Economic and Social Council

Committee of Experts on Public Administration
Nineteenth session
30 March–3 April 2020
Item 4 of the provisional agenda*
Institutional aspects of the 2020 theme of the Economic
and Social Council and the high-level political forum on
sustainable development

Promoting effective governance and institutional reform to accelerate the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals

Note by the Secretariat

The Secretariat has the honour to transmit to the Committee of Experts on Public Administration the paper prepared by Committee member Louis Meuleman in collaboration with Lamia Moubayed Bissat, Bridget Katsriku, Emmanuelle D'Achon, Linus Mendjana and Gregorio Montero.

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* E/C.16/2020/1.

Promoting effective governance and institutional reform to accelerate the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals

Summary

The progress shown at the high-level political forums on sustainable development since 2016 illustrates that Governments, United Nations agencies, civil society, academia and others seem to have a decent grasp of what should be done to leave no one behind. What seems to be missing is a set of possible answers to the question of how this should be done. How do we reform public administration and governance if we agree that achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 is the overall mission for Governments at all levels?

While answers to this question abound, one factor is clear: implementing the Sustainable Development Goals cannot be done without the involvement of civil society, businesses and other actors, and Governments have a special responsibility to play in this equation. The Committee of Experts on Public Administration therefore welcomes the decision to focus the 2020 high-level political forum on sustainable development on the theme "Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development". It shows that public administration and governance are rightfully taking centre stage with regard to sustainable development.

The present paper explores what the term "accelerated action" in the above-mentioned theme implies for public administration and governance reforms aimed at speeding up the implementation and review of the Sustainable Development Goals. In the paper, links are made between past and present governance failures and solutions that have proven successful. The paper includes suggestions for concrete actions on several governance challenges. The focus is not only on "incremental" reforms that target long-term, cumulative results but also on "fast-track" reform initiatives based on innovative breakthroughs. Often, long-term transformational change requires agile interventions, in particular at those junctures where the cumulative efforts need a boost. Optimizing efforts in the last decade of action to realize the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development requires a careful balancing of short-term urgencies and long-term pathways.

The paper also includes a discussion on matters such as empowerment through legislative reform and collaborative models of governance; access to quality public services with a focus on education; the promotion of transparency and accountability; the balancing of long-term needs with short-term urgencies; resource mobilization for the achievement of strategic, institutional and policy goals; and real-time actions at the local and community levels.

With these objectives, the paper places specific emphasis on fragile and conflict-affected States, in particular regarding corruption, the lack of access to justice, and conflict-affected institutions. Previous reflections on key levers in such contexts have included improving accountability mechanisms by increasing public affairs and financial literacy, citizen participation in budget-related matters, strengthening the role of oversight institutions, in particular with regard to procurement, and a focus on human security taking into account three freedoms: freedom from want, indignity and fear.

I. Key accelerated actions and transformative pathways for the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals: institutional aspects and interlinkages

1.   With the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, States members of the United Nations agreed upon a common mission to leave no one behind. Having such a shared mission is a significant achievement on its own, but transforming it into concrete action has yet to materialize. Mission-oriented public sector reform is only beginning to take shape five years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda. The tremendous governance challenges we are confronting today are largely the upshots of what has gone wrong in the first place, which is that there remains myriads of obstacles within the public administrations of many countries, despite the hard work of public officials and civil servants.

2.   These obstacles consist of specific policy and broader governance failures. Sometimes, a perceived policy failure may be a governance failure at root, as when cumbersome bureaucratic procedures, a lack of transparency, subpar performance or corruption prevent a policy from delivering its expected outputs or outcomes. The reverse might also be true, as when policy failures are disguised as governance failures, for example, when Governments are criticized for leaving vulnerable groups behind when raising energy prices without compensating the poorest.

3.   It is crucial to understand that innovation and acceleration may produce both success and failure. Accelerating the implementation of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals requires policy and governance innovation, which comes with its embedded and corollary risks. Accepting the need to innovate means being willing to take those risks. It implies accepting the costs of failure and understanding that the costs of not taking such risks and the costs of non-action might be a lot higher. A good example of the success of the trial-and-error approach is the randomized controlled trial conducted by the winners of the 2019 Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel, who used this methodology otherwise reserved for physical sciences to assess the efforts made to assist the poor.

