Accelerating progress towards the localization of the SDGs and post-pandemic recovery through enhanced multilevel governance

Preliminary synthesis report
The debate and notion of multilevel governance in the context of the 2030 Agenda

ACCELERATING PROGRESS TOWARDS THE LOCALIZATION OF THE SDGS AND POST-PANDEMIC RECOVERY THROUGH ENHANCED MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE

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The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted during the 70th session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York in 2015 by 193 Member States, represents the main global frame for most development strategies, policies and actions across the world at all levels. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their 169 targets are universal and relevant to all Member States, pushing the community of international organizations, public institutions, businesses, civil society organizations and academia to commit itself not only to drastically address emerging societal issues and challenges in developing countries but also to drive the transition towards a more equitable and sustainable development in developed countries.

Governance is a key concept in the sustainable development debate, early defined by the World Bank (1992, p.1) as the manner in which power is exercised in the management of economic and social resources for development. Indeed, the continuous interaction among authorities, institutions, organizations, and citizens shapes economies and societies and their structural change. In other words, the ways societies engage in collective action (Ostrom, 1990) – which is not exclusively led by public authorities – determine strategies and actions at national as well as local level. This is fundamental to pursue the SDGs in all places and countries.

The 2030 Agenda relies on a set of universal normative principles recognized as good governance elements, representing the norms, values, and basic rules of the game through which public decisions on the SDGs are managed in a manner that is transparent, participatory, inclusive, and responsive. Some are developed and declined as governance-related sub-goals in thematic SDGs 1 to 15, while SGD 16 includes a specific focus on effective, public governing authorities – to ‘governance’ processes – i.e., related to the articulation of interests, behaviours, resources and power among a wider group of public, private and social actors for the management of economic and social resources.
accountable, and inclusive institutions as an intrinsic component of sustainable development processes. These elements provide a powerful and unprecedented impetus for governments – alongside international organizations – to devote specific attention in designing and implementing governance mechanisms that effectively support the implementation of universally-set objectives at all levels.

Within this setting, the combination and coordination of resources, actions and capacities deriving from different governance levels, policy domains and societal actors is a crucial enabling factor for sustainable development in its environmental, social, and economic dimensions. Therefore, the notion of multilevel governance (henceforth, MLG) is used to describe the novel form of conducting politics and making public policies stemming from the existence of ‘overarchign, multilevel policy networks’ (Marks et al., 1996) replacing the vertically hierarchical nation-state model (Nolteni, 2010). In particular, Piattini (2010) argues that the simultaneous activation of three dimensions of change proceeding politics and making public policies together across levels – i.e., hierarchical (top-down), subsidiary & empowered (bottom-up), real time (collaborative) – based on, respectively, rule of law, empowerment and incentives, collaboration and co-production. Given the complexity of our societies, the pursuit of the SDGs requires a combination of these approaches, complementing each other, according to the specific contextual conditions, in order to create an enabling environment for addressing the complex societal issues raised by the 2030 Agenda at all levels and by all actors. This centrality of MLG and its conceptualisation has been strongly supported and reinvigorated by the leading role played by several UN agencies (primarily UN-Habitat, UNDP and UNEP), the OECD and the European Union, together with local and regional governments (LRGs) and their regional and global associations.

In particular, they led a vigorous debate on SDG localization and allowed it to gain momentum building on the capacities and knowledge of a wide international community of practice and knowledge. Taken together, these efforts recognize and build on the importance of a virtuous connection between MLG and SDG localization.

This connection is essentially grounded in a set of institutional and policy-making arrangements that engage a multiplicity of politically independent, but otherwise interdependent, societal actors (public, private, and social) at different levels. These arrangements concern both vertical coordination among governments at various levels and horizontal coordination within and amongst governments (and their departments) at the same level, along with the interaction and coordination with and amongst non-state actors and stakeholders, such as civil society and community organizations, the private sector, the academia, among others. In other words, they refer to the structures and processes that are designed to ensure accountability, transparency, responsiveness, rule of law, stability, equity and inclusiveness, empowerment, and broad-based participation for SDG implementation at local level.

This centrality of MLG for SDG localization is even more relevant in the post Covid19 pandemic era. Indeed, there are critical links between the achievement of the SDGs and recovering from the pandemic, and both have strong local dimensions. Being true that 65% of SDG targets cannot be reached without proper engagement and coordination with LRGs, the Covid19 pandemic has further highlighted the great importance of local action in both addressing the immediate health emergency and in designing a recovery that is inclusive, sustainable, and resilient.

The requirements to enable SDG localization – e.g., empowering LRGs as stronger partners, providing them with access to adequate funding, improving subnational accountability mechanisms and performance incentives, developing better means to enhance national and subnational capacity (Smoke and Nixon, 2016) – are even stronger because working towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and advancing an inclusive and resilient recovery at all levels are conceived as two sides of the same coin, thus complementing each other. Therefore, effective MLG systems must urgently be put in place to enhance policy coherence and effectiveness of delivery, while developing national recovery plans, placing territories and SDG localization at the very core.
Objective and methodology of this research

Within this scenario, UN-Habitat has consolidated an alliance with the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) on SDG localization, specifically looking at MLG as leverage to accelerate implementation of the Global Goals. This alliance has paved the way for the joint project “Accelerating progress towards the localization of the SDGs and post-pandemic recovery through enhanced multilevel governance”, which aims at providing local and national governments with cutting-edge knowledge and practical orientation on MLG to implement the SDGs.

By relying on the expertise of a broad-based knowledge partnership composed by ARCO (Action Research for CO-development), LSE Cities, Brookings Institution, UCLG (United Cities and Local Governments), and UN-Habitat itself, this project explores how effective MLG systems can promote the localization of the SDGs, and hence a sustainable, green, and inclusive post-pandemic recovery.

In this context, this synthesis report presents the main preliminary results of the research conducted by ARCO, based on:

i) a snapshot of the main recent trends in the core drivers and practice areas, based on both the systematization of cutting-edge knowledge and information about good practices of MLG for SDG localization as well as novel policy-based evidence on the key drivers and practice areas from selected case-studies;

ii) key insights and operational implications on how national and local governments can strengthen their multilevel cooperation for the SDGs, through action-oriented recommendations on the core drivers of MLG systems throughout the different policy cycle stages.

The research relies on the following methodological approach.

First, the analysis and update of the state-of-the-art about MLG as an accelerator of SDG localization, through an extensive desk-based review of the current policy and academic debate, including relevant reports, guidelines and publications by international organizations and scholars.

Second, the systematization of international trends and good practices – without any intention of exhaustiveness – on MLG for SDG localization across the world.

Third, the analysis of 5 case-studies (Argentina, Ghana, Italy, Jordan and the Philippines) to dig deeper on the real-world practices, deriving practical implications and take-overs from their experience as “living labs”.

In this way, this research contributes to the wider effort and process led by UN-Habitat and the UN to streamline a strategic framework on MLG for SDG localization, fostering the analysis and comparison of relevant experiences, policy support through a set of tested tools and practices, incremental partnership-building, open knowledge platforms, and advocacy.
Arguments for a MLG-SDG localization nexus

The universal, integrated, and transformative nature of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs requires governments to work across policy domains, actors and governance levels. To appropriately reflect and address this complexity, the 2030 Agenda reserves a specific goal (17) to partnerships and means of implementation, which represents a specific novelty compared to the previous and other global agendas. In particular, the global SDG indicator 17.14.1 recognizes and gathers under the notion of policy coherence for sustainable development the key dimensions of effective MLG systems for the implementation of the SDGs.

Policy coherence is critical to inform decision-making and manage tensions between potentially competing policy objectives for sustainable development. It embraces whole-of-government and whole-of-society coordination principles, engaging the mandates, roles and capacities of a wider set of levels and actors. In its broader formulation, the notion of policy coherence for sustainable development, as re-embodied by the OECD (2016), is therefore meant to:

(i) ensure a common vision and balanced approach to the environmental, social, and economic dimensions of sustainable development;

(ii) enable and capitalize on policy inter-linkages, including the identification of synergies and trade-offs between different SDGs and respective targets;

(iii) aggregate action at the local, national, regional, and global levels;

(iv) give thorough consideration to the root causes of common problems and challenges, and to the wider impacts of policies that are designed to address them.

