A view of changes in institutional arrangements for SDG implementation at the national level since 2015

Five years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with one third of the implementation period of its 17 Sustainable Development Goals having elapsed, it is important to take stock of relevant institutional arrangements at the national level. Institutionalization of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs lays the foundation for their effective implementation. It also serves as an indicator of the degree to which the Agenda is prioritized and has buy-in from governments and other stakeholders.

Countries have made significant strides since 2015 in adapting their institutional frameworks to facilitate the achievement of the SDGs. At the national level, these have included, for instance, the incorporation of the Goals into plans and strategies, planning processes, and the work of parliaments and existing multistakeholder institutions. It has also included the formation of new institutions such as high-level coordination mechanisms, dedicated strategies and roadmaps, as well as new mechanisms for the engagement of various stakeholders such as data platforms and collaborative reporting. It is clear that countries are still putting in place or adjusting key elements of their institutional systems with regard to SDG implementation as gaps or weaknesses become evident and shifting circumstances warrant.

Precise types of institutional arrangements to implement the SDGs, and the years – and sequence – in which they were set up or changed, differ significantly across countries, and – within countries – across parts of the institutional system. However, a review of such arrangements in a sample of 24 diverse countries provides insight into how quickly after 2015 they were put in place. Based on that review, nine "milestones," or key institutional developments in many countries in relation to SDG implementation, were defined (see the Table below). For each country in the sample, the year of occurrence of each milestone, starting in 2015, was recorded. In this way, a comparable picture of the development of institutional frameworks across countries can be obtained.

Key messages

» There is a trend of broadening and deepening institutionalization of the 2030 Agenda. Yet institutionalization at the country level remains a work in progress – with many countries still putting in place or adjusting parts of their institutional systems for SDG implementation.

» No regularities or typical patterns of SDG institutionalization are easily identifiable across countries. The sequence and speed of institutional changes relating to the SDGs have varied significantly.

» Entry points for state and non-state actors to engage with SDG-related institutional processes are multiplying, making institutional arrangements more complex. Yet there are also wide variations in levels of engagement, with potential for greater involvement of different stakeholders in many countries.

As with any limited set of binary indicators, because of the necessary simplification inherent in reflecting the evolution of institutional arrangements in binary criteria, such an approach does not do justice to the diversity of institutional arrangements for SDG implementation that exist, or to the nuances that characterize those arrangements at the country level. For instance, the milestone for the involvement of supreme audit institutions (SAIs) in SDG implementation considers the publication of an SDG audit report as one of its criteria. Some SAIs have conducted audits of government preparedness to implement the SDGs, but had not published them by the end of 2020. In such cases, and absent another formal channel of relevant engagement of the SAI, the countries in question have not been recorded as having achieved this particular milestone. Nonetheless, this simplified set of milestones provides an interesting perspective of the development of institutional and other arrangements for implementing the SDGs since 2015.

Table 1

Defining the milestones chosen to illustrate the build-up of institutional arrangements since 2015

Milestones	Criteria	Comments
Integration of the SDGs into a national sustainable development strategy (NSDS) or national development plan (NDP)	Published NSDS or NDP based on the SDGs, or clearly reflecting the correspondence between national development goals and the SDGs.	Date of publication. The strategy/plan needs to be publicly available.
Publication of a national SDG roadmap or action plan for SDG implementation	Published SDG implementation roadmap or action plan presenting how the country is planning to implement the SDGs until 2030. The strategy needs to cover all of the SDGs.	Date of publication. The roadmap or action plan needs to be publicly available.
Creation of a high-level piloting structure for SDG implementation in government	Government high-level institutional mechanism established (e.g. ministry mandated) to coordinate SDG implementation at the national level.	Date of mandate or of creation of the institutional mechanism.
Publication of national SDG indicators	First time a set of agreed national SDG indicators is published (either through a report or an online platform presenting the indicators).	Date of first publication.
Government reporting on SDG progress at the national level	First time government reports on SDG implementation at the national level – either through a voluntary national review (VNR) report or an SDG progress report.	Date of publication.
Creation of a central SDG hub – electronic portal	Launch of a dedicated central online portal operated by the government with information on the country's initiatives to implement the SDGs. The platform has to include information beyond SDG indicators.	Date of launch.
Parliament's involvement	Specific committee/caucus/working group in parliament created or mandated to work on the SDGs; or official report issued by parliament on SDG implementation.	Date of creation or mandate, or date of parliament's report.
SAI's involvement	First national audit report on SDG preparedness published by the SAI, or first occurrence of official involvement of the SAI in the VNR or national SDG reporting process.	Date of publication.
Evaluation by non-state actors	First time a report evaluating progress is published independently by civil society (shadow report, also called alternative report); or first time an independent evaluation commissioned by the government is published.	Date of publication.