4.   Governance failures are not only contingent upon unpredictable events but often result from a mismatch between a chosen governance design and the problem operating in its context. Other forms of governance failure emerge because of a lack of governance capacity (competences, skills, capabilities) or ineffective management of governance frameworks. Some forms of failure may be more predictable or better manageable than others and different forms of governance reform may fail in different ways or as a result of diverse causes in different contexts. As stated in the *Global Sustainable Development Report 2019: The Future is Now – Science for Achieving Sustainable Development*, many of the sustainable development challenges are so-called wicked problems, involving low factual certainty and values and aims that are defined differently by different stakeholders, making purely fact-based decisions no longer seem possible and challenges appear insurmountable.

5.   Another key reason why government institutions are not able to implement the Sustainable Development Goals at the desired scale and speed is a general undervaluing of the public sector in economic theories of the past decades, which has resulted in smaller but less effective public administration and a disregard for the public value that it may create in terms of, for example, adapting a country's infrastructure to climate-related disasters, creating a fair health system or preserving our natural capital.

6.   Public institutions need to "reclaim their rightful role as servants of the common good. They must think big and play a full part in the great transformations to come …

They must get over the self-fulfilling fear of failure, and realize that experimentation and trial and error (and error and error) are part of the learning process. With confidence and responsibility, they can expect success, and in so doing will recruit and retain top-quality employees".[1] In this sense, learning is not entirely different from strategizing, which can be viewed as a continuous process of learning. The acceleration of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals will benefit from a switch from a public strategy approach based on planning and design to one based on learning by doing.[2]

7. Combating corruption is a precondition of effective governance for accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Every administration must be vigilant towards the risk and reality of corruption and conflicts of interest in public life, given the corrosive effect on public trust in governance and the detrimental economic impact. Corruption raises costs, distorts decisions, misallocates resources and discourages enterprise and investment through its unpredictability; it is linked to overspending, fiscal deficits, undercollection of taxes, underabsorption of funds, gender inequality and discrimination against minorities and other vulnerable groups in access to positions of power and a brain drain from the economy.[3]

8. A signification portion of basic government action is not about innovation or change, let alone about disruptive innovation, but rather about stability and reliability. It is about ensuring the delivery of protection and services to citizens by providing, inter alia, evidence-based and adequate legal and policy frameworks. Where to focus the development of capacity for change depends on the existing quality and performance of public administration and governance in a given institutional setting. In some institutional settings, it may be appropriate to involve only a small percentage of the public service workforce directly in the transformational activities; in others, numbers could be greater or more dispersed. The following approaches could be used to determine public sector reform priorities towards capacity development for accelerating the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

9. First, priorities could be based on an assessment of the relative importance of each of the four "levers" identified in the *Global Sustainable Development Report 2019* for accelerating progress: governance; economy and finance; individual and collective action; and science and technology. Second, the six "entry points" of transformation described in the report could be considered: human well-being and capabilities; sustainable and just economies; food systems and nutrition patterns; energy decarbonization and universal access to energy; urban and peri-urban development; and global environmental commons. Third, the ten cross-cutting areas for action identified in the political declaration of the high-level political forum on sustainable development convened under the auspices of the General Assembly (see Assembly resolution 74/4) could also be considered: leaving no one behind; mobilizing adequate and well-directed financing; enhancing national implementation; strengthening institutions for more integrated solutions; bolstering local action to accelerate implementation; reducing disaster risk and building resilience; solving challenges through international cooperation and enhancing the global partnership; harnessing science, technology and innovation with a greater focus on digital transformation for sustainable development; investing in data and statistics for the Sustainable Development Goals; and strengthening the high-level political forum.

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[1] Mariana Mazzucato, *The Value of Everything: Making and Taking in the Global Economy* (New York, Hachette Book Group, 2018).

[2] See Henry Mintzberg, Bruce Ahlstrand and Joseph Lampel, *Strategy Safari: A Guided Tour Through the Wilds of Strategic Management* (New York, Free Press, 1998).

[3] European Commission, "Quality of public administration: a toolbox for practitioners", August 2017.

10.   In tandem with these levers, entry points and areas for action, the principles of effective governance of sustainable development formulated by the Committee of Experts on Public Administration and endorsed by the Economic and Social Council can prove useful in determining priorities in fast reform for accelerated action and in cumulative and transformative pathways for sustainable development. For example, the principles could provide a control system, in particular for contexts in which governance deficits have been noted, to encourage Governments and other governance actors to better integrate the Sustainable Development Goals into their developmental plans and projects, thereby creating a system of small-scale evaluations and possible interventions where and when governance alerts are raised.