A “policy integration” approach – adopted and applied in the UN, 2018 – similarly reflects the integrated and multidimensional nature of the new SDG framework. Here integration is intended to enlarge the policy space and broaden solutions to sustainably address complex and growingly interconnected challenges, through policy processes that identify and enable linkages across scales, policy domains, and between different stakeholders and resources for implementation at different levels.

Some key defining features of the SDGs concern to make a strong case for a MLG-SDG localization nexus.

Firstly, and most importantly, the interdependence among sustainable development dimensions has been long recognized, and probably constitutes the most fundamental tenet of the sustainable development concept. The deeply integrated nature of the SDGs is the most prominent expression of their transformative potential and has crucial implications in steering effective implementation processes through effective MLG frameworks.

Secondly, as SDGs are essentially aspirational and not prescriptive, the 2030 Agenda relies on “governance through goals” (Noferi et al., 2019) as a “comprehensive, inclusive, bottom-up, non-confrontational, country-driven and stakeholders-oriented approach”.

The often-weak legal enforceability of targets requires the intervention of different mechanisms – at different levels and through different actors – to guarantee continuous policy support to SDG implementation.

Thirdly, the universality transformative nature of the 2030 Agenda poses important challenges to implementation across levels. Adapting global and aspirational strategies to local conditions and priorities – that are inevitably heterogeneous – requires integrated policy approaches in complex and differentiated governance frameworks at all levels.

Lastly, there is widespread consensus that a territorial, place-based approach to the implementation of the SDGs is critical to see them succeed holistically, and that subnational and local governments play a key role as drivers of effective localization processes. In many policy domains, the local scale can often be more appropriate to unpack the complexity of synergies and trade-offs between different dimensions (and thus involved actors and levels) of the SDGs. Therefore, a bottom-up approach to the implementation of the SDGs requires, and at the same time reinforces, the adoption of integrated and differentiated MLG mechanisms, combining different approaches (hierarchical, subsidiary & empowered, real-time/collaborative) for a more coordinated, inclusive and coherent policy action.

Most above elements are entrenched in a set of consistent and complementary principles that have been associated to the operationalization of a sustainable development paradigm through effective governance, or more specifically assumed as transversal thrusts for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

They are also linked to the long-lasting core principles for effective development cooperation, which places attention to ownership.
alignment and harmonisation, as much as a focus on results, accountability, partnership for development, transparency and shared responsibility.

Together, these represent fundamental principles for an approach to MLG that concurs to trigger and unfold the potential of locally-driven SDG trajectories.

So far, our state-of-the-art review has allowed to outline a few elements that qualify the potential of effective MLG systems as enabler of SDG localization. Opposed to a hierarchical notion of vertical integration through centrally defined policy objectives, MLG for SDGs appears as a complex, dynamic and open-ended process with strong top-down and bottom-up interactions, thus not assigning exclusive policy competence or asserting a stable hierarchy of political authority to any level (Schmitter, 2004). As such, MLG is built on particularly context-sensitive patterns that “rely on political agreements requiring in turn a particular set of enabling conditions and a strong and shared commitment from all the actors involved” (Granados & Noferini, 2019).

Therefore, a key challenge is to reconcile a wealth of (often spontaneous, dynamic and truly innovative) local processes with broader institutional arrangements at different government levels, thus achieving properly integrated and MLG systems in support of SDG localization. In this regard, the diffusion of integrated review and monitoring systems is a promising entry point. The booming VLR movement (UN-Habitat and UCLG, 2020 and 2021) – and its potential in bridging local review processes with (as triggers of) enhanced policy coherence and integration mechanisms – constitute an outstanding good practice, which paves the way for the enhancement of effective MLG systems for SDG localization (Bilsky et al., 2021).

Yet, local and national governments still require further advancements in terms of conceptualisation, frameworks, analysis, evidence and guidance elements on MLG systems and mechanisms to implement the SDGs.

Different initiatives have been launched in the past years to provide conceptual (and to different extents operational) reference frameworks on MLG for SDGs implementation. Most often, they are more specifically focused on the national level, but also embrace the key elements of articulation with other levels. Most notably, they include: a methodological framework for SDG indicator 17.14.1 on policy coherence as means for SDG implementation, by UNEP; a policy integration approach for the SDGs by the UN, 2018; a new framework on policy coherence for sustainable development (PCSD) by OECD (2016), followed by its comprehensive recommendation (OECD, 2019) and implementation guidance (OECD, 2021). On the same lines, a strong work is jointly done by UN-Habitat and UCLG (2020 and 2021) to enhance a global community of practice around a consistent approach to VLRs, through a common understanding of their role and relevance.

A review of the above frameworks, as well as the current state-of-the-art in the debate on SDG localization, policy coherence for sustainable development and policy integration, appear to converge – with different objectives and angles – on the key elements of effective MLG systems. These elements are commonly organized in the three standard dimensions of vertical integration (VI), horizontal integration (HI) and stakeholder engagement (SE), reflecting the main thrusts and orientations of the 2030 Agenda calling upon governments to ensure an effective implementation of the goals. Respectively: embedding the SDGs at multiple levels of governments; cutting across sectors and breaking silos to address the integrated nature of the SDGs; enabling inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making, follow-up and review processes. In other words, VI, HI and SE constitute the core components of a MLG system potentially enabling SDG localization, each translated into a specific set of drivers and practices.
This represents the starting point for a novel analytical framework on the MLG-SDG localization nexus, whose ambition is to serve as a basis for both analysing and systematizing trends and practices, and deriving action-oriented recommendations.

For this twofold purpose, the proposed framework tries to capture and connect - through a system approach - (i) the key defining dimensions of MLG processes, as emerging from the policy coherence and integration paradigms, with (ii) the principles and conditions under which these are turned into specific practices, and (iii) the resulting outputs and outcomes, in terms of improved capacities and functionalities for SDG localization.

The following figure represents the key elements of our analytical framework and how they relate to each other:

- the foundational principles of MLG as enabler for SDG localization, including the core principles underpinning the 2030 Agenda, the principles of effective governance for sustainable development, the MLG principles;
- the core dimensions and drivers of policy coherence and integration, reflecting the three core components of MLG (vertical integration, horizontal integration, and stakeholder engagement);
- the enabling or disabling conditions for effective MLG systems, including contextual and place-based factors related to legal, political and financial frameworks, decentralization systems, crisis and conflict dynamics, social capital, data frameworks, etc;

- the specific and real-world practices (as available options/solutions, typologies of action, concrete mechanisms, processes and tools of MLG) in the different stages of the policy cycle: political leadership and commitment, planning, implementation, review and reporting.

- the intermediate outputs resulting from the practices, as enhanced MLG mechanisms and structures to support policy coherence and integration;
- the outcomes of enhanced MLG systems, as improved capacities and functionalities of LRGs for SDG localization.

A dynamic representation of multilevel governance systems for SDG localization.
These elements are also reflected and sequenced in the following matrix, which should serve as a reference for mapping, systematizing and analyzing the main evidence related to trends and practices of MLG for SDG localization, in order to answer the following key questions:

> How do they translate into effective/improved functionalities for SDG localization? (i.e., main MLG outputs and outcomes)

Using this matrix as the main analytical and interpretative grid, it is possible not only to systematize evidence on MLG practices, but also to derive general findings and organize policy insights and implications in the different policy stages for each dimension.