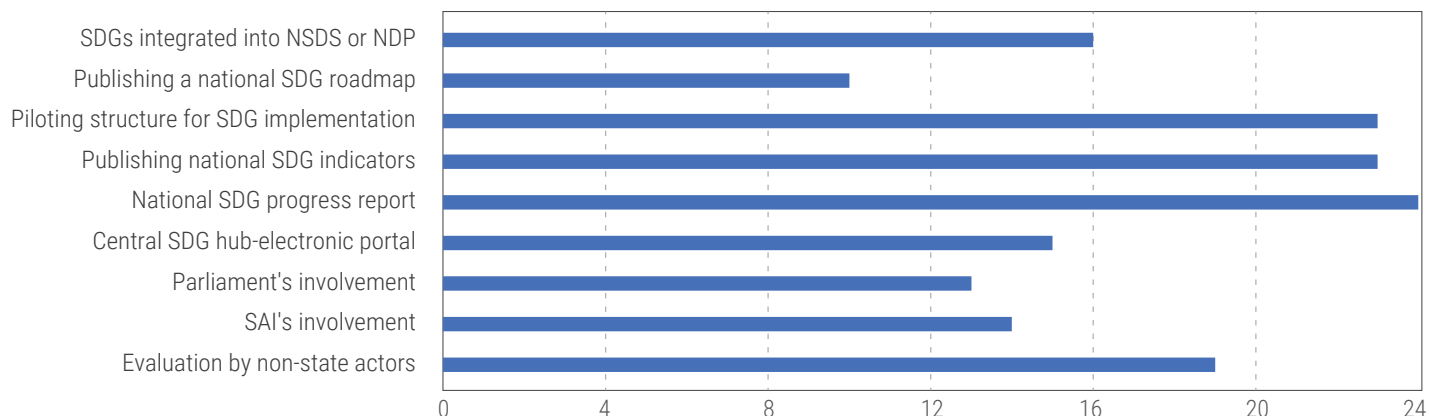**Source:** Authors' elaboration.

First, this perspective by milestones shows (Figure 1) that by the end of 2020, all 24 countries had reported at least once on SDG progress, either through voluntary national reviews or national progress reports. Twenty-three of the 24 countries had put in place arrangements for high-level coordination of SDG implementation. The same number had published SDG indicators (national adaptations of the global SDG indicators, national SDG indicators, or both). In 19 countries, non-state actors had published evaluation reports on SDG implementation. Two thirds of the countries had a national sustainable development strategy or development plan either based on, or clearly reflecting linkages with, the SDGs. In the majority of countries, central SDG portals had been created that were managed by government institutions, and the SAI had published a report on SDG implementation or was involved in national reporting mechanisms. In about half of the countries, parliament was actively involved, either through the creation of a dedicated committee or caucus on SDGs or through reports on SDG implementation that it had published. Only ten of the countries had published a roadmap for SDG implementation extending to 2030.

Figure 2 presents the evolution of countries' achievement of specific milestones each year since 2016, from the report's sample. It shows that change was not limited to the initial years of 2030 Agenda implementation. On average, some milestones were achieved earlier, indicating

Figure 1

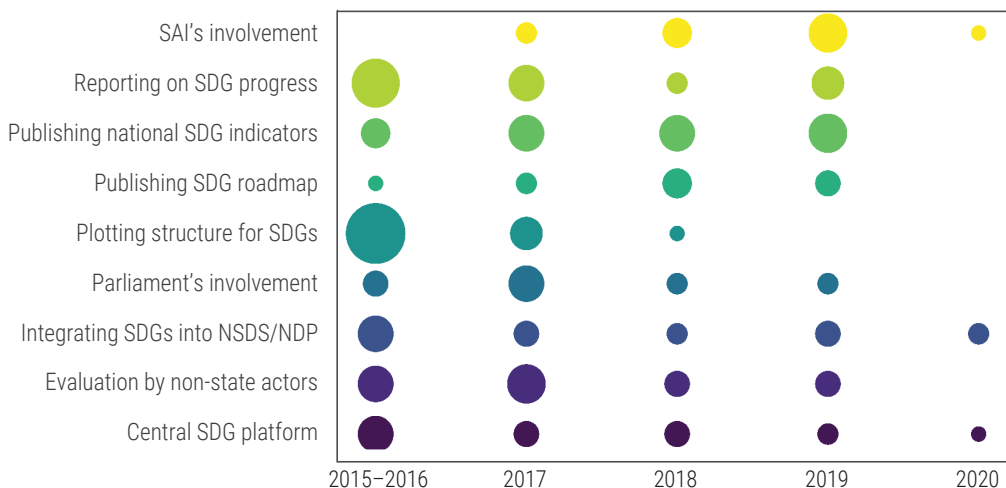**Number of countries having achieved the different milestones by the end of 2020**