Specific focus on fragile and conflict-affected contexts[4]

11.   Despite the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and progress achieved towards several Sustainable Development Goals, the past ten years have witnessed a sharp deterioration in peaceful conditions, in particular in the global South. Achieving the Goals in fragile and conflict-affected settings continues to receive insufficient attention, and many indicators related to Goal 16 may actually obscure the impact of other areas covered under the Goals, such as employment, if not framed within a wider discourse of sustainable peace. Moreover, action towards the implementation of Goal 16 needs to be further contextualized. For example, the establishment of just and positive peace entailing not just the absence of structural violence but the integration of human society should be upheld as opposed to a positivist peace based on engineering quick fixes to conflict in order to achieve short-term gains on the delivery of the Goals.

12.   Wider and long-term goals related to the contextualization of Goal 16 may require emphasis to be put on "gateway" targets for the achievement of all other targets in fragile and conflict-affected settings. Some of these gateway targets include target 16.3 on the promotion of the rule of law, target 16.6 on effective, accountable and transparent institutions, target 16.7 on ensuring inclusive and participatory decision-making at all levels, and target 16.a. on strengthening relevant national institutions, including through international cooperation, for building capacity at all levels.

13.   Conflicts across the world tend to be largely related to a lack of political and economic inclusiveness, as well as to ethnic, religious and geographical marginalization. International development practice has repeatedly shown that such conditions become breeding grounds for conflict and for the internationalization of internal conflicts. Ruling elites must understand the urgency and the range of reforms needed to avoid violence and State collapse.

14.   Promoting political inclusiveness is possible but often benefits from incremental approaches to setting transformative pathways for sustainable development. International practice has shown that reforms that tend to be successful, for example, in improving inclusiveness within the civil service or in reducing the wage bill in States with constrained financial capacities, are reforms that are focused on the medium to long term, such as on the promotion of voluntary departures or retirement without replacement.

15.   Political and institutional inclusiveness without clear fiscal frameworks risks overburdening economically constrained States. Recruitment, which can play a largely positive role in the promotion of political consensus and inclusiveness, needs to balance between meritocracy, quotas and existing fiscal capacity and financial resources. Also important for political inclusion is the enabling role of information

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[4] See also E/C.16/2020/5.

and communications technologies. Least developed countries, especially in Africa, have embryonic levels of information and communications technology, at best. In such cases, there is an urgent need to accelerate the digitalization of procedures, in particular for elections, and to make procedures more transparent. The digital divide reaches significant levels in the Latin American and Caribbean region. This is a problem that must be addressed urgently.

16. Funding for technical equipment and support for managing vast amounts of data related to electoral processes, ranging from voter registration to counting and results, could enable big leaps forward in terms of accelerating the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and setting the pathways for long-term transformation. Such incentives could also help to achieve peace and stability, which is a precondition for achieving all the Goals by 2030.

Specific focus on linkages between the environment, energy and peace

17. The effects of environmental degradation on international peace remain understudied. This major challenge has already exacerbated conflicts related to resource scarcity in fragile contexts. It has rendered conflict recurrence even more likely, for example in the Arab region, and it is accelerating the pace of climate-related displacements across the world. Current deadlocks in climate negotiations should be related to deadlocks faced in building and maintaining peace and to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16 and other Goals.

18. Related to the scarcity of linkages between the environment and peace, the lack of adequate international policy mechanisms that support energy transition, especially in regions that are extremely vulnerable to climate change, is another area of concern. In order to promote a smooth transition towards a low-carbon economy, the harmonization of public policy with energy transition objectives is vital. These policies will gain in efficiency by prioritizing projects that emphasize the conversion of key economic sectors towards sustainability and promoting equitable sharing of the benefits and costs of the energy transition.

19. Readying human resources to meet new skill sets associated with the energy transition through training and new competency-based recruitment is necessary, not least to adapt public administrations to the structural changes induced by the transition towards a low-carbon economy. In this regard, it can be helpful to incorporate training programmes for green jobs into educational curricula. Promoting North-South and South-South cooperation is another lever that could serve to strengthen capabilities in the field of renewable energy and energy efficiency. South-South partnerships need to be encouraged to enable experience sharing and pooling of expertise between scientific and innovation research centres and to promote appropriate technological solutions at an affordable cost.