![Analytical matrix on the MLG-SDG localization nexus](image)

**PRINCIPLES AND THRUSTS**

Thrusts underlying the MLG-SDG localization nexus

- Core principles underpinning the 2030 Agenda
- Principles of effective governance for sustainable development
- MLG principles

**DIMENSIONS AND DRIVERS**

Components of effective MLG systems

- Vertical integration
  - Institutional coordination across government levels
  - Political, administrative, legal and financial frameworks
  - Decentralization setting (functional assignments, institutional capacities)
  - Crisis and conflict dynamics
- Horizontal integration
  - Policy interactions across sectors and domains
  - Participation and social capital
  - Availability and access to data
- Stakeholder engagement
  - Active participation and cooperation for common objectives

**CONTEXTUAL FACTORS**

Enabling/disabling conditions

- Functional and chronological sequence of multilevel governance practices for SDG implementation

**PROCESS AND PRACTICE THROUGH POLICY CYCLE STAGES**

LEADERSHIP AND POLITICAL COMMITMENT

- Plan
- Implementation
- Review and reporting

INTERMEDIATE OUTPUTS

Effective MLG mechanisms and structures for policy coherence and integration

**POLICY EFFECTS**

Outcomes as improved functionalities for SDG localization

- Institutionalization of political commitment for policy coherence
- Alignment across governance levels (clear mandates and roles, joint and consistent planning processes)
- Inter-ministerial/cross-governmental coordination structures
- Institutionalizing governance processes
- Management processes and capacities
- Community awareness and commitment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thrusts underlying the MLG-SDG localization nexus</th>
<th>Dimensions and Drivers</th>
<th>Contextual Factors</th>
<th>Process and Practice Through Policy Cycle Stages</th>
<th>Policy Effects</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core principles underpinning the 2030 Agenda</td>
<td>Vertical integration</td>
<td>Enabling/disabling</td>
<td>Functional and chronological sequence of</td>
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<td>Principles of effective governance for</td>
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<td>conditions</td>
<td>multilevel governance practices for SDG</td>
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<td>sustainable development</td>
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**Source:** Authors

05 Evidence about trends and practices on multilevel governance for SDG localization

The real-world practices on multilevel governance for SDG localization are reaching a mature stage, being implemented and experienced in several countries across the world depending on contextual conditions and factors.

Here, for each cell of our analytical matrix (crossing the three dimensions with the different policy cycle stages), we systematize evidence on the main global trends as stated in several high-level reports, complementing it with the experience of our case-studies (Argentina, Ghana, Italy, Jordan, Argentina, and the Philippines). These are used as transversal “living labs”, selecting relevant and documented practices that represent illustrative concrete examples.

**Vertical Integration**

VI - Leadership and political commitment

The SDGs are offering ample opportunities for local governments to strengthen their influence by reshaping the local-national dialogue between different levels of government (Bilsky et al., 2021). As a consequence, across the world there is a growing attention and formal commitment for advancing vertical integration in SDG implementation at country and local level, fostering both multilevel coordination and direct support to SDG localization processes. There are several examples of spaces, mechanisms and institutional arrangements that enable multilevel policy dialogue and the effective engagement of LRGs in the national policy debate, incorporating multiple levels of government into sustainable development steering bodies, and reproducing coordination and collaboration mechanisms at different levels of government.

Several countries are introducing specific and innovative legal and regulatory instruments, establishing structures for coordination across levels of government, or adapting institutions and bodies that preceded the 2030 Agenda, through a dense coordination structure that involves local governments at multiple points. In contrast, other cases of vertical integration work mostly from the bottom up, by including national institutions or agencies in subnational processes (UCLG, 2019).

However, at the national level, LRGs are not systematically engaged in the policy debate, and in key levers for implementation and monitoring. Only 34% of countries that reported to the HLPF between 2016 and 2019 have engaged LRGs in national coordination mechanisms. For all other countries, such an engagement is either very weak (15%) or inexistent (43%) (UCLG, 2019).
**ARGENTINA**

Argentina’s National Coordination Council for Social Policies (CNCPSS) coordinates the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It is linked to the Presidency and it ensures that support is provided to the Inter-institutional National Commission for the implementation and follow-up of the SDGs. At the initial stage of the policy cycle, leadership for vertical integration has taken many forms: from recognition by the national government of the importance of LRGs for SDG implementation and outreach campaigns intended for local governments, to actions by local governments to signal their commitment to the SDGs, joint events and adoption of agreements across levels of governments for SDG implementation. Moreover, a SDG network of provinces was formed in 2018 to facilitate coordination, exchanges, monitoring and the development of indicators.

**GHANA**

In order to implement the 2030 Agenda, Ghana is relying on its decentralised planning system, which assigns functions to Ministries, Departments and Agencies at national level, and to local authorities (namely Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies - MMDAs) at sub-national level. National SDG coordination is done through the National Development Planning Commission at the apex, supported by 16 regional coordinating councils. Other coordination and leadership structures have been established to provide focused attention on the SDGs, build innovative partnerships and accountability mechanisms around their implementation and integrate lessons learnt into ongoing national development efforts. These consist of a High-Level Ministerial Committee (HLMC), a SDGs Implementation Coordination Committee (ICC), a Technical Committee and a CSOs Platform on SDGs. Also, a SDGs Advisory Unit has been established in the Office of the President. Finally, the 2019 VNR states that “strengthening of local government capacity” is an important action required to accelerate progress and to increase efficiency to achieve the SDGs.

**ITALY**

According to the law, the Presidency of the Council of Ministries oversees and coordinates the implementation of the National Sustainable Development Strategy (NSDS) with support from Ministry of Ecological Transition (MiTE), which focuses on ecological aspects and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI) for the external dimension. MiTE leads the co-creation process to build the revised NSDS and “Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development Action Plan” to be attached to the former. MiTE is also playing a crucial role in promoting the NSDS at local level through capacity building and by establishing a permanent platform that provides spaces for dialogue on vertical coherence as well as related financial support. In particular, this process involves the State Regions Conference – i.e., a collegiate body established in 1983 to foster cooperation and dialogue between the central government and the regions and autonomous provinces – and the 14 metropolitan cities created in 2014 after the institutional reform and in charge of spatial and urban planning.

**JORDAN**

In order to ensure efficient alignment and to emphasize a commitment to all SDGs within national priorities, the Government has opted to ensure that no overlapping mechanisms are established anew, and that the implementation of the 2030 Agenda builds upon existing institutional frameworks. These have been further refined to allow for better harmonization, including Higher Steering Committee headed by the Prime Minister’s Office and involving relevant Ministers, the private sector and CSOs to overall strategic guidance for the implementation of the SDGs. National Higher National Committee for Sustainable Development established in 2002 to act as a reference for all national endeavours related to sustainable development, headed by the Minister of Planning and International Cooperation (MOPIC) with membership from ministries, the private sector, CSOs, and representatives of women, youth, Senate (upper house), House of Representatives (lower house), and local communities; Coordination Committee, headed by the Secretary General of MPOIC, with membership from ministries, Government, and stakeholders, to ensure mainstreaming of the SDGs within national plans.

**PHILIPPINES**

The National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) is responsible for the coordination of the SDG implementation strategy, while the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) supports SDG localization. A national executive order (Order No. 27, 2017) requested all government levels to implement the national development plan (NDP) aligned with the SDGs. NEDA’s regional development offices are responsible for drafting and coordinating the regional development plans. Provincial governors usually chair the Regional Development Council, acting as the formal mechanism for coordination and multilevel governance on SDGs.

**VI - Planning**

Vertical integration of strategic planning for the SDGs is probably the policy stage showing the strongest advancements in terms of effective MLG systems. Indeed, several countries have started the process of aligning national, subnational and local plans and budgets for the SDGs, through genuine multilevel planning structures and mechanisms: that ensure consistency of strategies and plans, enabling authorities to work together in addressing commonly identified SDG challenges. It remains to be seen, however, how these structures work and whether they are sustained with appropriate resources, capacities and mandates (UN, 2018).

In some cases, national governments drive the alignment process, while in others it is triggered and led by regional, state and municipal governments. Overall, these cases correspond to either countries or local governments that have advanced in integrating the SDGs into their national or subnational strategies and plans (UN, 2018).

Strategic direction from national (as well as supranational, as for instance in the EU) can be crucial to avoid a lock-in situation and smooth the articulation across levels. This provides a basis for more effective guidance, incentives and facilitation, yet leaving room for autonomy, as some LRGs still perceive SDGs more as an imposed burden without adequate resources than an opportunity to innovate and integrate action across policy domains.
ARGENTINA

A formalised system and roadmap has been developed for the implementation of the SDGs at provincial level. This started in every province with the signing of a formal cooperation agreement between the CNAPS and the highest provincial authority. Supported by UNDP, the CNAPS has signed agreements with 20 out of 24 federated governments or provinces, which have agreed to implement the 2030 Agenda by aligning their strategies, policies, monitoring systems and reporting with the SDGs. Moreover, they agreed to establish a Federal SDG Network for Provincial Governments. All the provinces designed focal points and made progress in various areas, e.g., promotion of new local development plans using the SDGs as a reference, alignment of the SDGs with their existing strategic plans or provincial government agendas, identification of programmes and indicators.