Source: Authors' elaboration.

that the underlying area of work was a priority in many countries. Establishing a high-level coordination or piloting structure for SDG implementation was of high priority in many countries in the sample, with most having done so by the end of 2016. Also frequent in 2016 were the creation of online SDG portals and reporting on SDG progress. However, those two milestones were more evenly distributed over time, with a still significant number of countries publishing their first national implementation report in the period 2018-2019. Evaluations of progress published by non-governmental actors followed a similar pattern to that of official reports, which may suggest that the voluntary national review (VNR) process is indeed a catalyst for civil society involvement in SDG follow-up and review. The first publication of national SDG indicators took time, with a majority of countries publishing them for the first time during 2018-2019. As regards supreme audit institutions, in most countries where they play an active role, their involvement materialized in 2018 and 2019, which is the period when many audits of government preparedness to implement the SDGs were published. The integration of SDGs into national planning and policy frameworks has been spread over time, which in part reflects different initiation dates of medium- or long-term planning instruments across countries.

Lastly, Figure 3 shows the annual evolution of the distribution of the number of milestones achieved by a given year in the sample of 24 countries. The figure gives a sense of the time dimension of institutional adjustments, and its variation across countries. By 2016, one country (Finland) had achieved five milestones, and three had achieved four of them. A typical country in the sample, though, had achieved only two milestones. By 2018, the distribution had shifted markedly to the right, with all but one country having met at least three milestones. By 2020, the average number of milestones in the sample had increased to almost seven; all but one country had met at least five milestones, with seven countries having met eight milestones or more.
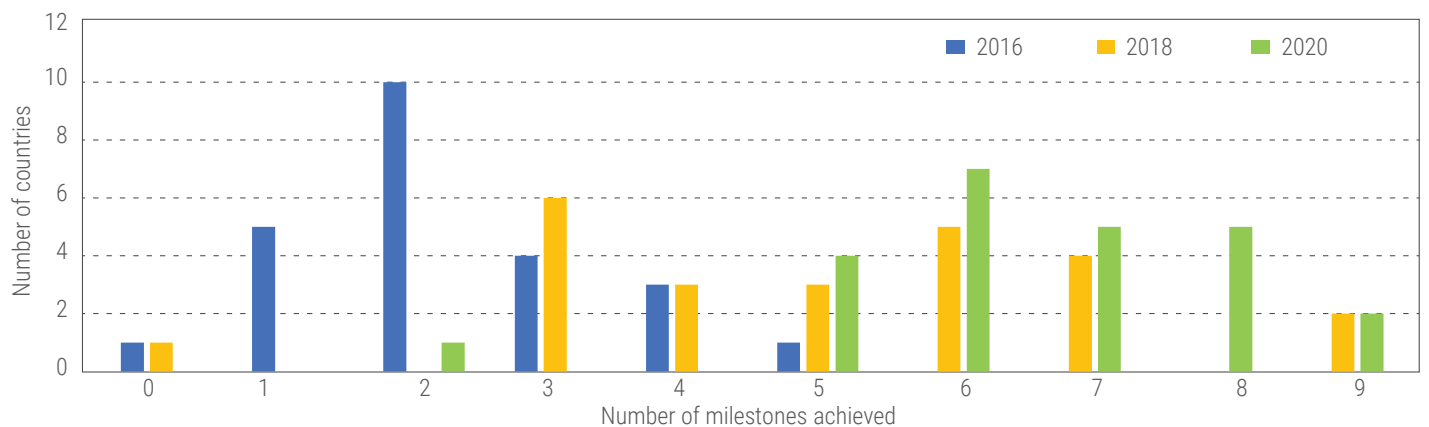
Figure 2

Milestones achieved by year since 2016, by type of milestone

Source: Authors' elaboration.
Note: The size of the bubbles is proportional to the number of countries (out of 24) having achieved a given milestone in a given year.