II. Key accelerated actions and transformative pathways for the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals: catalysts and enablers

20. Promoting the accelerated actions and transformational pathways related to the Sustainable Development Goals requires readiness on many fronts in public institutions. First, accepting and internalizing the fact that effective governance requires adaptation to its specific context would be a significant step forward. Second, context is not detached from values and belief systems, including those associated with different public administration models. Are policymakers stimulated to think outside the box? Are career systems rewarding or punishing officials for innovative

approaches? These questions are essential. Third, the speed at which reform is conducted should be considered, as there is often a correlation between the speed and the quality of the reform. For example, the pace at which routine collaboration among levels of administration is conducted is slow, but efforts to speed up decision-making processes for the implementation of the Goals should not be made at the expense of strategic foresight, backcasting or impact analysis.

21.   It is thus important, first, to adopt a broad definition of governance, which is about how public administrations and relevant stakeholders develop solutions and opportunities in the face of societal challenges, including steering, incentivizing and collaborating within the larger framework of the rule of law. It is also crucial to weigh the soundness against the completeness of policies and to pit their flexibility against their stability and predictability. One pivotal issue is to accelerate urgent actions through real-time multilevel governance and with an eye to enduring structural transformation.

22.   It is also paramount to be cognizant of the size of the gap between the what and the how questions and the extent to which it differs across countries and through time. Some countries have well-functioning and flexible public administrations while others have not yet reached that level and work in silos. Still others have malfunctioning and/or fragile administrations. In addition, many countries may have a well-functioning public administration in planning, for example, but not in other arenas, such as implementation. Others that have transformed their public administration into lean and efficient operations may have caused conditions that chip away at their overall effectiveness.

23.   While there is no single answer to the "how" challenge, one should recognize that there may be different starting points, distinct trajectories, multiple aspirations and equally legitimate but significantly diverse end points pursued by public administrations across the world. Nevertheless, some recommendations could apply to all public administrations: first, implementing the aforementioned principles of effective governance for sustainable development formulated by the Committee and endorsed by the Economic and Social Council in 2018; second, providing training for public officials on how to accelerate transformation towards sustainable development; and third, integrating studies on transformational capacity and capability into the curricula of schools of public administration.

24.   Regarding training and school curricula, there is a need for a new public servant profile based on strengthened criteria for empathy and honesty, social sensitivity, responsibility and innovation. In general, it should be understood that new approaches have arisen around the design of public sector employment systems and public service careers. For example, there are those, especially among millennials, who are not necessarily interested in lifetime employment. Also important are the emerging trends, such as teleworking, machine learning and others, that undoubtedly influence the way in which public sector workforce employment is organized today.

25.   Structured peer learning among countries is a successful and cost-effective tool to speed up the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, as experiences in several regions have shown. Examples of good practices include the African Peer Review Mechanism and the European Union Environmental Implementation Review peer-to-peer programme. Peer exchange projects can be short, such as expert missions, study visits and small workshops, or longer, such as twinning projects. They should be organized in such a way as to ensure follow-up. Other organizational measures to accelerate implementation include establishing task forces with participants from different departments, establishing joint administrative-business-civil society task forces, promoting hotspots of innovation and multi-Goal focused international conferences bringing together experts and representatives of

Governments and other organizations working on different areas covered under the Goals.

26.   Several other enablers and catalysts of accelerated action and transformative pathways for the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals include elements of reform of public administration and governance, such as public-private partnerships, electronic and open government, inclusive service delivery, training, public sector ethics, transparency and innovation. The concept of open government, for example, is based on the principle of access to public information and the possibility to reuse such information collaboratively to improve public services and procedures. In other words, it gives people greater control over governance-related matters. It can also reinforce integrity, efficiency in resource management, the rule of law and accountability, and facilitate the creation of public value and the redistribution of wealth, as well as inclusive public policies.

III.   Ensuring that no one is left behind through action at the global, regional and national levels

27.   Both public services and public management oblige public institutions to design agile mechanisms to enable people to engage while fully respecting their dignity on the basis of the principles of effective governance. Today, one can talk about a fundamental right to good governance determined by public interest and concerns such as equality, objectivity, efficiency, evaluation, ethics, transparency, participation, the rule of law, due process and privacy protection.