GHANA

The SDGs have been integrated into the national development agenda. The Government’s national development blueprint – An Agenda for Jobs: Creating Prosperity and Equal Opportunity for All (2017-2024) – reflects the SDGs. The guidelines for preparing medium-term development plans require ministries, departments and agencies, as well as local authorities, to align their activities with SDGs. Ghana has taken advantage of its decentralized planning system to ensure better coordination of SDG implementation processes and to better integrate its national and sub-national levels of planning. In particular, the national government decided to reinforce the regional and local coordinating councils to ensure vertical (national/local) and horizontal coordination in the territories. Overall, substantial efforts have also been made to align local and regional strategies with the SDGs: local government organizations are required to follow guidelines laid down by the national government and to align their medium-term district development plans and activities with the SDGs. For instance, the national LRGs’ association (NALAG) made efforts to align district development plans with the national plan and the SDGs.

ITALY

In December 2017, the Italian NSIDS became law by formally updating article 152/2005 of the national environmental code, to be reviewed every three years. In 2017, Italy decided to take the opportunity to include in the revision process of the NSIDS – due by law – a strengthened and constructive dialogue on Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development involving all relevant central, sub-national administrations, civil society and other stakeholders. As part of the NSIDS, the Italian regions are invited to present progress reports to MTE and to participate in the National Council for Development Cooperation, which allows regions to provide inputs for the national efforts on the SDGs. Moreover, all Italian regions, autonomous provinces, and metropolitan cities have been asked and supported to design their own strategies, plans and activities on the SDGs, to align local priorities and plans with national objectives organised around the five Ps of the 2030 Agenda. Several sub-national administrations have established SDG steering committees for drafting and implementing their strategies.

JORDAN

In Jordan, the Executive Development Programmes (EDPs) are multi-year government development plans, developed through a participatory approach, to integrate and translate different national development and sectoral plans and strategies under the “Jordan 2025” into actionable and measurable development programmes through three- or four-year cycles. As part of the country’s decentralization drive, the EDPs include also development programmes for each of the 12 governorates, translating national priorities at the sub-national level and taking into consideration their own sustainable development priorities and challenges.

PHILIPPINES

The SDGs are integrated into the Philippine Development Plan 2017-2022, complemented by national budget allocations through the Public Investment Programme, and monitored through the Socioeconomic Report SDG Annex. The national government’s localization strategy continues to follow a top-down approach (e.g., through mandatory regulations and incentives). The main mechanism for SDG localization is through the Regional Development Plans (RDP), which translate the national development plan to regional strategies and priorities. The RDPs, by extension of the alignment and complementation of the PDP with the SDGs, serve as the implementation mechanism of the SDGs at the regional and local levels. Moreover, the Philippines launched in 2018 its Guidelines for Localization and a ‘result matrix’ for LURGs, while the League of Cities of the Philippines (LCP) integrated the SDGs into its Strategic Plan for 2019-2022 and is leading various initiatives for SDG dissemination (including, among others, developing the Cities’ System Capacity Development Project to strengthen city planning). However, although the country’s national associations, and particularly the LCP and the League of Municipalities (LMP), are active in SDG localization, it is reported that many local government units are not fully aware of these processes and that technical and financial support needs to be improved in line with the new SDG priorities.

VI - Implementation

Approaches and tools to advance vertical integration in the implementation of the SDGs seem less frequent than at the planning stage. However, emerging practices show that countries that have strengthened the linkages across levels of government in the planning process are also advancing SDG implementation. Indeed, an increasing number of national governments support the localization of the SDGs in cities and regions, both through technical cooperation and financial support (OECD, 2020). A total of 67% of respondents to the Global Task Force survey in 2019 (UCLG, 2019) had adopted policy documents related to the implementation of the SDGs and over 75% had organised information campaigns, workshops and training activities to raise awareness and build capacity on the SDGs. Conducive national frameworks are crucial for effective vertical integration and (as a basis for) the localization of the SDG. Besides institutional leadership and coordination mechanisms, there is large evidence of ad-hoc cooperation agreements, projects and initiatives across levels to tailor and channel support for effective localization processes. Intermediate governance layers – notably provinces and regions – play an important role in aligning policy priorities and catalyst support at the intersection of national and local levels. The role of international organizations and global and regional associations of LRGs is equally critical in providing relevant support to LURGs as drivers of SDG localization processes. Collaborative national frameworks are crucial for effective vertical integration and (as a basis for) the localization of the SDG. Besides institutional leadership and coordination mechanisms, there is large evidence of ad-hoc cooperation agreements, projects and initiatives across levels to tailor and channel support for effective localization processes. Intermediate governance layers – notably provinces and regions – play an important role in aligning policy priorities and catalyst support at the intersection of national and local levels. The role of international organizations and global and regional associations of LRGs is equally critical in providing relevant support to LURGs as drivers of SDG localization processes. Collaborative national frameworks are crucial for effective vertical integration and (as a basis for) the localization of the SDG.
ARGENTINA

The CNCPD provides provinces with technical support through an adaptation guide including methodological suggestions on the utilisation of the SDGs as a management and planning tool at the subnational level. Municipalities also benefited from tools, workshops and training sessions, and local governments have also made notable progress in developing awareness-raising activities with their staff.

JORDAN

Mainstreaming and financing development initiatives.

The UNDP has supported the Higher National Steering Committee with dedicated capital expenditures to the EDP, thereby also ensuring that priority funding is allocated to the SDGs, which is not clear for LRGs, which find it difficult, for instance, to access specific funds to support adaptation to climate change and resilience projects. Overall, the government prioritises mechanisms, but still devotes limited support and funding to new SDG priorities, with an over-reliance on regulatory approaches instead of promoting outreach, collaboration and capacity-building efforts between national and local governments.

Both the League of Cities and the League of Municipalities have been active in SDG localization through seminars, information sharing, conferences and workshops, building a reputation as drivers of SDG localization and of membership empowerment, working as a substantial link between local action and the fulfilment of the global commitment, as well as supporting international cooperation.

ITALY

The MiTE activated national funds to support the design of regional and metropolitan strategies for sustainable development and the implementation of pilot actions. In particular, MiTE played a crucial role in promoting the NSDS at local level through activities and workshops for capacity building and by establishing a permanent platform that provides spaces for dialogue on vertical coherence, as well as related financial support to LRGs. For instance, policy coherence tools and capacities have been built through technical assistance (CReIAMO PA) to mainstreaming the SDGs and the NSDS into regional and local policies and budgets, including finding the linkages between the EU Cohesion Funds objectives and projects and the NSDS. Similarly, UICCRE has organized sessions on the SDGs involving more than 100 mayors.

GHANA

Ghana’s Budget has been aligned with the SDGs, with budget tracking as a tool that helps track government allocations and expenditure on each SDG target. On this basis, financing mechanisms are being progressively adapted to support regional or local initiatives. Ghana is improving its local-level planning, monitoring and implementation capacity through recruitment of more local-government staff and the appointment of statisticians at the local-government level. These efforts have been further consolidated through effective training organized by the Regional Coordinating Councils (RCCs). Similarly, NALAG has undertaken SDG training and awareness sessions for staff and its national executive council, and it has organized nationwide SDG sensitization workshops in all ten regions in 2017. Moreover, with the support of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, NALAG has launched several projects to improve the capacity of local, provincial and district governments to adapt the SDGs to their local realities, focusing so far on four Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies.

PHILIPPINES

As part of the localization efforts aimed at following up the implementation process, NEDA, DILG and the Philippines’ Statistical Office developed assessment criteria for SDG implementation linked to funding access. In particular, different score cards systems have been used to evaluate progress, linking performance to access to specific funds. However, the alignment between the funds to support local governments’ plans and the SDGs is not clear for LRGs, which find it difficult, for instance, to access specific funds to support adaptation to climate change and resilience projects. Overall, the government prioritizes mechanisms, but still devotes limited support and funding to new SDG priorities, with an over-reliance on regulatory approaches instead of promoting outreach, collaboration and capacity-building efforts between national and local governments.

Vertical integration in terms of review and reporting is another area showing relevant, but yet ambivalent, advancements.

On the one side, the VLR movement is booming through a snowballing effect following some very first inspirational initiatives in Spain, China, Japan and the US. By 2022, some 38 countries had made publicly available 123 VLRs or similar review documents and another 3 reviews are currently being finalised. This, combined with the 15 VSRs presented so far, represent over 16,000 local and regional governments around the world showcasing the importance of subnational reporting to achieve the goals. According to OECD (2021) and Narang-Suri et al. (2021), VLRs provide a tool for LRGs to periodically follow-up and review their progress in SDG implementation. The process of preparing them is often as important as the final report, and also reinforces vertical coherence and complements SDG implementation at the national level. It appears crucial the role played by UN-Habitat, UCLG and several national governments to assist LRGs in preparing their VLRs, notwithstanding the high commitment from the bottom.

