Co-ordination and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals: The role of the centres of government

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Aprincipal issue for governments with respect to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is how to align policies in practice given the breadth and complexity of the SDGs and their 17 goals and 169 targets, the mixed track record of most governments in working horizontally, and the need to include an unprecedented range of public and private actors in both policy formulation and implementation. The different phases bring with them very specific challenges. For example, adapting global targets to national contexts and setting targets at department level is a delicate, political task that requires careful and sensitive negotiation in order to ensure an inclusive process with real buy-in from key stakeholders both within and beyond government. Implementing the SDGs is a formidable governance challenge that needs to be steered. In recognition of this challenge and as a shift in thinking since the last set of global goals were agreed, the SDGs underscore the importance of building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels (Goal 16) as a foundation for achieving the desired outcomes from ending poverty, to improving health, and combating climate change and its impacts.

Achieving progress across the SDGs will require governments to work across policy areas and steer the delivery of these ambitious goals. However, this is not an easy task: the obstacles to joined-up government are well known. For example, immediate economic and social pressures often crowd out strategic policy initiatives, particularly where the benefits from the latter span electoral terms. Public budgets and accountability systems are usually aligned with departmental structures and have difficulty tracking progress and valuing outcomes that accrue in multiple policy areas. One of the key institutions that can play a role in steering the delivery of the SDGs by highlighting trade-offs, enabling policies across issue areas to address multiple and sometimes competing objectives is the Centre of Government.

The OECD survey of the role and functions of the Centre of Government confirmed that, for most countries, the number of cross-ministerial initiatives has increased since 2008, but governments are still searching for effective models to deliver policies than span multiple departments. Governments have tried numerous solutions. For example, "super ministers" or "policy tsars"

can be effective if they have sufficient drive and authority, but success depends on the status of an individual and might not lead to integration at the policy level. Similarly, super ministries can help to integrate the policies of multiple departments, but internal silos often remain. Permanent (standing) or ad hoc committees are the most typical mechanism for "routine" co-ordination, but seem less suited for ambitious initiatives. Finally independent policy units can bring fresh ideas and new expertise but may face challenges in establishing legitimacy across departments. These models all have strengths and weaknesses, but none have shown to be entirely fit for purpose.

Of course, governments already have bodies and agencies to assess how well policies are being implemented – major contracts performance teams, supreme audit institutions, the ministry of finance expenditure tracking teams, and so on. They provide essential information to ensure accountability, track spending and measure outputs, but as each usually has its own benchmarks and reporting requirements, they often lack an overview of performance that would be needed to monitor the SDGs.

The centre of government has a number of assets that can help to ensure that agenda-setting leads to an agreed and realistic approach. First, the centre is, technically, policy neutral, in contrast to departments. Second, the centre has convening power borrowed from the head of government and can bring pressure to bear on departments to adjust policies and commit resources. In principle, with respect to the head of government's priorities, it does not need to rely on achieving consensus through compromise and lowest-common-denominator negotiations. Third, while line ministries, even those with the most relevant technical expertise, might have little experience in driving cross-disciplinary policies, the centre usually has co-ordination expertise allied with political sensitivity.

Often, the crucial ingredients provided by the centre are relatively minor, practical tools to overcome administrative rigidities, such as holding funding pools, designing tailored accountability frameworks or hosting project teams of specialists drawn from different departments or from outside government. Together, these inducements ensure that disruption of departments

other operational tasks is minimised and that roles and expectations are clear for all.

There is also a clear role for the Centre to take a more active stance in reviewing and refining policy implementation linked to complex strategies such as the SDGs. The role of the Centre is already evolving in this direction in some countries. This has a number of advantages. First, it creates a more flexible system in which, if necessary, decision makers can take action to remedy problems or change course. Second, the Centre can pinpoint blockages and propose support and problem-solving advice to the agency concerned. Dedicated teams at the Centre of Government have become the preferred tool to ensure this close-to-the-ground monitoring, with countries setting up one or more teams in the three principal areas, strategy, policy and delivery. They are also in charge of building an evidence base of citizen experiences and expectations in the delivery of government priorities. These teams allow for focused attention on chosen priority areas, which are often complex and require management across a number of departments from the design phase to the implementation phase. In essence, Centres of Government can help steer government action from planning to the delivery of the SDGs.

Centres of Government have good practices to share in the design, steering and delivery of complex policies such as the SDGs, built on practical experience of setting, and increasingly leading complex agendas across government. As a way forward, and as the SDGs are a universal agenda – the Centres of Government could envisage:

➤ Establishing whether there is an adequate evidence base to support quality decision making throughout the policy cycle with regards the implementation of the SDGs.

➤ Maintaining the focus on the goals underpinning the SDGs despite short-term emergencies, shifting political priorities and electoral discontinuities.

➤ Setting out plans to address potential trade-offs in the agenda of the SDGs and ensuring inclusiveness is at the heart of the implementation plan in order to leave no one behind.

In all of these areas, the regional or country context will define implementation plans – there will not be a single pathway to delivery. As a result, the Centres of Government could benefit from the sharing of experiences on how countries have addressed complex agendas such as the SDGs that do not fall neatly under departmental or ministry portfolios, and how innovations in this area can support effective and accountable institutions.

Useful links

Original article: de Mello, L. (5 April 2016), "Coordination and Implementation of the SDGs: The Role of the Centres of Government", OECD Insights blog, *http://wp.me/p2v6oD-2rI.*

Network of Senior Officials from Centres of Government: *www.oecd.org/gov/cog.htm*