

PROGRESSING NATIONAL SDG IMPLEMENTATION REPORT 2023

I. GOVERNANCE, INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS AND ENGAGEMENT

Chapter I: Leadership, Governance And Institutional Arrangements



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Overall, awareness and uptake of the Sustainable Development Goals as a guiding framework is taking root, but not yet at the level that leads to visible results on goal attainment. In the second half of Agenda 2030, actors can integrate the Goals into their core decision-making processes and institutions more and strengthen the accountability for making progress.

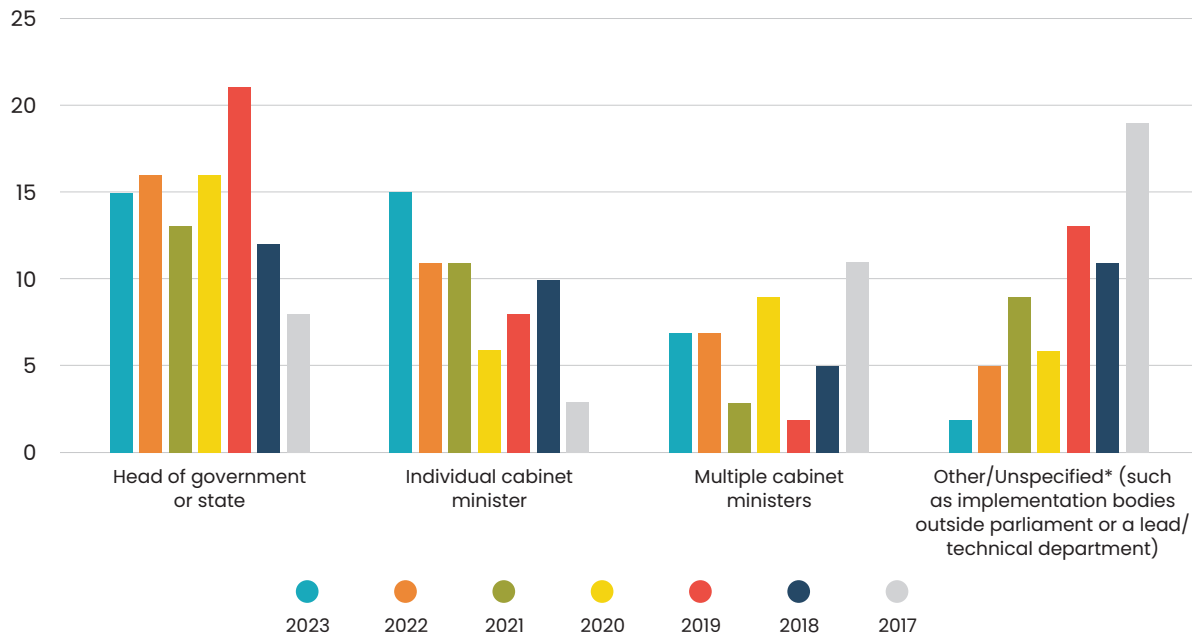
[Global Sustainable Development Report 2023]

1. SDG Governance and stakeholder engagement

SDG leadership matters! At the half-way point of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and buffeted by multiple and overlapping crises, countries are increasingly aware that effective governance is needed to balance between equally-important economic, social and environmental imperatives. Ideally, this would also call for new types of institutions with the capacity and credibility to convene a broad range of societal actors and manage the inevitable tradeoffs that will arise when fostering integrated policy making, while ensuring that no group is left behind.

