

POLICY BRIEF

No. 14, 2018

Implementing the 2030 Agenda in Asia and the Pacific: Insights from Voluntary National Reviews

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Highlights

Countries in the Asia-Pacific region have made impressive progress in developing institutional arrangements for the 2030 Agenda, and mainstreaming SDGs into their national frameworks and budgets. Many countries are facing initial challenges in developing inclusive and collaborative governance frameworks and localising the SDGs.

Recommendations:

- Develop and foster an inclusive, collaborative governance structure by accommodating multiple actors and sectors, and instituting mechanisms for coordination while transcending bureaucratic boundaries.
- Strengthen or establish a national body with the legitimacy, authority, and capacity to lead and coordinate efforts to achieve the SDGs.
- Accelerate the localisation of the 2030 Agenda by raising awareness of the SDGs at all subnational levels, prioritizing and reflecting SDGs in subnational plans, and promoting multi-stakeholder partnerships to engage local actors, including women, indigenous peoples, and marginalised groups.

Examining Progress on the SDGs

Countries in the Asia-Pacific region are setting up implementation arrangements for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), by instituting governance structures and incorporating the goals in their national policies and plans. While these countries are yet to make progress on some dimensions of governance for the SDGs, they are advancing in many other areas.

This policy brief identifies the initial governance challenges they have faced in the process of implementing the 2030 Agenda. Based on a review of the latest Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports submitted by countries in the Asia-Pacific region (see Note), it summarises the types of governance structures and their inclusivity, the incorporation of SDGs into national plans or policy frameworks, and efforts to localise the 2030 Agenda. The brief provides policy recommendations for national governments focused on developing inclusive governance structures and fostering stronger localisation efforts to achieve the SDGs.

Governance for Implementation

All of the 15 Asia-Pacific countries considered have a national governance structure in place to implement the 2030 Agenda. Given that each country has its own specific political and governance contexts, a wide range

of different governance structures are in practice. In some countries (Bangladesh, India, and Nepal), coordination and implementation for the SDGs has been added to the mandate of a pre-existing central planning commission for development issues, chaired by the Prime Minister. Other countries (Azerbaijan, Japan, and Turkey) have created a new council or headquarters within the government specifically for the SDGs. Similarly, countries such as Afghanistan, Australia, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea, and the Maldives have an SDGs secretariat, division, or department within a particular ministry tasked with leading the 2030 Agenda. In the Philippines and Thailand, it is overseen by the cabinet, and in Malaysia and Tajikistan by a dedicated body under the prime minister or president.

How inclusive and collaborative are these governance structures? These are both key factors for the effective implementation and the localisation of the 2030 Agenda, given that successfully balancing the three dimensions of sustainability depends on bringing in the voices and concerns of multiple actors (CCIC et al. 2018; Risse 2017). In most of the countries considered, the governance structure for implementing and coordinating progress on the SDGs is partially inclusive, and highly centralised in the government — state functionaries, mainly ministries and government departments, are well represented. However, there has been a missed opportunity in the lack of meaningful engagement of the legislature, subnational government bodies, and political parties.

Most of the countries have engaged non-state actors, or committed to doing so on their journey towards achieving the SDGs. But non-state actors are merely added on to the main governance structure for implementing the 2030 Agenda. For example, Japan holds SDGs Promotion Roundtable meetings to promote cooperation with civil society organisations (CSOs), academia, the private sector, international organisations, parliamentarians, and scientists, among others, through its Public Private Action for Partnership initiative. Nepal has included representatives from civil society, the private sector, and development partners as “invitees” in its SDGs-focused thematic committees for implementation, monitoring, and coordination. Indonesia, Malaysia, and other countries have also developed coordination mechanisms to engage non-state actors, although they are not represented in the main governing bodies.