Figure 3
Distribution of the number of milestones achieved in the 24-country sample in 2016, 2018 and 2020

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Although the figures presented here are taken from a limited country sample, they nonetheless provide a sense of how long it takes for countries to adjust their institutional set-ups, and for different actors to mobilize around new processes such as the SDGs. They also reflect varying levels of priority given to the full integration of the SDGs into domestic frameworks.

Because it only looks at the first time a given activity occurs in a country, the use of milestones here to view the development of institutional arrangements for SDG implementation does not provide a snapshot of any country's current set of activities. For instance, some countries have seen SDG implementation prioritized in the first few years following 2015 and achieved a number of "firsts" early on – only to have the related activities or institutional mechanisms discontinued or stalled in later years due to political change or other reasons. For instance, Brazil's multi-stakeholder National Commission for the Sustainable Development Goals, created in 2016 and linked to the Government Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic, was dissolved by decree in 2019 (N° 9.759/2019) following a change in government, and no action plan for SDG implementation at the national level was proposed to succeed the one developed by the Commission for the period 2017 to 2019. In 2017, Mauritius developed with UNDP a draft "Roadmap for SDG Implementation," which was updated and put forth to the government in 2018.[1] However, at least as of the date of the 2019 voluntary national review report, the roadmap has not been endorsed by the government.[2] Additionally, responsibility for coordinating, monitoring and reporting on SDG implementation in that country was assigned to four different ministries between 2015 and 2018.

Indeed, while this milestones approach by definition shows increasing numbers over time, in reality the development of institutional arrangements for SDG implementation is not always gradual or linear. Patterns of institutionalization of SDG implementation at the country level are highly idiosyncratic, and no regularities or "typical" patterns are easily discernible across countries. In the limited country sample, there is no clear divide between developed and developing countries.

Many developing countries took steps to institutionalize the Goals early on in the implementation period. For example, in February 2015 (before the 2030 Agenda was formally adopted), Colombia established a High-Level Inter-Institutional Commission on SDGs that provides the institutional space for decision-making around the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Also that year, Nepal became one of the first countries to prepare a preliminary report on the SDGs,[3] and in 2016 introduced SDG coding to enable the alignment of annual programmes and budgets with the Goals[4]. In its 2016 Budget, Sierra Leone included a mapping of the Goals and targets with the pillars

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1   National Audit Office of Mauritius, "Performance Audit Report on Preparedness for Implementation of Sustainable Development Goals - Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Regional Integration and International Trade," February 2019, https://www.intosai.org/fileadmin/downloads/focus_areas/SDGs_and_SAIs/sai_preparedness_audits/SDGs_2019_Mauritius_prep_EN.pdf.

2   Mauritius, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Regional Integration and International Trade, "Voluntary National Review Report of Mauritius 2019," 2019, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/23462Mauritius_VNR_Report_2019.pdf.

3   United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, Nepal: Voluntary National Review (VNR) - Case Study, 2018, https://sdghelpdesk.unescap.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/VNR%20Nepal_0.pdf.

4   Nepal, National Planning Commission, "National Review of Sustainable Development Goals", June 2020, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26541VNR_2020_Nepal_Report.pdf.

of the Agenda for Prosperity (2013–2018), its leading development plan at that time, and with the lead ministries, departments and agencies, as an annex. That same year, Costa Rica became the first country to establish a National Pact for the SDGs, whose signatories include the three branches of government, the Supreme Court of Elections, faith-based organizations, civil society, unions, local governments, public universities, and the private sector.

In several developed countries, significant progress towards institutionalization came somewhat later, around 2018-2019. For instance, in 2018, Canada committed dedicated funding to support SDG implementation over 13 years, including to establish an SDG Unit within Employment and Social Development Canada to lead coordination at the national level. In 2019, the government held public consultations to guide the development of a national strategy for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and launched an interim document containing a draft strategy. Efforts to advance SDG institutionalization in Spain gained speed in 2018. That year, the government developed its Action Plan for the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and a dedicated bicameral legislative committee was established.[5] Among several roles and structures created and enhanced is the National Commission for the 2030 Agenda, established in 2019 to coordinate SDG implementation with the Autonomous Communities and local governments.

Based on the review findings – combined with a deeper review of changes in the institutional areas reflected by the milestones, and of various entry points for stakeholders to engage with relevant processes in those and other areas – some broader conclusions can be drawn. On the whole, there is a general trend of greater institutionalization of the SDGs. In fact, compared to other internationally-agreed development frameworks, the first five years of implementation of the 2030 Agenda have seen unprecedented institutionalization at the national level.