It is noticeable that in 2023, approximately 72% of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), including the EU, reported that they have newly created SDG coordinating institutions, to enhance “a “whole-of-government” approach to SDG implementation and monitoring, of which 15 are vested at the highest state level (See Figure 1). By contrast, approximately 57% of 2022 reporting countries said they were making use of new governance structures to oversee implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Figure 1: Most common sources of leadership for 2030 Agenda implementation



However, only about a third of reporting countries characterize their institutional arrangements as “multi-stakeholder” in nature (38%), that is with non-state actor inclusion in their SDG coordinating bodies. This sets 2023 VNR countries at a much lower level compared to 2022 regarding participatory governance. As in previous years, while there are some limited positive examples on non-state actor engagement, 2023 reports do not offer sufficient insights into the actual mechanics of multi-stakeholder SDG policy making. In this context, CSO Views included note discontinuities in SDG governance arrangements between political cycles (**Timor Leste**), fragmentation in governance (**Lithuania**), limited stakeholder engagement mechanisms (**Canada, Ireland**) or multi stakeholder mechanisms that either are not as participative as claimed in the VNR or exist only in theory (**Croatia, Chile** and **Mongolia**, see Chapter 2 on Stakeholder engagement).

For countries that explicitly mention multi-stakeholder coordinating structures, the scope of such interactions is largely left unexplained and many do not specify the inclusion of distinct stakeholders. **Barbados** notes, for example, that its national coordinating structure under the purview of the Prime Minister’s office, is mandated to “work closely” with the multi-stakeholder SDG Working Group. **Canada** merely states that it has established “a robust structure to implement the 2030 Agenda in a coordinated way, advance the SDGs and engage with Canadians.” **Portugal** underscores the space created for members of civil society “of acknowledged merit in the sustainable development field” in its newly created inter-institutional coordinating mechanism that aims to strengthen the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development in public policies.

At the same time, roughly 20% of reporting entities state that they have not created dedicated coordinating structures for the SDGs. In **Liechtenstein, Rwanda, Timor-Leste and Turkmenistan**, for example, the reports state that “relevant” ministries and other state organs are responsible for implementing various SDG-related projects. **Poland** reports that 2030 Agenda implementation “... [relies] on partnership, co-responsibility and cooperation of a wide range of public entities, business and citizens in the course of development processes.” **Tajikistan’s** National Development Council, operating under

the Presidency, ensures “the consolidation of activities for implementation of SDGs,” through 13 interdepartmental working groups tasked with analyzing the implementation process of sectoral programmes and their compliance with the long-term development goals and objectives in the context of the SDGs. In other countries, such as **Rwanda** and **Zambia**, it is stated that SDG governance is integrated with multi-level policy coordination and monitoring mechanisms established in the context of their respective National Development Plans.

CSO View: Scope of SDG governance arrangements in Timor Leste



***Timor-Leste** is one of the countries that has not created a dedicated coordinating structure for SDG implementation, prioritizing a sector-based approach, with relevant ministries and other state organs responsible for implementing various SDG-related projects.*

According to the national civil society platform ‘NGO Forum for Timor Leste’ (FONGTIL), SDG implementation is indeed primarily carried out and monitored through relevant sectoral ministries. That said, regarding monitoring efforts, the previous administration had put in place an engagement mechanism under the Prime Minister’s Office called ANAPMA (National Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation Agency), in which CSO representatives were able to participate and voice their concerns regarding the implementation of the National Strategic Development Plan in which the SDGs are integrated. Since the new Government was instituted, the mandate of ANAPMA changed, and there is currently no clear overarching channel established for continuous monitoring of SDG implementation.

Specific participation opportunities in policy making and monitoring still exist within relevant ministries (such as health, education, infrastructure, social development, or Official Development Assistance), as well as at the local level in the administration of each ‘Suco’ (village).

Source: Adapted from FONGTIL’s Civic Space report

CSO View: Participatory nature of governance arrangements in Canada



***Canada’s** VNR states that the country has established “a robust structure to implement the 2030 Agenda in a coordinated way, advance the SDGs and engage with Canadians. In 2018, the SDG Unit, housed in the Department of Employment and Social Development Canada, was created to lead coordination of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Canada.”*

According to the national civil society platform Cooperation Canada, the establishment of Canada’s SDG Unit within the Department of Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) initially appears as a government-centric

mechanism. Audits conducted by the Auditor General rationalized this decision by emphasizing the need for centralized coordination across all departments to effectively implement the 2030 Agenda.

