

Summary of key points

Brown Bag Webinar on “Good practices for national planning and the 2030 Agenda”

Division for Sustainable Development Goals
UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)

14 September 2021, 10:00-11:30 a.m. (EST)

Agenda

Moderator: Mr. Amson Sibanda, Chief, National Strategies and Capacity Building Branch, Division for Sustainable Development Goals, DESA

Presenter: Professor Lauchlan Munro, School of International Development and Global Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ottawa

Discussant: Mr. David Le Blanc, Chief, Institutions for Sustainable Development Goals Branch, Division for Public Institution and Digital Government, DESA

Q&A

Main Discussion Points

- Dr. Munro presented a draft paper on “Integration of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into national development plans (NDPs) and strategies”, covering three main issues: (1) framework to classify/categorize the extent of alignment of NDPs with the 2030 Agenda and SDGs; (2) identification of good practices in this regard; (3) practical checklist for integrating the SDGs into national development plans in least developed countries (LDCs) and small island developing States (SIDS).

1. Framework to classify/categorize the extent of alignment of NDPs with the 2030 Agenda and SDGs

- Three scales were presented to measure the extent of alignment of the NDPs with the SDGs:
 - SDG Centrality Scale (SDGCS)—mean number of mentions of SDGs per page of the plan
 - SDG Integration Scale (two versions):
 - SDGIS1—Does the NDP deal with SDGs individually, or are synergies and trade-offs included?

- SDGIS2—Are the SDGs mentioned in key parts of the plan, i.e., title, introduction, executive summary, political preface, key objectives/priorities, performance management?
 - Level/Type of Participation Scale (LTPS)—to what extent did the planning process include non-State actors?
- Based on an analysis of 28 recent (post-2015) NDPs from SIDS and LDCs, it was found that (1) the degree to which NDPs *mention* the SDGs varies widely; (2) the SDGs are not well *integrated* into most NDPs in LDCs and SIDS; and (3) the SDGs are not present in the *key parts* of many NDPs.
 - Overall, the number of countries preparing national plans more than doubled between 2006 and 2017 and there is evidence this is mainly country- rather than donor-driven. Nevertheless, donors still have an important influence on the funding available to address different priorities in some country's NDPs.
 - There are many good examples of emerging approaches to national planning (e.g., in terms of participatory planning; improving alignment between planning and budgets; and reviewing and addressing lessons learned from previous planning cycles—"Crossing the river by feeling the stones", with reference being made to the China's experience.)
 - There is a dearth of recent academic research on national development planning. Much of the recent literature on planning theory and practice comes from sub-national, sectoral or project planning. The degree to which this enthusiasm at the subnational level can support and steer SDG implementation at the national level is an important and under-researched issue.
 - During the discussion, it was suggested that good practices for national planning in conflict or post-conflict situations would also be an important topic for further study. Ideally, an iterative and participatory planning process that is open to new ideas could help to develop a common vision and buy-in from different sides to a conflict.
 - In addition to the SDGs, regional priorities are often important in national plans (e.g., African Union Agenda 2063, and regional economic community priorities such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Industrialization Strategy and Roadmap 2015 - 2063). Different ideological movements, policy objectives and national interests inevitably play an important part in national development planning, in addition to international agendas.
 - The point was also made that many countries have more than one national planning document in place (e.g., national visions, NDPs, national strategies for sustainable development (NSDS), national SDG road maps), with different plans and budgeting processes sometimes identifying different priorities and including different indicators to measure progress. When studying a national planning document, it is therefore important to consider its political and legal importance in the country. A review of literature on experiences with NSDS that countries developed before the adoption of the 2030 Agenda could provide some useful lessons to inform the "new development planning".

2. Good practices on national planning and the SDGs

- The term "good practices" rather than "best practices" was used as there is now a strong consensus that there is no one best way to conduct development planning, and it is highly dependent on the national context (e.g., geography, history, culture, and constitutional framework).
- There is nevertheless consensus that some "good planning practices" exist. The draft paper presents the following nine based on a review of the literature:
 - Broad-based participation in the planning process
 - Balancing political leadership on SDGs with broad-based participation in the planning process
 - Getting the institutional structure for planning right

- Flexible, iterative planning process with room for experimentation, learning and adaptation
 - Analysis of synergies and trade-offs between SDGs
 - Bringing the SDGs home
 - Use of formal modelling techniques
 - Use of visual tools for policy dialogues with public and political leaders
 - Linking the national planning process to the national financing for development strategy
- Evidence for the proposed best practices as well as their purported benefits was often not very strong, partly because of the limited research conducted on new approaches to national planning, and partly because of the difficulty to measure the impact of good practices that are highly context-specific. In general, evidence is a little stronger for procedural benefits (e.g., improving widespread public buy-in to the planning process; improving communication between specialists and lay audiences) and weaker for the more substantive benefits (e.g., accelerating sustainable development overall).
 - While in most situations more flexible, collaborative and experimental forms of planning work better, it was recognised that traditional, top-down planning can also work under specific conditions, among others when there is a high level of capacity in the planning agency.

3. Practical checklist

- It was explained that the draft report includes a practical step-by-step checklist on integrating the 2030 Agenda into national plans, based on the identified good practices. The checklist is intended to support countries with an overall self-assessment of their national planning process and in identifying priority areas for capacity development support.
- During the discussion, it was noted that many individual points covered by the checklist (e.g., linking planning and budgeting) could in themselves require a large amount of time and effort to address, each requiring their own political impetus, legal framework, institutional structure and a substantial amount of technical work.
- It could also be valuable to further elaborate or disaggregate some points in the checklist. As examples: What specific steps can a country take to identify and focus on the most important synergies and trade-offs in its national plan (rather than consider all of them)? What steps could a country take to bring together its planning and budgeting processes? In addition to developing and submitting an annual report on the SDGs, what steps can help a country ensure that the findings are taken into account in the next planning cycle?

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