28.   Accelerating action to ensure that no one is left behind will require, at the global level, political efforts to break down the political and administrative silos within international policy action, development aid and peacebuilding, and to reinforce existing multilateral and regional political and economic mechanisms that are conducive to the building of political momentum for dispute settlement and conflict resolution.

29.   Many opportunities exist for policy action at the regional and national levels as well. Since State capacities and human capacities at all levels can have a significant impact on leaving no one behind, networks of schools of public administration and other networks can act as levers for effectiveness and participatory decision-making. Such networks could thus benefit from support and strengthening, in particular in regions where such initiatives are undermined owing to conflicts and restricted resources. They could also be useful in developed country settings facing different governance challenges. In France, an open centre for citizen participation was established by the interministerial office for public transformation, which provides guidance and expertise to both government officials and civil servants on how to include citizens in public policy and involve them in matters that affect their lives.

30.   At subnational levels, leaving no one behind can be promoted through decentralization, local development and increased resource transfers to local areas. It will often require avoiding top-down approaches to local development and establishing focal points within communities to assess the extent of possible decentralization, value optimization and the impact of resource transfers from the national to the local level. It might also require due recognition of informal institutions and practices, as in the sector of security and justice, for example, where home-grown conflict resolution mechanisms described in the expert paper prepared for the nineteenth session of the Committee on re-establishing credible governance and public administration institutions and systems after conflict (E/C.16/2020/5) can be instrumental in leaving no one behind at the community level.

31.   Empowerment at the local level and its diversification are pivotal to ensuring that no one is left behind in sustainable development efforts. Diversifying empowerment entails finding different ways of building the capacities of local players. In most developing countries, empowerment has consisted of institutional capacity-building, while citizens have been largely left out. In most cases, only palliative methods of engagement have been practiced without informing people of the issues at stake. To ensure inclusive development and to make sure that everyone benefits from such efforts, people at the local level must know their rights and responsibilities. They should be able to articulate their case and assess solutions offered to them by the local authorities.

32.   Such empowerment at the subnational levels entails localization of the Sustainable Development Goals and resource mobilization to address local problems. This does not relate to financial resources only but also entails human, material and technical resources. Governments need to strengthen the involvement of all local stakeholders who are committed to these localization efforts. While national and local governments hold primary responsibility for delivering services, the private sector, communities and civil society also play key roles in shaping demand and policies, as well as in delivering services. This is particularly relevant in areas where national or local governments lack the capacity or the will to provide services. Communities can provide some services for themselves, which would enable the governments to focus on policy, strategy and monitoring and evaluation, and at the same time contribute to the principle of subsidiarity.

IV.   Successes and lessons learned on accelerated actions and transformative pathways: examples from practice

Public procurement

33.   One transformative policy area that is repeatedly being identified as a lever for strengthening the rule of law, efficiency, competitiveness, efforts to combat corruption, participatory decision-making, State capacities at all levels and transparency is public procurement, and more specifically sustainable public procurement.

34.   Sustainable public procurement is at the heart of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Adopting sustainable public procurement frameworks can generate new business models, in particular for small and medium-sized enterprises, creating job opportunities and contributing to decreasing poverty (Goal 1) and stimulating inclusive growth (Goal 8). Public procurement is also key in promoting gender-responsive public services (Goal 5). One key lesson comes from ChileCompra, a recipient of the 2019 United Nations Public Service Award, whose public procurement practices proved to accelerate the participation of women in the public marketplace and helped to promote small and medium-sized enterprises owned by women, thereby achieving progress on several Goal targets simultaneously.

35.   E-procurement has also proven to be a transformative tool for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goal 16, by facilitating data capture, analysis, visualization, reporting and free access to data and performance-based audits, thereby fostering transparency, promoting accountability and enhancing trust in government. These elements have had a significant impact on the ease of doing business and attracting investments. For example, following the establishment by the Government of Ukraine of the online platform ProZorro, the volume of the public procurement market grew by 17 per cent (up to $10.4 billion)

from 2015 to 2016.[5] Tunisia was also able to create businesses opportunities for 3,000 beneficiaries across the country in 2017 alone through its e-procurement platform known as the "Tunisia online e-procurement system" (TUNEPS).