On the other side, the involvement of LRGs and their associations in national reporting exercises is not making enough progress. In 2021, the percentage of LRGs that were consulted by their government in the VNR process has fallen, in spite of the efforts made by LRGs and LGAs to upscale local and subnational reporting; indeed, only 40% of the countries that have reported to the UN since 2016 have associated or consulted local governments during their reporting processes. The evolution has also been geographically uneven: there has been important progress in Europe (with 75% participation by local governments in national processes, in 2021) and to a lesser extent in the Asia-Pacific region (44%). In contrast, the involvement of LRGs has been rather stagnant in Africa (at around 9%) and has suffered setbacks in Latin America and the Caribbean (declining from 41% for the period 2016–2020 to 39% in 2021) (Bilsky et al., 2021).

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ARGENTINA
The CICNIPS invites provinces to participate in the Voluntary Provinces Report (Informe Provincias), which seeks to highlight annual progress on the adaptation of the SDGs in each territory, as done by seventeen provinces presented between 2017 and 2019. Moreover, in Argentina there are some of the most illustrative and mature VLR experiences across the world, such as the case of Buenos Aires, Lincoln and Santa Fe. However, although the VNRs indicate that consultation with local governments has taken place, the organizations representing local governments note that in some cases the consultation did not directly include them.

PHILIPPINES
SDG data monitoring and evaluation is managed by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), which designed appropriate scorecards to evaluate whether development plans are aligned with the SDGs. This is complemented by the City Database Project led by the League of Cities of the Philippines to consolidate city data and show how cities are achieving the SDGs. However, cities still underline the difficulties that they face in ensuring appropriate monitoring and evaluation. Also for this reason, so far only one city – Naga – has started a VLR process, with the support of UNESCAP.

Horizontal integration

HI - Leadership and political commitment

The cross-cutting and integrated nature of the SDGs poses coordination challenges at each level and stage of the policy-making process, and it requires governments to strengthen institutional and governance mechanisms for horizontal coordination between sectoral entities at each particular tier (OECD, 2021). Having in place efficient mechanisms and processes at appropriate levels for inter-ministerial coordination is essential to ensure an integrated implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs and to resolve policy divergences and trade-offs between different sectors.

Countries around the world are introducing new or adapted institutional coordination frameworks to overcome policy silos and integrate SDGs transversally into central/national structures and processes. In this regard, four main categories of practices can be distinguished: i) strengthening the institutional and financial capacity of their Centres of Government — the body or group of bodies that report directly to the Head of Government and the Council of Ministries — to support SDG implementation (OECD, 2016); ii) assigning the coordination responsibility to line ministries with cross-cutting influence (e.g. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Finance), such to lead the commitment towards sustainable development well beyond its original domain; iii) creating ad hoc institutions (Committees, Councils, Working groups) — or use pre-existing ones — delegated to sustainable development issues with a transversal mandate across sectors and policy domains; iv) establishing informal working groups or networks that meet on a regular or ad hoc basis to discuss pressing issues. However, in some cases, the above-mentioned mechanisms do not have the power nor the legal mandate to impose themselves and they usually face difficulty in getting their recommendations considered and accepted by all Ministries / Departments within national and local governments (Granados & Noferini, 2019).

Moreover, several regions and cities are piloting innovative governance models (e.g., inspired by transition management principles) to implement the SDGs holistically at/and across subnational levels in different administrative/decentralized settings. They are meant to both overcoming policy silos through integrated policy-making and planning, and to promoting multi-stakeholder dialogue and engagement in the different stages of the process.

ITALY
Italy has invested considerable efforts in building statistical frameworks for evaluating sustainability and well-being. The National Institute of Statistics provides relevant indicators and improves their coverage and significance in identifying trends in SDG achievement. A detailed analysis of SDG indicators is published annually and the NSDS Annual Report is compiled every year by the MiTE. Significant results have been achieved at territorial level. The Italian Association of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (AICCRE) replicated and created the first Italian SDG portal for local indicators to monitor SDG implementation by over 100 municipalities in Italy at the end of 2020. Similarly, since 2020, the Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development published a yearly Territorial Report, which offers a detailed analysis of Italy’s Regions, provinces and metropolitan cities, contributing to the territorialisation of the 2030 Agenda in Italy. So far, the Metropolitan City of Florence has been a pioneer in Italy with the release of its VLR – the first in the country – in 2021. Nevertheless, the 2022 VNR process led by MiTE triggered a wider engagement of regions and metropolitan cities in preparing their VLRs over the year.

JORDAN
The Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation is in charge of reporting progress and it is developing, in cooperation with the Performance Progress Unit at the Prime Ministry, a national monitoring system which will be used to monitor national and local programmes and plans. This system includes more than 100 indicators designed to be tracked by MOPIC through three-month progress reports and annual analytical reports. Jordan’s VNR – submitted in 2017 – stressed the participation of both elected municipal councils and appointed governoreate councils to the reviewing process. In early 2021, Amman Greater Municipality started the process for the development of its VLR – the first in the country – with the support of UN-Habitat, contributing also to strengthen the VLR movement in the Middle-East and West Asian Countries.

GHANA
Ghana stands out for actively creating institutions and mechanisms for SDG review and implementation, as well as championing the SDGs ahead of presenting its first VNR to the 2019 HLPF. The VNR was conducted in an open, inclusive and multi-stakeholder manner with the active participation of a wide range of state and non-state actors at both national and sub-national levels. Moreover, the Ghana Statistical Service (GSS) has conducted a review of data availability for SDG indicators production, which has resulted in the creation of the National Data Roadmap, to be implemented through a multi-stakeholder advisory committee. In 2020, the city of Accra released its VLR, which is so far a unique experience in the country and one of the few VLRs in Africa.
ARGENTINA

The inter-ministerial Roundtable raises awareness and fosters the implementation of the SDGs, coordinating all the provincial departments (ministries, secretariats and agencies) that are working on prioritization and alignment of their activities to the SDG targets and goals.

The High-Level Ministerial Committee (HLMC), made up of 15 ministers, is chaired by the Minister for Planning with the President’s Special Advisor on SDGs as secretary. The Committee provides strategic direction for the implementation of the SDGs and Agenda 2063 to ensure a “whole-of-government” approach to implementation, by actively engaging all sector of government in a cross-sectoral and coordinated manner. The SDG Implementation Coordinating Committee (ICC) is made up of representatives of 10 key ministries, departments and agencies, and the Office of the President, along with the SDG Philanthropy Platform, civil society organizations and the National African Peer Review Mechanism Governing Council.

In 2021, the newly established Inter-ministerial Committee for Ecological Transition (CITE) has been mandated to approve the NSDS revisions and oversee its implementation. As the CITE is chaired by the Prime Minister, and steered by the Minister for Ecological Transition, it illustrates the government’s high-level commitment to the path to sustainable development. The Inter-ministerial Committee for Economic Programming and Sustainable Development (CIPESS), which is in charge for assessing sustainability of public investment, is also placed within the Presidency of the Council of Ministers.

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JORDAN

The Higher Steering Committee headed by the Prime Minister’s Office includes relevant Ministers (and when required, all the cabinet/council of ministers). Similarly, the National Higher National Committee for Sustainable Development headed by the MOPIC included membership from relevant line ministries, Senate (upper house), House of Representatives (lower house), and local communities.

HI - Planning

Ensuring whole-of-government coordination is fundamental to identify and mitigate divergences between sectoral priorities and policies, including external and domestic policies, and promote mutually supporting actions across sectors and institutions.

Several national and local governments have devised formal governance arrangements and informal working methods that support effective co-creation of sustainable development plans between ministries and departments, and between ministries and other public sector bodies under their aegis. This helps breaking silo thinking and serving as common reference for integrated approaches across broader governments’ policy objectives. Here again, such high-level co-ordinating mechanisms to promote PCSD and the integration of sustainable development across central agencies, line ministries and other public institutions are either located within the Centre of Government or a lead line ministry as appropriate.