While non-state actors such as CSOs, businesses, and academia are working on the SDGs, in many countries their representation in the main SDGs governing body is for the most part unrecognised, despite the use of buzzwords

such as consultation and cooperation in the VNRs. Many countries are yet to develop an inclusive and collaborative structure to govern the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. A key challenge has emerged — reforming the overly state-centric governing structure for the 2030 Agenda to be more collaborative and inclusive.

National Integration: Becoming Trailblazers?

Most of the Asia-Pacific countries considered here have made substantial progress, incorporating the 2030 Agenda into their national development frameworks, policies, plans, and budgets. Despite challenges related to the collection of data, methodology, and capacity, most of them have prioritised the SDGs, developed country-relevant targets and indicators, and assessed their baseline status under each of the goals.

The promising commitment of these countries to the 2030 Agenda is well reflected in their efforts to mainstream the SDGs in long-term national development plans, to rework global targets and indicators to fit national contexts, and to develop additional implementation tools and frameworks. These efforts can offer valuable lessons for other countries seeking to integrate SDGs at the national level. And many countries, including Afghanistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Nepal, have aligned their budgets with the SDGs. For instance, Nepal has assigned SDGs codes to specific annual programmes and budgets, linking each item with one or more relevant SDGs. This allows the country to monitor progress and challenges related to each SDG. In Afghanistan, the SDGs are divided into eight national budget sectors, including education, health, governance, and economy. Under each sector, national targets and indicators are specified, along with the budget allocated for each sector, for better alignment.

Towards Localisation: A Long Way to Go

As noted above and highlighted in other studies (e.g., CCIC et al. 2018), impressive progress has been made on mainstreaming SDGs into national policy processes, but there remains a long way to go. While most countries have acknowledged this governance challenge in their VNRs, they are yet to sufficiently envision processes that could reach the grassroots level. Acknowledging the insufficient attention paid to localisation, Japan promises to “work hard” on raising public awareness of the SDGs under the leadership of its SDGs Promotion Headquarters, a government entity that was created for coordinating the 2030 Agenda. Afghanistan intends to build awareness of the SDGs, and adjust national targets as well as indicators

at the provincial level. Nepal, with provincial and local governments established in its 2015 constitution, intends to incorporate the SDGs into subnational planning and budgeting processes.

Indonesia has gone further ahead in this regard with developing national and subnational action plans for the period 2017–2019 to facilitate localisation of SDGs at the provincial and local levels.

At the national level, all of the countries considered have made extensive efforts to raise awareness, translate SDGs into local languages and consult stakeholders. Nevertheless, only a few countries have done so at various subnational levels, for example through “road shows” in Malaysia, SDGs “socialisation events” in Indonesia, radio and special public events in the Philippines, and “SDGsfeats” (SDG festivals) in Nepal. Similar initiatives to raise awareness and promote public engagement would be useful for other countries in the lead up to substantive localisation of the 2030 Agenda.

Policy Recommendations

Based on analyses of 15 VNRs of countries from the Asia-Pacific region, we provide three recommendations, which are of equal importance.

1. Develop and Foster Collaborative and Inclusive Governance Structures

Realising the SDGs through an approach that limits the 2030 Agenda within governmental silos and overly government-centric frameworks is likely impossible. Governance structures that allow stronger national integration and localisation of SDGs in policies and plans, and that promote multi-stakeholder partnerships at multiple levels, are essential for producing real impacts on the ground to “leave no one behind”. Countries need to develop and foster collaborative and inclusive governance structures to accommodate multiple actors and diverse sectors at various levels for implementing the 2030 Agenda (CCIC et al. 2018; Meuleman and Niestroy 2015). Lack of collaboration between multiple stakeholders is a limiting factor for promoting partnerships (CCIC et al. 2018; Davies 2005), which constrains the ability of stakeholders to better respond to issues relevant to 2030 Agenda implementation. Collaborative practices enhance the capacity of stakeholders to manage conflicting demands and move forward with implementation.

