The Senior Officials from Centres of Government

SUMMARY

Steering and Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals

35th meeting of Senior Officials from Centres of Government
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The 2016 Centres of Government meeting explored the ways that countries are getting organised to implement the SDGs in practice. Now that the political commitment has been made, countries need to find practical mechanisms to steer implementation of the 17 SDG Goals and 169 targets. The SDGs present a significant governance challenge. Countries need to align policies across sectors and engage with an unprecedented range of public and private actors. This meeting offered an opportunity for senior policymakers at the centre of government to discuss the challenges they face and the progress that they have made. By looking at the challenges of specific goals, the meeting aimed to look beyond the high level pronouncements to identify the real-life challenges and opportunities that the SDGs represent.

To offer a snapshot of progress so far, the 2016 Centres of Government Network survey examined the opportunities and challenges from the perspective of the centre of government. It showed that adapting global targets to national contexts is a political task that requires careful and sensitive negotiation to ensure an inclusive process with real buy-in. The centre of government has an important role to play in navigating the political-administrative interface, supporting policy co-ordination, and localising the SDGs.

**2016 Centres of Government Survey**
The meeting allowed countries to share how they are getting organised to deliver on the Goals, and, in particular, to align policies in practice given the breadth and complexity of the SDGs. The break-out sessions focused on selected horizontal issues, including sustainable production and consumption, the integration of migrants, integrity and anti-corruption, and gender equality. The final session explored the practical ways in which countries are ensuring coherence between measures and policies for achieving the SDGs and the allocation of resources. Participants were invited to discuss how centres of government can draw on their unique assets to drive this kind of ambitious agenda.

The experiences demonstrated the level of ambition and, with it, the challenges of implementing the SDGs. Almost all participants noted that they had an implementation strategy for the SDGs, although there was significant variation in how these strategies are designed and implemented. Countries have chosen different paths in co-ordinating the SDGs: leadership by the CoG; permanent ministerial and inter-ministerial groups; the establishment of strategy units, or the adaptation of existing institutions, staff or resources to the SDGs. Others are still reflecting on whether to create an overarching framework for already existing strategic objectives. In many cases, the centre of government is also co-ordinating with the subnational level, especially cities. Many participants outlined co-ordination mechanisms or arrangements that have been made with non-governmental organisations, including the private sector.

Participants stressed that the SDGs can help provide incentives to break down silos and work horizontally. The SDGs can also provide another set of incentives to tackle systemic risks and solutions rather than focusing only on daily and immediate crises. Finally, the SDGs were also characterised as representing a shift away from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as a universal agenda, towards one that enabled countries to ‘hold a mirror to themselves’. At the same time, many of the interventions highlighted the need to ensure that implementation strategies take into account the specific country context, including how the political and administrative interface operates.
In the session on **sustainable production and consumption**, participants discussed the importance of building partnerships (in line with Goal 17), including with business. One of the key challenges is that the transition from a linear to a circular economy requires significant engagement from a large number of stakeholders, including in the development of technologies and new production methods. Many countries have strategies in place but these vary in their level of ambition. The centre of government can support change by encouraging partnerships and ensuring that critical areas such as public procurement are in line with the objectives of a circular economy.

In the session on **migration**, participants discussed the opportunities presented by the SDGs for shaping migration policies - taking into account the multiple dimensions of the issue (trafficking, border control and integration) and the long-term nature of the solutions. SDGs can also help focus attention on the root causes of migration. Participants noted that the centre of government plays an active role, since migration has become a ‘crisis management issue’, but stressed that the centre should also help develop a longer-term focus and better co-ordination across ministries – e.g. labour, education and housing ministries for integration; development agencies to address the root causes; and interior and justice ministries. The centre of government can also help identify and meet ministries’ capacity needs for dealing with crises, for example by bringing capacity in from other agencies. Active assistance for managing expectations and providing better evidence including on the local dimension to the integration of migrants are also seen as key tasks of the centre.

In the session on **integrity and anti-corruption**, participants discussed the importance of using data to both identify challenges and increase transparency. There was wide acknowledgement of the paradox that increasing transparency can reduce trust in the short-term, as well as of the need to reduce this risk by reaching out beyond central government to a broader community. The SDGs can bring fresh momentum to this discussion by highlighting the multi-faceted nature of integrity, and making the connections between the domestic and international agendas. They can also be a means for engaging civil society on this issue. The centres of government can play a critical role in supporting legislation, audit as well as evidence to support leadership on integrity and anti-corruption.

In the session on **gender equality**, participants discussed the high level of expectations from citizens, including in countries that are highly ranked in this area. SDGs were seen to strengthen the incentives to reform policies and strategies to support gender equality, including through the use of gender-disaggregated data. Participants discussed the role of the centre in promoting gender equality as a cross-cutting policy along with supporting the leadership in setting the example or in communicating gender equality as an economic imperative. Collecting robust data was underlined as a priority.

In all discussions, the importance of evidence was a recurring theme, including the need to localise national averages of well-being as they hide significant disparities. Many countries have boosted their national statistical office’s capacity and undertaken a gap analysis of evidence needed to implement the SDGs, both at national and local level. Participants also discussed the importance of focusing on the global impact of national policies.

In the final session, participants focused on how to integrate the SDGs into the budget process, aligning performance information and targets to the Goals. The discussion touched upon the need to raise the resources required (an incremental 1.5-2.5% of world GDP each year, according to the United Nations), but also to ensure that these resources are used with maximum impact. The centre of government has a role to play in the performance budgeting process, given the inter-dependence of the budget process and the achievement of government-wide policies. Issues raised included the extent to which the SDGs should
be translated into the key national indicators framework that anchors the performance system within
government. Some participants cautioned against the SDGs becoming a ‘performance orphan’,
unconnected to existing budget processes. Others focused on the need to be creative in using the budget
process in an era of budget austerity. Some countries have used the SDGs to help define their multi-
annual performance frameworks, whilst others see the SDGs as already reflected in their government
priorities.

In summing up, members reflected on the results of the CoG Survey and the issues brought up in the
background session notes. In particular, they noted:

- The breadth, complexity and long-term nature of the SDGs means aligning policies in practice is
  essential to achieving them.
- Institutional mechanisms are in place to support the SDGs but differ significantly among
countries.
- The centres of government recognise that the SDGs are both a governance challenge and an
  opportunity.
- The SDGs are also a multi-level governance challenge, and better data is needed. The wellbeing
dimension is key to achieving the SDGs, particularly at local level.

In light of the general interest in how the centre drives implementation of the Sustainable Development
Goals, the OECD proposed a number of next steps for interested countries, including:

- Build on the 2016 CoG Survey with additional case studies to deepen our understanding and
  analysis of the role of the centre of government in monitoring the SDG process, managing trade-
offs among the SDGs, integrating the SDGs into the budget process, and supporting the
  engagement of a broad set of stakeholders.
- Use the conclusions from the CoG network meeting, the survey and additional case studies to
  inform OECD work on the Sustainable Development Goals, including the OECD Action Plan on the
  SDGs and work on regional well-being. The results will be disseminated to OECD networks such as
  the Senior Budget Officials meeting.
- Support interested countries in their presentations to the United Nations High-Level Political
  Forum in July 2017 convened under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council.