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# A “Power Package” to Enhance Quality Public Administration and Governance



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## STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- A good way to power up public administration and governance would be to make SDG targets 16.6 on public institutions and 17.14 on policy coherence for sustainable development the heart of a power package that could include a rolling action plan.
- The SDG Action plan of Cyprus will have a PCSD-based governance part and is designed as a rolling plan.
- It would be great if countries and subnational governments could include an action plan to boost public administration effectiveness in their SDG reporting contained in VNRs and VLRs to be presented at the HLPF in 2024.

By *Louis Meuleman*

With the huge challenge for public institutions to steer towards sustainability in a world characterised by multiple crises, the quality of public administration and governance (PAG) is higher on the political agenda than ever. After decades of relative neglect, countries have realized that sustainable development can only be achieved with strong, effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels. Well-formulated Goals and policy targets will only go so far if governance systems are inadequate.

The High Impact Initiative on building public sector capabilities for the future (FutureGov), [launched by the UN Secretary-General](#) in September 2023, is designed to support countries on their path to strengthening public institutions to accelerate implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The good news is that dedicated targets on institutions and governance are already included in the 2030 Agenda. They just need to be dusted off and put to work.

**Combining targets 16.6 and 17.14 into a power package for public administration and governance**

A good way to power up public administration and governance would be to make SDG targets 16.6 on public institutions and 17.14 on policy coherence for sustainable development the heart of a power package that could include a rolling action plan. These targets are often treated separately, to the extent they are considered at all. Together they can steer the quality of public administration and governance towards not just more efficiency but also greater effectiveness (reaching clear objectives), accountability (broadly speaking, not only involving Parliaments and oversight bodies), and inclusiveness (beyond the ‘usual’ stakeholders). Rolling action plans could focus on the next three to five years, with a concrete and budgeted plan for the first year, which could go some way towards countering short-termism.

The power package for PAG can build on existing frameworks, such as the set of 11 [principles of effective governance for sustainable development](#) which were developed by the UN Committee of Experts on Public Administration and endorsed by the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in 2018. It can also benefit from the work undertaken by the UN Environment Programme ([UNEP](#)) and the Organisation for Economic

Co-operation and Development ([OECD](#)) on measures of policy coherence for sustainable development (PCSD) – a key governance framework for action across eight domains that comes with a self-assessment tool to measure progress. PCSD is therefore both about capacity building and about tracking progress on public administration and governance quality through SDG indicator 17.14.1. The application of the PCSD framework should itself be done in an accountable and inclusive manner, and a [protocol](#) has been proposed to ensure this for the self-assessment tool. A growing number of countries are preparing or have recently adopted PCSD action plans. These are not yet rolling plans, but the SDG Action plan of Cyprus will have a PCSD-based governance part and is designed as a rolling plan.

Both the UN governance principles and the PCSD framework draw attention to the role of multilevel governance (MLG) in achieving the SDGs, which should become more dynamic and collaborative to deal, in [‘real time’](#), with the current complex and unpredictable world which seems dominated by cascading crises and shifting some governments towards a permanent crisis mode.

Apart from an action plan (at each level of government), management of the PAG power package would also require peer learning among administrations to accelerate progress. As an excellent example, Italy has recently attached a [PCSD Action Plan](#) to its newly established Sustainable Development Strategy.

The power package would also integrate or refer to actions undertaken on related SDG targets, such as on SDG target 16.3 on the rule of law and equal access to justice, 16.5 on corruption, 16.7 on responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision making, 16.10 on public access to information, 17.16 on multi-stakeholder partnerships, and 17.19 on measurements of progress on sustainable development. In addition, the power package could integrate or refer to actions undertaken in relation to SDG 11 targets and target 12.7 on promoting sustainable public procurement practices.

#### **Powering up: From ‘green’ to sustainable public administration**

Under the banner of environmental sustainability, some public authorities have pushed for expanded capacity in green public procurement and environmental taxation. Such activities are often brought together under the term ‘green public administration.’ While they represent an important step towards environmental sustainability (which is significant because this is still a weak aspect in practice), they can leave out the social dimension of sustainable development. The economic dimension is usually addressed with circular economy under green public procurement.

Although ‘green’ may communicate better than ‘sustainability,’ and there may be other good reasons to keep focusing on ‘greening,’ countries have no time to lose in achieving the SDGs, and it would be timely to shift the discourse from ‘green’ to ‘sustainable’ public administration that embraces the social dimension as well.

The European Commission has already integrated the SDGs into their economic governance cycle (the [European Semester](#)), and is recommending that countries shift from taxes based on labor to taxes on energy consumption and pollution. This is a good example of a policy designed to attain environmental and social benefits at the same time. The SDGs are also integrated into the EU’s regulatory impact assessments and evaluations with several EU member States [joining this effort](#). Local voluntary reviews (VLRs) of SDG implementation underline the fact that leaving out the social dimension will frustrate stakeholders, and delay or even block sustainability transitions, including the transition towards a public administration that is fully equipped to deliver the SDGs. A recent good example is [Helsinki’s](#) second VLR, which has a special chapter on ‘people’ that addresses many social issues.

#### **Full speed ahead towards 2024**

To conclude, combining efforts to achieve SDG targets 16.6 and 17.14 can create a power package able to accelerate the achievement of sustainable development in its three dimensions (economic, social, and environmental), as a key quality of public administration. The power package and an accompanying rolling action plan should include effective mechanisms to link different levels of authority (multi-level governance), as well as different and often competing policy areas (multi-sectoral governance) and ensure better inclusion of relevant stakeholders (multi-stakeholder governance).

In addition, it should address skills and mindsets of civil servants. If the working culture is not supportive, nothing works; the quote attributed to Peter Drucker that “culture eats structure for breakfast” is very true for the challenges to making administrations sustainable. It would be great if countries and subnational governments could include an action plan to boost public administration effectiveness in their SDG reporting contained in VNRs and VLRs to be presented at the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in 2024.

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