ARGENTINA

The National Coordination Council of Social Policies (CNCPS), linked to the presidency, ensures co-ordination with 20 ministries and the adaptation of the SDGs to national priorities through 6 thematic commissions (education, agriculture, housing, and urban development, work and employment, and social protection). The same approach for horizontal integration is then translated into provincial and city plans.

JORDAN

Several line ministries have formed technical working groups to review their sectoral and local plans and map them against the SDGs. Technical missions have also been conducted to support this process with relevant line ministries and the Department of Statistics, especially with regard to assessing the availability of indicators and identifying their categorization.

HI - Implementation

The governance and institutional architecture devoted to the implementation of the strategies for sustainable development is surely a priority issue for all the countries, regions, provinces and cities committed to the SDGs. Indeed, a clear assignment of implementation responsibilities — along with a structured interaction between local authorities, institutions, citizens, associations and enterprises — are essential ingredients to influence resource management for social, environmental, and economic change towards sustainable development (UNDG, 2014; GTF, 2016). Making specific commitments in relation to initiatives and actions aimed at contributing to the Goals in a sustainable development strategy is a powerful enforcement mechanism. Explicitly outlining the actions that will be put in place to foster sustainable development makes the public institution implementing the strategy accountable for the actions it commits to (ARCO, 2020).
Most commonly, decision-making power on planning and implementation is given to State Cabinets / Office of Prime Ministers or similar entities, while the coordination is given to the Inter-Ministerial Committees/ Councils/Working Groups, which work in close collaboration with all relevant ministries/departments under the presidency of a leading actor. Finally, the implementation and funding of the items included in the plans fall within the scope of responsibility of each specific minister and department concerned.

Several countries have applied ‘SDG budgeting’ tools to advance cross-sectoral integration, setting priorities and reconciling policy objectives through aligned/pooled funding mechanisms and incentive mechanisms. Countries have also established formalized financing mechanisms aimed at incentivizing institutional coordination on urgent issues (e.g., climate change action).

Moreover, capacity-building initiatives in public administrations for horizontal integration are diffused, to increase knowledge and create new competences in aligning public strategies and programmes across policy domains with the principles and integrated nature of the SDGs (UN-Habitat, 2022). Staff incentives and horizontal mobility schemes are being promoted, alongside the promotion of digital technology skills and tools to enhance integration and innovative governance outcomes (e.g., enabling larger citizens’ participation in policy-making and monitoring processes).

HI - Review and reporting

A whole-of-government approach underlying horizontal integration appears to be highly embedded into national and local review practices, as they are set to break the policy silos by involving several departments / ministries and public bodies and by reporting on multiple (or even all) SDGs.

In this respect, it is critical to map critical interactions and assess progress towards interrelated goals and targets through integrated monitoring frameworks that enable cross-sectoral exchange and collaboration in data production and elaboration to fill information gaps, build capacity at different levels and enable circular feedback loops along the policymaking budgeting evaluation cycle.

Cities and regions are also pioneering different methods and tools (network analysis, matrix approaches) to analyse the interactions between SDG targets and existing policies in terms of both synergies and trade-offs (OECD, 2021). Provisions/arrangements are also being made to enable critical oversight functions on SDG alignment and integration for policy coherence by Parliaments and supreme audit institutions.

Stakeholder engagement

SE - Leadership and political commitment

Several countries have put forward multi-stakeholder partnerships or frameworks in relation with the SDGs. Indeed, engaging proactively with stakeholders in all phases of the policy cycle, including through the exchange of knowledge and expertise, helps to ensure a holistic perspective on sustainable development issues, give voice to diverse interests, identify potential trade-offs, raise public awareness and create ownership (OECD, 2021). Therefore, a coherent implementation of the SDGs requires mechanisms for dialogue and engagement whereby governments and key stakeholders can come together to identify challenges, set priorities, contribute to the development of laws and regulations, align policies and actions, and mobilise resources for sustainable development (OECD, 2021).

Besides citizens’ awareness-raising campaigns, countries are engaging stakeholders in SDG implementation through diverse types of mechanisms that are mostly applied to (i) the formulation of national SDG strategies and plans and/or (ii) at sectoral level, through a broad set of participatory tools more or less directly anchored to institutional and policy-making processes. For this purpose, they are adapting existing institutions or creating new ones. There is no single blueprint, but rather great variation in terms of the resulting engagement mechanisms. In all cases, interaction with representatives from civil society, the private sector, and academia through formalised spaces and mechanisms (e.g., fora, councils) for dialogue, participation and public scrutiny nurtures social creativity, active citizenship and collective empowerment. In addition, it helps actors to navigate conflictual views and to generate trust in co-creation processes (UN, 2018).
Multilevel governance for SDG localization

**GHANA**

The SDGs Implementation Coordinating Committee is intended to streamline and strengthen cross-sectoral coordination and multi-stakeholder partnerships in implementation, monitoring, evaluation and reporting, through the involvement of the SDG Philanthropy Platform and civil society organizations, among others. The SDG Technical Committee is made up of the SDG focal persons of the MDAs and representatives of civil society organizations, private sector, academia and other stakeholders. Moreover, the Civil Society Organisations Platform on SDGs was set up to ensure coordination and partnerships on SDGs within the CSOs’ space. The Platform has a membership of more than 300 local and international CSOs clustered into 17 sub-platforms aligned to each of the 17 goals. There is also a youth-focus sub-platform addressing youth-related concerns across the goals.

**JORDAN**

The MOPIC prepared a stakeholder engagement strategy to ensure the widest participation from all Major Groups and Organizations (MGOs) in the SDG implementation and VNI preparation. The Higher Steering Committee headed by the Prime Minister’s Office and in charge of endorsing long-term plans includes not only relevant Ministers, but also private sector organizations and CSOs. Similarly, the National Higher Committee headed by the Prime Minister's Office and in charge of endorsing long-term plans includes not only relevant Ministers, but also private sector organizations and CSOs. Similarly, the National Higher Committee headed by the Prime Minister’s Office and in charge of endorsing long-term plans includes not only relevant Ministers, but also private sector organizations and CSOs.

**ITALY**

The National Forum for Sustainable Development (NFSD) has proven a powerful multi-stakeholder tool for dialogue with the civil society organizations and other societal stakeholders. It is an open-membership fora articulated in five working groups around the 5Ps and considered the permanent platform for NSDS in Italy. 187 CSOs and other stakeholders are represented in the Forum and the possibility to enrol remains open. It operates in connection with the National Council on Development Cooperation to enhance civil society’s attention to PCD, including the aspects related to transboundary issues.

**PHILIPPINES**

The Sub-Committee on the SDGs serves as a regular and institutionalized space for engagement among government, private sector, civil society, academia, media, trade and labour unions, among others. It shall hold stakeholder chambers to take stock of non-government and private sector initiatives and then direct these projects to current development gaps. This engagement includes also pledging sessions where non-government and private sector organizations to signify their commitment and identify specific areas where they can contribute.

**ARGENTINA**

In Argentina CSOs have been formally invited by the president of the CNCPS to join six thematic commissions for the design, implementation and review of the national plan. Similarly, Provinces work with actors from the private, not-for-profit, and academic sector to provide a reality check on the priorities selected by the government and to assess the interconnectedness across social, economic and environmental SDGs in their territories.

**ITALY**

The MiTE has constituted the NFSD as a space for dialogue and facilitates CSOs involvement in the decision-making process for the NSDS. In this way, the MiTE leads a dialogue between all relevant central, sub-national administrations, civil society and other stakeholders to co-build the revised 2021 NSDS and an Action Plan for PCD to be attached to the former. In addition, Regional Fora for Sustainable Development are established in sixteen regions involving civil society, Metropolitan Cities, association of municipalities and the private sector. CSOs, NGOs and private sector organizations are also involved through the CNCPS through specific working groups from the point of view of the external application of the 2030 Agenda 2030.

**SE - Planning**

A particularly relevant aspect in designing strategies and transitions towards sustainable development is linked to participatory mechanisms. Indeed, the localization of SDGs may take advantage of the proximity between sub-national governments and local stakeholders and simultaneously it may enhance their engagement and commitment for sustainable development (Granados and Nöferini, 2019). Most countries are involving multiple stakeholders in the process of identifying national and local priorities and developing strategies or action plans for SDG implementation.

