Background

There is clear awareness that the understanding of institutions is important for delivering on the imperative to leave no one behind. Institutions are essential enablers of inclusiveness, even though not the sole ones. The 2030 Agenda calls for transparent, effective, inclusive and accountable institutions to advance poverty eradication and sustainable development. It aims to ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels, emphasizing the importance of public access to information, protection of fundamental freedoms and the promotion of non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development. Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) do not prescribe institutional models for the national level, but outlines governance principles that institutions should strive to achieve, such as "effectiveness, inclusiveness, and accountability" (SDG 16), responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels" (target 16.7) and "policy coherence" (target 17.14).

Inclusive institutions for sustainable development

Achieving any particular target under the SDGs will require a combination of factors, including: legal, regulatory components; multiple institutions intervening at various levels; and potentially broader societal changes, e.g. in social norms, which themselves can be spurred by changes in institutions. For example, the advancement of gender equality requires a range of actions at all these levels, and the intervention of a range of institutions with different mandates and purposes. Conversely, individual institutions, especially those with broad mandates, can contribute to inclusiveness in many different areas as well as society-wide. It is important to assess both how inclusive institutions are, and whether and how they foster inclusiveness through their actions.

Institutions can trigger behaviors and trends that can have positive or negative impacts for development outcomes, and in particular for inclusiveness. Inclusive institutions bestow equal rights and entitlements and enable equal opportunities, voice and access to resources and services. They can be based on principles of universality (e.g. universal access to justice or services), non-discrimination (e.g. inheritance laws that protect widows' land rights), or targeted action (e.g. affirmative action to increase the proportion of women political representatives). On the other hand, power holders can shape institutions for the benefit of some rather than all groups of society. Institutions that are not inclusive potentially infringe on rights and entitlements, can undermine equal opportunities, voice and access to resources and services and perpetuate economic disadvantage. They can also have a negative impact on access to services, voice in decision-making, and vulnerability to violence and corruption.

Institutions mirror the culture and history of the national contexts from which they emerge and in which they are meant to work. This cultural dimension of institutions means that "best practices" are elusive. The cultural dimension of institution-building and their underlying values have to be taken into account (e.g. by striving for at least a minimum of cultural compatibility during transformations to new and more inclusive institutions), as they can be very resistant to change and not accounting for them can lead to failure in changing institutions.

It is, therefore, important to support drivers of institutional change. Examples used over the world have included facilitation and strengthening of stakeholder feedback mechanisms, review mechanisms, and support to design and implementation of client voice mechanisms (e.g. citizen report cards), as well as promotion of public information disclosure at national and local levels. Large numbers of better educated, and politically and economically aspirational young men and women, effective organisations to represent them, and the middle classes that support more inclusive institutions are all vital. Growing migration and urbanisation offer possibilities for social mobility and stronger voices for inclusive institutional change, but can also increase marginalisation within cities

In this vein, the Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) explores two specific types of institutions: national councils for sustainable development (NCSDs) and national parliaments. These are intended as examples, among the multitude of institutions whose role in promoting inclusiveness is relevant to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

National Councils for Sustainable Development

National Councils on sustainable Development (NCSDs) were first identified as important institutional components in Agenda 21 in 1992. During the past two decades, many countries have experimented with versions of them, with various levels of success. Lessons learned from that phase can be useful for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Research reviewed for the report suggests that, if provided with adequate resources, NCSDs can be effective mechanisms for stakeholder participation and engagement across the whole policy cycle, to: inform and educate the public at large on sustainable development related topics; stimulate informed public debates; engage key stakeholders in formulating policy

recommendations; and involve stakeholders in various parts of implementation and progress reviews.

In practice, governments' attitude regarding stakeholder involvement influences the functioning of NCSDs and the resources provided to them. The composition of NCSDs usually reflects the political system and culture in which they exist. In general, the more the NCSD is dominated by the government, the more it tends to have communication of government policy to various stakeholders as its main role. The more independent the NCSD, the more role it tends to play in the decision-making process.

NCSDs can serve as platforms for dialogue between governments and all relevant stakeholders, in a form that usually encourages open and respectful debate. At the same time, NCSDs and other multi-stakeholder processes can also be dominated by specific interest groups, resulting in lack of accountability and lack of ownership. Potential solutions can include: transparency about roles, rights and responsibilities of participants and managing of expectations of what participation entails; having procedures in place to balance vocal minorities and silent majorities; setting rules for inclusion and exclusion of actors; as well as organizing how to codify agreement.

The mix of experts represented in NCSDs is variable. Participation of senior business leaders with sustainability interests and concerns is found to have worked well in a number of cases. Senior scientists, economists or other intellectuals with good practical experience and networks have provided added value in many cases. Adding an expert-type scientific body can potentially foster a more deliberative setting, rather than the negotiation style often seen in representative bodies.

Regarding oversight of Councils, some researchers see having leadership for sustainable development at the highest level (e.g. directly reporting to Heads of Governments) as the best arrangement in order to foster horizontal coordination within the government. High level representation can help integrate goals and objectives throughout the policy management cycle and among different sectors. In addition, direct linkages between NCSDs and key decision makers have been found to increase the effectiveness of NCSDs.

Parliaments

As legislatives bodies, parliaments are very important for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs. Parliaments execute three basic functions: representation, legislation, and oversight. Parliaments represent their respective constituencies; as part of their legislative duties they debate and approve legislation and they oversee the execution of laws, national policies, and strategic plans. In turn, governments are expected to report back to parliaments, which have at their disposal evaluations and assessments from bodies such as audit institutions. While countries differ in their parliamentary systems, all of them require parliamentary approval for legislation pertaining to the SDGs.

Parliaments constitute an arena in which peoples' representatives can use language both to comment on the nation and try to shape it. Representation of all sections of societies, including vulnerable and marginalized groups, is an important dimension of how parliaments can foster inclusiveness. In turn, like other institutions, Parliaments can directly support or enable inclusive outcomes that advance inclusiveness through their actions, including through passing legislation.

In order to illustrate how parliaments can foster these two dimensions of inclusiveness, this chapter looks at four categories of persons in vulnerable or marginalized situations: women, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, and children and youth. These four groups have received consistent attention from the institutional literature. Research reviewed for the report suggests that progress has been made with respect to the representation of these groups in national parliaments. However, gaps still exist. Similarly, while progress has been made in terms of codifying the rights of marginalized groups, there is still a long way to go in this respect, and parliaments will have a key role to play in ensuring that no one is left behind.

While the chapter focused on four specific groups, other marginalized and vulnerable groups would also deserve attention in the context of more comprehensive review.

Considerations for policy-makers

The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs call for inclusion and participation in the social, political and economic spheres of all societal groups. Chapter 4 examined how two types of institutions - NCSDs and Parliaments –can be active promoters of inclusion.

The review undertaken for this chapter is limited to a certain extent by the lack of empirical data, even though dispersed information does exist and would merit further study. The limited attention given to NCSDs by academia is an example of an area where research could be encouraged.

In order to improve the science-policy interface on institutions for sustainable development, it will be important to collect evidence on other types of institutions and how they can foster inclusiveness, including for different vulnerable or marginalized groups. Conversely, it will be important to collect evidence on what combination of institutions and institutional features are successfully used to address specific goals and targets, including those related to inclusiveness. This should be a critical component of future GSDRs.

More information
The GSDR 2016, its Executive Summary and other related briefs and documents are available on the following website: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/globalsdreport.