public institutions given the limitations on the availability of public servants which, in some cases, forced the public administration to adopt new methods of participatory processes to ensure involvement of all stakeholders, such as the case of Ankara, Turkey, and the way public administration managers operate in other countries. The pandemic has also affected the science-policy relationship, as well as the communication between the government and citizens which has been crucial in establishing a relationship of trust. However, the section concludes with an analysis of the limitations that digital governance has had across different parts of the world, given limited communication infrastructures. The next section looks at horizontal policy integration during and after the pandemic, and its impact on inequality and intergenerational equity. In analysing the impact on vertical policy integration during the pandemic and its impact on the tensions among the different levels of government and on stakeholder engagement, the general conclusions point to the need to persevere in creating a public space to integrate civic engagement in decision making as well as to increase accountability. The next part of the chapter, in fact, focuses on national accountability in terms of transparency and access to information, both in evaluating the movement towards an open government as well as the assessment of the risk of increased corruption that the pandemic has introduced. The Report recommends increased public participation, greater transparency and openness as tools that can reduce the corruption risk associated with the processes of the COVID 19 pandemic. The last part of the fourth chapter addresses the importance of trust in public institutions to promote societal change and sees the extraordinary situations brought about by the pandemic as an opportunity to strengthen the societal contract and trustworthy institutions. Norway is presented as an example of a

way in which social trust was able to be preserved during the pandemic. The chapter closes with a focus on the need to strengthen the capacity of the public service to foster societal change.

The brief conclusion to the Report lists a number of short- and medium-term recommendations. It offers a tabular summary of the strengths and challenges for each analysed dimension, including institutions, data and indicators, subnational levels of government, VNR processes, national reporting, stakeholder engagement, policy coherence and integration, and feedback loops.

To summarize, the World Public Sector Report 2021 represents a useful assessment of the state of the SDG implementation process since its inception. It gives a broad perspective, while incorporating snapshots of different countries, on the state of the progress in the light of the COVID 19 pandemic which on the one hand added a challenge to the existing implementation difficulties, but on the other, has also highlighted the weak links of the process and the need to remain adaptable in policy implementation.