However, not all the paths that led to the drafting of national and local plans can be considered fully participatory. There is an extreme variety of engagement mechanisms around sustainable development across countries, both at the systemic level in the overall course of SDG planning and in relation to sector issues. Institutional structures for engagement may involve several types of stakeholders (e.g., platforms for local businesses, youth councils), operate at various levels of government and perform their functions at different stages of the policy cycle. Also, while some of these structures are directly led by governments, others are independently led by non-state actors. Some institutions have decision-making powers while others are advisory bodies.

Theoretical arguments point to both benefits and drawbacks of engagement in this regard, but it is clear that the balance of costs and benefits can be highly idiosyncratic, both across countries and sectors (UN, 2018). In this regard, promoting citizens’ participation can be costly and time-consuming, as adopting inclusion tools could lead to challenges in the elaboration of the local strategy: participatory governance processes require much time to discuss the vast range of goals related to the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. The process can result slower due to organizational difficulties, as the SDGs are not always considered a priority for civil society organizations. Many stakeholders do have expertise on their sectors but could lack the knowledge and expertise needed to identify multiple linkages between goals and targets in a balanced and integrated manner.
Multilevel governance for SDG localization

SE - Implementation

Besides the overcharging governance of the sustainable development strategies and the role of public authorities, central attention has to be devoted to multi-actor responsibilities in a whole-of-society perspective, as emphasised by the 2030 Agenda itself and the global debate on its implementation. Indeed, mobilisation around specific local issues, which are perceived as closer to everyday life, can become an opportunity for citizens, business and community-based organizations to join efforts and work together in formal and informal roles.

In this regard, real-world practices span from those who generally highlight that organisations, groups and individuals across all sectors had the opportunity to debate the issues, support and inform a collective manifesto and should be involved and engaged in accelerating efforts, to those specifying more precisely the role and responsibilities of both the leading and supporting organizations for each objective (ARGO, 2020). In other words, it is fundamental to explore to what extent the implementation of SDG strategies at all levels is participatory, meaning that all social, economic and cultural agents are active and responsible for achieving goals and targets, and more generally join forces together to realise the vision underlying each strategy.

JORDAN

Jordan’s Higher National Steering Committee provides overall strategic guidance for the implementation of the SDGs, including consultations with stakeholders. Stakeholder engagement strategy to ensure the widest participation from all Major Groups and Organizations in the SDG implementation and VNR preparation proposes a variety of fora, including taskforce meetings, workshops, focus groups and debates, as well as a number of outreach tools like printed materials, social media engagement, and others. The strategy also took into account challenges to the meaningful participation of all stakeholders, namely difficulties reaching the most marginalized, the tendency to involve larger NGOs rather than smaller, community-based organizations and individuals and time constraints. Moreover, the first EDP for 2016-2019 was designed in partnership with all Major Groups and Organizations as essential partners in the development process, with the support of a coordination committee and 18 task forces, with representation from relevant public and private sector establishments, CSOs, academia, women and youth representatives.

SE - Review and reporting

Most VNR and VLR processes around the world were firmly based on strong participatory processes, enhancing citizens’ engagement and commitment for sustainable development and assessing collective efforts. Indeed, the possibility to express opinions and share information on SDG performances at local level is a learning experience for many individuals, and one that empowers them to become active citizens in all aspects of their personal and social life. Engaging and empowering local communities (Clark et al., 2019) through the elaboration of VNRs and VLRs contributes to bring local communities, minorities and vulnerable groups closer to decision-making, while contributing to make such civic engagement systemic (Narang-Suri et al., 2021). Moreover, including in the monitoring system also actions and initiatives implemented by actors and stakeholders in other sectors is an important practice, to avoid monitoring only public policies and keep the whole-of-society committed and accountable.

Good practices include civic engagement strategy that are proactive and well-thought-through, providing space for voice to particular groups who are at risk of being left out and creating systemic conditions for participation through a continuous process, rather than in an ad hoc/one-off manner.

GHANA

Ghana used the 2019 VNR process to deepen public awareness and knowledge of the SDGs by engaging the media and marginalised groups such as persons living with disability, market women, school children, commercial drivers, street children, fisher folk and smallholder farmer groups. Moreover, the draft VNR report was reviewed and validated in a series of workshops for stakeholder groups to ensure that the information presented in the report was a true reflection of Ghana’s story.

ITALY

The National Forum for Sustainable Development is currently involved in the 2022 VNR process. Indeed, a central pillar of this VNR is “Participation and promotion of a sustainability culture”, which includes territorial fora for sustainable development as a relevant monitoring and accountability tool.

PHILIPPINES

In conducting the 2019 VNR, the Philippines undertook several consultation workshops to gain feedback from stakeholders and to engage and renew commitments for cooperation towards the achievement of the goals. Therefore, the VNR process was utilized as an opportunity to connect with different stakeholders representing different sectors and geographic regions. Moreover, the SDG Website aims to provide an online platform to engage different stakeholders on the SDGs and serve as a tool for policy coordination.
Action-oriented recommendations to enhance MLG systems for SDG localization

Our overview of the literature and prevailing trends and practices allows to extrapolate some preliminary conclusions on the relevance and effectiveness of MLG systems as enabler of SDG localization processes.

There is undoubtedly a growing recognition of the importance of enabling policy coherence and integration for more effective implementation and localization of the SDGs through enhanced MLG systems. This translates into growing policy commitment at different levels and a wide array of practices in multiple related areas. Institutional frameworks are adapting to incorporate and consolidate these practices across governments levels and different policy cycle stages.

Nevertheless, there are still limited examples of countries that have mainstreamed “full” and effective vertical and horizontal integration across levels and policy domains.

The process is often affected by shifting commitment, different and complex intergovernmental relations, varying institutional and organizational capacities, incomplete decentralization reform processes. It is therefore difficult to identify a general pattern and to draw firm evidence of the balance between the assumed benefits and actual costs of coordination and integration processes.

The very relevance and political recognition of the SDGs (and the way they are embedded in legal institutional frameworks) varies considerably across countries and at different levels within countries. While national governments are increasingly recognizing the role of LRGs for SDG implementation, this does not necessarily translate into multilevel spaces for dialogue and joint action.

A wealth of innovative and effective policy instruments is being piloted by cities and regions, but they are not yet sufficiently embedded and harmonised at the national level. This leaves LRGs with more autonomy in determining their SDG localization strategies, but it may expose them to a “governance gap” that reflects a still limited representation of LRGs in high-level fora and the inadequate degree of horizontal and vertical coordination between governance levels. All in all, despite considerable improvements, LRGs are not yet adequately and systematically involved in the policy debate, monitoring process and implementation levers at national level.

Significant results are being achieved in promoting integrated approaches, but the SDGs are still prevalently approached thematically. This entails a dominant focus on targets and financing and less on improving the functional arrangements (e.g., alignment, complementarity of attributions and coordination) between interrelated levels of governments and between the mandates, capacities and resources of different involved actors and institutions. In other words, “who does what (and how)” for achieving the global agenda in complex and multilevel governance settings is not yet entirely addressed. This leaves significant margin to enhance multiple synergies and the alignment between complementary processes and functions.

In the current scenario, there are many SDG localization initiatives, and LRGs in many countries (also through their networks and associations) are leading innovative practices and solutions for the SDGs. However, these initiatives face the challenge of going beyond the local level and effectively connecting SDG action across levels of government. The risk is that such wealth of SDG localization processes remains confined to the dimension of virtuous local exercises, with limited impact in addressing problems that are mostly interconnected not only thematically but also in terms of scale and functional requirements (i.e., political mandates and resources).

Strategic frameworks and direction on SDGs at national level are crucial for providing guidance, incentive and harmonising support to localization processes; yet, some LRGs have elaborated their SDG strategies without a national framework to align with. It seems important to balance binding institutional arrangements and policy requirements with a lighter orientation and coordination function that does not limit room for autonomy and further the risk that SDGs are perceived as externally imposed burden without adequate resources.

At subnational levels, fully enabling settings for effective SDG localization are not in place yet and require further advances in terms of political commitment and harmonisation of vision and practices at different levels. Effective MLG systems can be crucial drivers to enhance the responsiveness and effectiveness of LRGs for SDG localization, as long as their three dimensions (vertical integration, horizontal integration, stakeholder engagement) are properly connected as part of a system approach; and local, regional and national governments get much needed support in terms of conceptual and analytical frameworks, documented evidence, capacities and guidance.