Nevertheless, the SDG Unit does provide channels for engagement in policy coordination. One of these channels is the [SDG Funding Program](#), through which community-based consultations and CSO policy briefs are developed. Another example of how the SDG Unit does engage with civil society organizations (CSOs) is through the inclusion of CSOs in its High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) delegation. This engagement does provide CSOs with a platform to contribute their perspectives and insights to the policy coordination process.

That said, more broadly, the whole-of-society approach has not kept pace with expectations. The Canadian government seems to have recognized this gap, given its recent decision to establish a “2030 advisory committee” aimed at enabling non-state actors to provide strategic policy advice to the SDG Unit. This advisory committee represents a positive step towards broader engagement. It is evident that there is room for improvement, as the government has the capacity to enhance participation by providing more structured and inclusive mechanisms for civil society involvement.

Source: Adapted from email exchanges with Cooperation Canada

2. VNRs as an institutional learning process

While many countries are presenting their second Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), only a few reports mention actions taken to address governance shortcomings identified in the previous review. This indicates a lack of continuity and tangible progress in the reporting process. The lack of continuity could be attributed to factors such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and changes in political cycles. However, it also suggests limited political will in many countries to implement institutional improvements that could enhance governance arrangements and ensure their sustainability over time – which perhaps stems from a lack of a solid consensus around sustainable development in many countries.

Belgium explains that its longstanding Interministerial Conference on Sustainable Development (IMCSD), established in 2012 to ensure consultation and collaboration between the federated entities “was not operational” between 2017 and early 2022, “and the national sustainable development strategy developed in 2017 was not fully implemented.” The report notes that the IMCSD was “revived” partly for the purposes of drafting the second VNR. The **Maldives** explains that while a National Ministerial Coordination Committee was formulated during the first VNR as the overarching body responsible to provide policy guidance on the SDGs, it has not been active with the change in government in 2018.

Fiji acknowledges that the multiplicity of actors “working in silos” is a major challenge, and reports that efforts are underway to identify and rectify any gaps or discrepancies to ensure a cohesive approach towards achieving the SDGs. While there are existing structures, such

as cabinet meetings and committees, that promote interaction and decision-making, the report notes the need for enhanced collaboration and coordination.

More positively, **Brunei** reports on a “re-strategization of efforts” since its first VNR, by shifting the national SDG coordinating body from the Ministry of Finance and Economy to the Prime Minister’s Office in 2020. “This move ensures better alignment between the SDGs and the Wawasan Brunei 2035 and allows harmonization of efforts and progress from various stakeholders,” the report notes. The **Central African Republic** highlights an ongoing process to create a dedicated office under the Prime Minister’s office to “raise the political profile of the 2030 Agenda and ensure a more stable and efficient linkage” between the existing interministerial SDG Committee and the government.”

Presenting its first VNR, **Saint Kitts and Nevis** credits the process with “sharpen(ing) our strategic focus on our vulnerabilities, gaps and risks relating to external shocks and climatic phenomena.”

CSO View: Governance arrangements in Lithuania: A rare example of self-criticism



Lithuania’s report openly admits that its National Commission for Sustainable Development – the main inter-institutional body for strengthening cooperation between public administrations – “has not been active since 2017.” Despite efforts by the Ministry of Environment and the establishment of various issue-based working groups and other formal and informal structures, the report notes that “there is still no effective and efficient inter-institutional coordination mechanism for sustainable development in Lithuania, and the involvement of stakeholders is fragmented.” The report recommends re-establishing the National Commission, or transferring additional sustainable development coordination functions to an already existing high-level structure, such as the State Progress Council, with the latter option seen as the preferable one, “as it would not expand the bureaucratic apparatus of the State.”