36. The optimization of public procurement, including e-procurement, cannot be solely concerned with ensuring value for money or cost optimization. This is especially true for fragile and conflict-affected settings. Sustainable public procurement will thus have to be included holistically and within a larger perspective of geographical and social inclusion, the financing of development in underdeveloped national and subnational economic sectors and the promotion of small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as ecosystem management, all with a focus on innovation.

Sustainable budgeting

37. Another transformative pathway to sustainable development concerns budgeting. Progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals relies not only on countries' ability to mobilize diverse resources but also on their capacity to mobilize public spending in relevant sectors, in particular health, education and infrastructure, on the basis of needs and performance assessments. As demonstrated in the expert paper prepared for the nineteenth session of the Committee on emerging issues in public financial management and budgeting for the Goals (E/C.16/2020/6), national budgets constitute a powerful starting point for linking revenue collection and the allocation of resources with the Goals.

38. Integrating the Sustainable Development Goals into budgeting may benefit from a shift towards performance-based budgeting, in particular since traditional budget structures or line-item budgets may thwart, or at least not encourage, efforts to implement the Goals. The use of line-item budgeting does not secure fiscal sustainability, as it only indicates what is being purchased, with little indication of the value for money, financial performance and the link between policy and outputs. Outcome-based budgeting could emphasize the economic and social impact of spending-related efforts to reduce inequalities (Goal 10), achieve gender equality (Goal 5), ensure children protection and human rights (Goal 16) and address other areas covered under the Goals.

39. Tying budgets to programmes or performance indicators helps to assess whether public resources have been effectively allocated and whether the Government's targets and objectives have been met. Sustainable budgeting can thus act as a lever for domestic resource mobilization while reducing reliance on development aid. Budgeting for the Sustainable Development Goals with clear linkages to specific Goals and targets can enable society to take a step further in integrating the 2030 Agenda into national and subnational budgets.

40. Many countries have already linked their budgets to sectoral objectives related to the Sustainable Development Goals. One example is progress towards achieving gender equality (Goal 5) through gender-responsive budgeting or tackling climate change (Goal 13) through climate-responsive budgeting. The progress made notwithstanding, efforts need to be multiplied to further link budgeting with the Goals. In Morocco, gender-responsive budgeting was aligned with a budgetary reform designed to shift public budgeting from input-based formats and processes towards a results-driven system. The fact that gender equality in the country improved, in particular in the education (Goal 4), health (Goal 3) and employment (Goal 8) sectors, is telling.

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[5] Arthur Kovalchuk, Charles Kenny and Mallika Snyder, "Examining the impact of e-procurement in Ukraine", Working Paper, No. 511 (Washington, D.C., Center for Global Development, 2019).

New uses of tax data

41.   Countries require information and evidence to track progress on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and to identify the outcomes and impact of their policies and strategies related to the Sustainable Development Goals. Technological leaps and the move towards e-government have improved data collection, storage, analysis and dissemination. That said, new and more diverse sources of data and approaches to analytics need to be applied in support of the 2030 Agenda. Digitization, e-government and open data have increasingly altered the landscape of tax administrations. Governments now own a voluminous and diversified database concerning individuals and households, including financial, demographic, spending, purchase and other types of information.

42.   Tax data can provide insights on taxpayers' behaviours and could be used as input for creating and measuring different indicators that are directly or indirectly related to the Sustainable Development Goals and their targets. Such input could subsequently serve in Goal-driven policy formulation, implementation and assessment. It is highly recommended that Governments begin considering tax data to inform analyses on a wide range of social and economic issues, using the data as input for sustainable development policies and actions.

43.   Some examples of cross-cutting usage of tax data for purposes related to the Sustainable Development Goals include linking records related to income, employment and gender with inequality assessments, thereby informing policies related to Goal 10 on reducing inequalities and Goal 5 on gender equality and the empowerment of women; using social security and insurance information retrieved from tax records for evaluating health-care systems and making policies related to Goal 3; and integrating data on wages, tax payments, employment status and residency into labour market and employment analyses to gauge progress related to Goal 8 on growth, employment and decent work.