Based on these final remarks and taking into account also the operational insights provided by ARCO (2020), Bilsky et al. (2021), Narang-Suri et al. (2021), OECD (2021) and UN (2018), several action-oriented recommendations can be provided for each dimension in order to accelerate progress towards the localization of the SDGs and post-pandemic recovery through effective multilevel governance systems.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>VERTICAL INTEGRATION: Action-oriented recommendations</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership and commitment</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Officially integrating LRGs into national coordination mechanisms and reporting processes on the 2030 Agenda, going beyond simple declarations of intent, thus having a clear commitment together with enforcement and accountability mechanisms.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Ensuring effective processes for appropriately engaging LRGs in areas where they have a role to promote coordinated actions and enhance coherence across levels of governments for sustainable development.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Formally adopting policy coherence for sustainable development as strategic framework at different levels of government and developing tools that support LRGs in applying it in their legal frameworks, plans and actions for localizing the SDGs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Ensuring alignment and consistency among supranational, national and sub-national strategies, using the SDGs as a framework to align policy priorities, incentives, objectives across levels, in order to avoid dispersion of efforts in the collective pursuit for sustainable development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ensuring and demonstrating a strong and clear linkage between all local priorities, national objectives for sustainable development and the 17 SDGs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Enabling – and providing support to – lower levels (e.g., cities and towns) to translate national and sub-national strategies into tailored strategies for their places.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Involving LRGs in the definition and update of strategies for a safe, equitable and sustainable recovery, enabling them to sustain the expanded provision of public services to the recovery with the SDGs.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Implementation</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>• Ensuring a strong political ownership of the strategies by the relevant government levels and public authorities, to certify an effective commitment to their implementation for the pursuit of the SDGs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Developing capacity-building programmes across government levels on policy coherence for the implementation of the SDGs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Facilitate multilevel dialogue around good practices and persistent challenges among LRGs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Working with sub-national levels of government to leverage public procurement for sustainable recovery, enabling them to sustain the expanded provision of public services to the recovery with the SDGs.</td>
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<th><strong>Review and reporting</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>• Pursuing consistency with indicator frameworks developed at national, supranational and global level, along with ensuring the feasibility to apply the same framework also on lower levels, taking into account the frequent limited availability of territorially disaggregated data and statistics.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Investing in the collection and elaboration of new and disaggregated data at local level and intensifying cooperation with the national statistical offices to expand the information base.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Promoting enabling environments for subnational reporting, by connecting VLRs and local governments to the VNR processes, overcoming institutional fragmentation in SDG reviews.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Promoting bottom-up, subnational reporting exercises by local governments, their associations and their communities, including updated indicators, implemented policies and results, and considering the opportunity to complement or translate them into Voluntary Local Reviews to be shared within the global community of actors committed to SDG localization.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Using high-level co-ordinating mechanisms, wherever located within the Centre of Government or a lead line ministry as appropriate, to promote the integration of sustainable development across central agencies, line ministries and other public institutions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Assigning a clear and transparent responsibility to a body / institution in charge of leading the process, to be kept accountable to design a tailored and evidence-based strategy to influence policy-making and cross-sectoral initiatives in the short-, medium- and long-run.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Assigning the pivotal governance role to inter-ministerial / cross-departmental body in a whole-of-government approach, in order to fully embrace an integrated notion of environmental, social and economic sustainability.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Communicating the existing mandate of the coordination body to all actors, coupling its mandate with the financial and human resources needed to do so effectively, and providing it with a clear mandate to anticipate and resolve policy divergences and tensions arising from diverging priorities and different sectoral interests related to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Ensuring the involvement of the Government Office/Centre of Government in efforts to promote policy coherence across line ministries and other public institutions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Creating an advisory council and/or a technical committee composed by experts and public officials by different departments, fields and sectors, to provide the coordination body with advanced knowledge and evidence from multiple sources.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Encouraging informal working methods to stimulate an open exchange of ideas between ministries / departments / public sector bodies leading to innovative thinking that can be conducive for addressing cross-cutting policy objectives and develop integrated solutions.</td>
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<td>• Conducting an integrated diagnostic analysis on all dimensions / SDGs taking into account the linkages, impact, synergies and trade-offs among them, and guaranteeing its continuous use as baseline for future monitoring and progress reports.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Going beyond setting goals, priorities and targets towards identifying specific actions / initiatives to be realized to operationally implement the strategy, assigning responsibilities to lead agencies and other involved government sectors with respective timeframes for action.</td>
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<td>• Designing a clear, effective and transparent governance system and institutional architecture for implementing sustainable development strategies, enforcing both political and executive responsibilities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Building capacity in public administrations to adequately address the principles and integrated nature of the SDGs, by making civil servants able to go beyond their traditional operating environment thinking and acting in new, cross-disciplinary and experimental ways.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Adjusting management practices to an increasingly complex economic, social and environmental reality and employing human resources and capabilities in the most effective way.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Encouraging digital skills to strategically shape public governance outcomes towards integration and flexibility across policy domains in light of the SDGs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Anchoring the VLR process to the design of new long-term strategic plans based on territorial partnerships and cross-sectoral coordination for sustainable development.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Sharing and comparing baseline data, trends and performances across government sectors and places.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Combining official statistics with data and information from new sources (e.g. big data) that may allow obtaining new evidence on the dimensions of sustainable development.</td>
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### Leadership and commitment

- Ensuring open and inclusive spaces for dialogue, participation and public scrutiny, by adopting appropriate mechanisms and tools to be transformed into systematic and permanent channels of consultation and exchange between communities and public administrations.
- Promoting and facilitating stakeholder access to capacity-building and information-sharing opportunities and resources, to build consensus on priorities for enhancing policy coherence for the SDGs.
- Ensuring that the selection of stakeholders takes into account their capability to support objectives in terms of policy integration around specific SDGs.
- Allowing the younger generations to effectively influence the policy process since the vision and priority setting, to mobilise support for structural reforms with long-term implications.
- Assuring inclusivity of voiceless and marginal groups also through the involvement of locally embedded organizations and other actors that represent and bring the perspective of under-served constituencies.

### Planning

- Enabling a real participation by all societal actors to inform and influence sustainable development strategies in all phases (since the design to implementation and monitoring) by combining a wide array of participatory methods and tools.
- Involving a wide range of expert stakeholders (e.g., civil society organizations, public agencies, public utilities and services providers) to dig deeper in the diagnostic analysis for each SDG / field of action.
- Through a participatory process, defining a societal vision able to simultaneously be place-based and globally-oriented, and identifying tailored objectives for sustainable development, in order for the whole society to understand their relevance and value and commit to related actions.
- Incentivising stakeholder participation via digital platforms – and encouraging related digital skills – to re-use open government data and generate innovative solutions that can assist in achieving the SDGs.

### Implementation

- Specifying the role, contribution and responsibility for each category of actor in all sectors in a whole-of-society perspective, adopting tailored mechanisms to keep them accountable.
- Strengthening the capacity of stakeholders that may contribute to SDG integration and encourage them to work together and to form alliances or partnerships, in order to pool together knowledge, information, expertise and align their actions.
- Promoting co-production, whereby citizens engage in partnerships with the government in the design and delivery of public services and initiatives, so that stakeholder engagement goes beyond information sharing and consultation.

### Review and reporting

- Enabling participatory monitoring mechanisms to involve stakeholders and citizens also in the assessment of the collective efforts towards sustainable development, thus allowing national and local governments to understand the extent to which their policies were successful and improve them.
- Enabling the use of reviews and monitoring reports by societal actors both for analysis, communication, and accountability on the progress of the strategy, as well as for influencing decision-making processes on new priority-setting, policies and budgeting.
- Including in the monitoring system actions and initiatives implemented by societal actors and stakeholders, to avoid assessing only public policies and keep the whole society committed and accountable.


UNDG (2014). Localizing the post-2015 development agenda: Dialogues on implementation. UN Habitat, Global Task Force of Local and Regional Governments and UNDP.


The universal, integrated, and transformative nature of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs requires governments to work across policy domains, actors and governance levels. However, local and national governments still require further advancements in terms of conceptualisation, frameworks, analysis, evidence and guidance elements on MLG systems and mechanisms to implement the SDGs.

This research contributes to the wider effort and process led by UN-Habitat and the UN to streamline a strategic framework on MLG for SDG localization, paving the way for policy support through a set of tested tools and practices, incremental partnership-building, open knowledge platforms, and advocacy.

For further information, please contact:
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Urban Practices Branch, Global Solutions Division
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