The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs have achieved relatively high visibility as well as political salience as an overarching policy agenda in both developing and developed countries, with most countries having put in place coordination arrangements for implementation at a high level. The Goals' integration into national strategies and plans is notable, as are efforts made by national governments to measure progress on the SDGs, both through global and national indicators. Reporting on progress towards the Goals has occurred in most countries. Yet significant gaps across them remain. For instance, there is potential for enhanced and centralized dissemination of SDG-related information, and for deeper integration of SDG-related institutional mechanisms with other parts of national institutional systems, in particular with respect to strategy development and planning processes.

Since 2015, entry points for stakeholders to get involved in institutional processes for SDG implementation at the national level have tended to increase in number and importance, reflecting the maturity and growing complexity of institutional arrangements. This relates not only to parliaments, supreme audit institutions, and civil society organizations, but also to subnational and local governments, academia and experts, and the private sector. Whereas voluntary national review (VNR) processes have been the main source of engagement, in many cases, a broader range of entry points has emerged, such that engagement is occurring on a more continuous basis and involving a more diverse range of stakeholders. Still, degrees of involvement vary widely. In many countries, for instance, parliaments are still not playing a regular role in oversight of government actions to implement the SDGs, yet many have issued at least one report on SDG implementation since 2015. The level and depth of engagement on the part of supreme audit institutions differ significantly across countries, though numerous audits related to the Goals have been undertaken by them.

A broad range of entry points is accessed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) across countries. Among them is the creation of collective platforms to facilitate action. Many non-governmental organizations have coalesced around the 2030 Agenda into NGO and civil society networks, forums and platforms dedicated to contributing to the achievement of the SDGs. They engage with the Agenda by, for instance, drawing attention to the importance of its cross-cutting "leave no one behind" principle and coordinating contributions to voluntary national reviews. India's Wada Na Todo Abhiyan (WNTA) is among some collectives that existed prior to the SDGs but shifted focus following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda. It is a campaign of CSOs, counting more than 4,000 partners across the country, committed to upholding government accountability for national and international commitments. Another entry point is participation, including by such collective platforms, in the institutional structures that lead or advise the national coordination of SDG implementation, which itself can enable further means of engagement with the Goals.

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[5] Congreso de los Diputados, Comisión Mixta para la Coordinación y Seguimiento de la Estrategia Española para alcanzar los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS).

For instance, Estonia and Mongolia are among countries in which NGOs are represented in national councils and commissions for sustainable development. In Kenya, a group of more than 350 civil society organizations in fact co-chairs, along with the government and a private sector umbrella group, the Inter Agency Technical Working Committee (IATWC), which supports the SDG Coordination Directorate within the State Department for Planning at the National Treasury and Planning Ministry.

Another entry point for the engagement of civil society with the SDGs is awareness-raising and advocacy. Many NGOs, including indigenous peoples' organizations, women's and youth organizations, and organizations of older persons and of persons with disabilities, build public awareness and knowledge of the Goals and promote commitment to and ownership of them by undertaking information campaigns, organizing events, and collaborating with governments and other actors on communications and activities. In France, for instance, the collective Comité 21 initiated the SDG Tour of France (Tour de France des ODD), a series of local workshops at which the SDGs are presented and debated in the context of local economic, social and environmental dynamics. Sectoral workshops are organized for CSOs, businesses, and other actors. NGOs also provide policy inputs to governments. They have sometimes contributed to, been consulted on, or collaborated on the development of national roadmaps or dedicated strategies or action plans for SDG implementation. They have contributed to government progress reports and, in particular, VNR processes, in some cases leading and facilitating consultations with non-state actors to convey the views and goals of communities. They have also been consulted on the development and updating of national SDG indicators. NGOs provide advisory services to governments on SDG implementation, issuing recommendations, studies and good practices. As noted above, they widely produce evaluations of and promote accountability for SDG progress in the form of shadow/spotlight/progress reports on implementation, reflecting their own perspectives and contexts. For instance, the Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development (ASviS), an organization representing multiple CSOs and institutions in Italy, produces an annual report analysing SDG progress and presenting recommendations.

Institutionalization of the SDGs at the national level is a work in progress. The long process can be expected given the time it generally takes to achieve institutional change, the broad scope of the Goals, and external contexts. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic and shifts in political circumstances can affect the visibility and prominence of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs on the national policy agenda, with implications for the effectiveness of institutional frameworks. On the whole, trends are encouraging, but countries must not lose sight of their commitments to the 2030 Agenda and the pivotal role of institutions in determining progress towards it.