Artificial intelligence

44.   Artificial intelligence can be a powerful means to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and to monitor progress pertaining to each and all of the Sustainable Development Goal. For example, for Goal 3 on health and well-being, artificial intelligence can be effective in supporting medical diagnoses and prognostics and in devising new prevention and treatment methods based on the analysis of heterogenous large-scale biological datasets and clinical outcomes. In many cases, artificial intelligence is used to monitor, track and predict outbreaks of communicable diseases. Algorithms can identify children most at risk of not receiving vaccinations, thereby allowing medical personnel to promote awareness and follow-up with families more consistently. At the same time, one should be cautious about the possible side effects, unintended consequences and externalities. Threats to data protection and privacy and social discrimination based on gender, race, income or ethnicity should not be perpetuated, and algorithms should be adjusted to the contextual realities and specific Sustainable Development Goal aspirations on the basis of the principles of effective governance for sustainable development.

45.   Artificial intelligence can also be useful for the achievement of Goal 16, such as facilitating interactions between Governments and citizens using automated questions and answers or providing public services through digital channels. The *Artificial Intelligence Index Report 2019* cites several examples, such as helping individuals verify and validate information, providing improved security through the detection and prediction of violence, addressing bias to ensure fair and equal access to justice and optimizing the management of public and social sector institutions. Artificial intelligence can help to automate repetitive tasks such as the processing of

different claims and can be instrumental in detecting fraud, financial crime or identity theft. That said, the analytic prowess, scalability and convenience provided by artificial intelligence must be weighed against its possible downsides of loss of human oversight and accountability.

46. While the use of artificial intelligence can be topically aligned with a view to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, focus should be directed towards key levers that can accelerate action for the achievement of several targets and indicators. An efficient mapping of the use of artificial intelligence could contribute to identifying which targets could be addressed through an artificial intelligence-related solution, while recognizing that artificial intelligence alone cannot solve all issues raised through these targets and indicators. A prime example is the application of artificial intelligence in disaster relief, employed by several Governments and technology-driven organizations across the world. The artificial intelligence for digital response platform of Qatar, for example, is a free and open-source software that automatically collects and classifies social media feeds during humanitarian crises. The free open-source software of Sri Lanka called Sahana automatically collates and calculates data from various applications to provide real-time needs assessments.[6] Nevertheless, the widespread use of artificial intelligence in disaster relief by multiple partners and across regions is still in its infancy.

47. Many challenges need to be addressed for artificial intelligence to achieve its full potential as an enabler of social development, including challenges related to data availability, accessibility, quality, volume, labelling and integration, computing capacity, artificial intelligence-related skill sets, the capacity of State institutions to acquire and deploy artificial intelligence, the receptivity of leadership and malignant use. Other challenges that would need to be addressed are the potential impact of artificial intelligence on fairness and equity and human rights. The societal threats and opportunities related to artificial intelligence have yet to be fully explored for purposes of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

V. Areas in which guidance by the high-level political forum on sustainable development could be sought

48. The high-level political forum on sustainable development could provide guidance to accelerate the adoption and the progressive integration of peacebuilding frameworks into policy action geared towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Such guidance could take into account the impending and lingering challenges in fragile and conflict-affected settings, harnessing synergies between sustainable peace and sustainable development, in particular with regard to the peaceful settlement of disputes through international and national conflict mediation and resolution mechanisms, the resumption of public services and capacity development at all levels based on the Committee's principles of effective governance for sustainable development.

49. Concerning the resumption of public services, the political guidance of the high-level political forum on sustainable development could help to clarify the often contradictory approaches concerning the role of the State. The traditional welfare State has led to bloated and unsustainable debts while austerity has created unprecedented poverty, soaring inequalities and shattered social capital. Guidance would thus be beneficial regarding the development of smart sustainability

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[6] See United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "E-resilience through e-government: global and regional perspectives", in *United Nations E-Government Survey 2018: Gearing E-Government to Support Transformation Towards Sustainable and Resilient Societies* (United Nations publications, Sales No. E.16.II.H.2).

governance frameworks that are country- and context-specific and based on Governments and all relevant governance stakeholders being co-producers of public value, and the development of economic markets working for the people and the planet.

50.   Discrimination against communities and peoples perceived to be in opposition to ruling Governments can occur in the distribution of State resources and in employment, as a result of which these people are left behind. Political discrimination, coupled with blatant corruption, is deepening exclusivity and imbalance in development. Therefore, strong political guidance is needed from the high-level political forum on sustainable development to review and monitor Governments not only regarding the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals but also concerning their adherence to the principles of effective governance of sustainable development, including non-discrimination.

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