According to the Lithuanian Development Cooperation Platform (VB Platforma), the Ministry of Environment does currently coordinate efforts related to SDG implementation, although to some extent and in a discontinuous fashion. VB Platforma has been leading the cross-sectoral SDG working group built within the Ministry since 2018, which used to be cross-sectoral and effective until the onset of COVID and the war in Ukraine. Since then, there has been a reduced focus on the SDGs, except for the preparations for the 2023 VNR. Regarding report-formulation, although there were some issues during the 2018 VNR, the second VNR in 2023 went smoothly.

During the VNR presentation at HLPF 2023, the Ministry of Environment committed to renewing and leading the cross-sectoral SDG working group. They issued an open call for all interested parties to join, and VB Platforma contributed to the strategic planning. However, there doesn’t seem to be any new developments since then. The main reason for this might be the upcoming presidential, European and national parliamentary elections. In this context, VB Platforma anticipates delays in communications and in the government convening multi-stakeholder meetings. Regarding fragmentation within governance arrangements, VB Platforma has

emphasized to the government the necessity of placing SDG governance at a higher governmental level for effective coordination and accountability, rather than within a single sectoral ministry. Although the government appears to put forward in the VNR the idea of placing SDG governance within the remit of the State Progress Council (institutional space for monitoring the implementation of national development plans), VB Platforma isn't aware of any tangible developments on that front either. In case the government moves forward with this proposal, VB Platforma asserts that merging the cross-sectoral network in place at the Ministry of Environment with the Lithuania 2030 group in place within the Council, would increase coherence and enhance multi-stakeholder dialogue within the Implementation process.

Source: Adapted from email exchanges with VB Platforma

3. The role of leadership

That leadership matters in ensuring a cohesive, whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to priority setting, as well as greater accountability for SDG delivery, is one of the underlying messages from the reports. In this regard, **Iceland** has created a new multi-stakeholder body, Sustainable Iceland, under the coordination of the Prime Minister's office and Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

A few countries also link the revamp of their SDG institutional mechanisms to broader good governance approaches. **Saint Kitts and Nevis** highlights synergies with the government's good governance agenda, with a focus on anti-corruption, integrity in public life and freedom of information. **Uzbekistan's** report notes that since 2022, "implementation of the SDGs has been accompanied by large-scale reforms within the framework of the New Uzbekistan Development Strategy (2022–2026)," which aims to, *inter alia*, improve governance and democratic institutions, fight corruption, support civil society and freedom of speech, and sustainable development of vulnerable regions.

The **EU Voluntary Review** highlights a "political programme" put forward by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (2019–24) that requires all Commissioners to ensure the delivery of the SDGs within their policy area. It notes the new policy integrates the SDGs into all Commission proposals, policies and strategies and features "all of the 17 SDGs in one or more of the six headline ambitions announced."

CSO View: Effectiveness of SDG governance arrangements in Ireland



*In its VNR, **Ireland** asserts that it has adopted a whole-of-government approach to SDG implementation, with each Minister having specific responsibility for implementing individual SDG targets related to their Ministerial functions. The Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications has responsibility for promoting the SDGs, and for overseeing their coherent implementation across Government.*

Irish CSOs gathered within Coalition 2030 view the fact that SDG governance is ensured through an under-staffed SDG Unit hosted at the Ministry for the Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC), constitutes an ineffective governance mechanism, especially regarding policy coherence.

In its recommendations to the government for the formulation of the country's Second Implementation Plan, a key measure proposed by Coalition 2030 for consolidating a 'whole-of-government' approach to delivering the SDGs would be to strengthen the SDG Unit and place it under the Prime Minister's Office (Department of the Taoiseach). Such a revamping of the SDG governance arrangements would enhance integrated policy making by fostering horizontal and vertical alignments at all levels.

However, Coalition 2030 asserts that the Second Implementation Plan does not mention plans to move coordination responsibilities from the Ministry of the Environment (DECC) to the Department of the Prime Minister, and that no rationale for this has been given.

Source: Adapted from Coalition 2030 Recommendations document + Email exchanges