Inclusive structures would facilitate the process of reconciling the competing priorities of different sectors

and actors, harmonise plans, and create synergies across sectors and actors at multiple scales. Such institutional arrangements largely shape the success of delivering SDGs (Biermann et al. 2017). There are various models for an inclusive and collaborative governance structure, but important common elements include:

- Representation of diverse sectors (at least those related to the three dimensions of sustainability)
- Mechanisms for coordination between different actors and sectors for shifting from a “silo or sectoral approach, and to work instead across sectors” (Risse 2017)
- Meaningful engagement of diverse, multi-level actors including non-government actors in the governance structure, also having mechanisms to ensure that their voices count

The restructuring of governance should also be flexible enough to allow subnational actors to develop their own frameworks to coordinate with local state and non-state actors including women, youth, and marginalised and indigenous peoples for delivering SDGs.

2. Establish or Strengthen National Bodies

While instituting an inclusive and collaborative structure is necessary, it is not sufficient. Countries will need to create new national bodies or strengthen existing ones, such as the councils, headquarters, departments, and so forth that were discussed above. Such bodies will need to be equipped with greater legitimacy, and adequate authority and capacity to lead and coordinate efforts to achieve SDGs with multiple partners, including both state and non-state actors at multiple levels — international, national and subnational. Such an inclusive and well-resourced nodal body can oversee the overall alignment between the national and subnational plans and SDGs, reconcile trade-offs, and foster synergies between various sectors and stakeholders. The principal role of such a body should be to coordinate and facilitate, rather than control and coerce.

3. Accelerate Localisation

While it may be too early to evaluate countries’ progress toward articulating SDGs in their subnational development policies and plans, it is evident in the VNRs of countries in Asia and the Pacific that there is a need to expedite localisation of the 2030 Agenda. Achieving the SDGs will depend not only on their integration at the national level, but also the extent to which they are understood, prioritised, and implemented at the local level. Localisation is a critical step to accelerate progress and generate real

impacts in people's lives. While localisation models for the SDGs may vary between countries, we suggest three important ways to proceed.

First, countries should elevate efforts to raise awareness of the SDGs at all subnational levels. In addition to traditional media such as newspapers, TV, and radio, central and local governments can use social media, creating official accounts dedicated to promoting the SDGs. CSOs and community organisations can also support such efforts by governments as well as foster bottom-up initiatives. Raising awareness can enhance local understanding of the SDGs, making them a community and household agenda at the grassroots level.

Second, countries need to ramp up efforts to prioritise and reflect SDGs in subnational development policies and plans. However, this should not be made a burden for local governments — rather, it should be integrated into the existing processes of local planning, where possible. To the extent possible, local governments can also align their budgets with SDGs. A formidable challenge for policymakers and researchers is to find practical ways of mainstreaming SDGs into these existing local processes and institutions.

Third, building multi-stakeholder partnerships is key for bringing the 2030 Agenda to the grassroots level (Dahiya and Okitasari 2018). Local governmental bodies should have autonomy to develop partnerships with CSOs, local community groups, and the media for promoting the 2030 Agenda. Importantly, the localisation process should ensure that “no one is left behind”, particularly women, indigenous peoples, and marginalised groups. As well as governments and aid agencies, the private sector has an important role to play in supporting initiatives at the grassroots level.

Notes

This brief is based on analysis of the latest VNRs submitted in English by Member States of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN-ESCAP). They comprise 2017 VNRs submitted by Afghanistan, Australia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Maldives, Nepal, the Philippines, Tajikistan and Thailand, as well as 2016 VNRs submitted by the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, and Turkey (United Nations 2018). As Australia submitted no earlier VNR, a draft 2018 VNR was considered for the review.

The research was supported by the Environmental Research and Technology Development Fund (S16-4) of the Environmental Restoration and Conservation Agency of Japan.

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Implementing the 2030 Agenda in Asia and the Pacific: Insights from Voluntary National Reviews
UNU-IAS Policy Brief — No. 14, 2018

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ISSN: 2409-3017

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Publisher

United Nations University Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability (UNU-IAS)
Tokyo, Japan

