



**Division for Sustainable Development Goals, UN DESA
Webinar**

**Integrating the 2030 Agenda into national plans and strategies: Considering COVID-19
response and recovery**

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Key Challenges, Gaps, Policy Messages and Recommendations

Topic 1: National planning – responding to changing circumstances

- ❖ After a period of decline, there has been a significant upswing in the number of countries with national development plans or strategies. Today, more than 130 countries have some form of development plan or strategy, which represents a doubling since 2006.
- ❖ Research suggests a number of drivers behind countries' interest in planning, among them the poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs), implementation and monitoring of the MDGs and SDGs, and NDPs as tools of societal transformation. In some instances, however, the impetus behind planning is inconsistent and not supportive of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.
- ❖ Analyses of the available NDPs show the emergence of a “new development planning”, which is characterized by a bottom-up processes, draws on consultations with a variety of groups in society, and rests on a solid evidence base. A large share (around 40 per cent) of the NDPs have all or more of these characteristics. Other NDPs show a tendency towards top-down processes, predominantly technical analyses developed without broader discussion or consultation with interest groups, disjointed or incoherent blueprint, or a weak evidence base.
- ❖ While it is still too early to draw hard and fast conclusions, but many governments are devoting considerable resources to the planning process. Many, though not all, are making great efforts to implement their plans. There is evidence that most plans do not take gender or inequality seriously, despite SDG5 and SDG10.
- ❖ In the context of response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it remains to be seen how the different planning approaches will fare. Do plans based on consensus building, collaborative rationality, continuous improvement have an advantage over those with a more top-down, technical and prescriptive character?
- ❖ During the post-pandemic period, governments will be under extraordinary economic pressure, and it will be important to retain the balance between the three dimensions of sustainable development.
- ❖ Building consensus and holding meaningful consultations can help ensure the buy-in and effective collaboration that will enhance realization of the SDGs. Time allocated to the development of the plans is crucial to ensure that consultations are meaningful and amount to more than a formality.
- ❖ The COVID-19 crisis presents an opportunity to examine at the effectiveness of national planning. There is also a change in the norms related to planning, with the crisis being national in scope, but still requiring a strong local response. This has brought to light one of the shortcomings of development planning, which is a lack of engagement with the local level of government.
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- ❖ Research suggests that the location of the planning body influences the implementation of the plan. In this regard, one tentative conclusion is that plans, and strategies closely linked to the finance or related ministries experience more uptake, as opposed to alternatives, such as planning entities located in the office of the head of state or government.
- ❖ Capacity for planning covers several aspects. One relates to technical skills, including deploying up-to-date tools and modes that come to grips with the interlinked nature of the SDGs. A second encompasses softer skills, in particular the capacity of government officials to conceive planning as not simply a technical exercise, but also a process that seeks societal consensus around key objectives. A third aspect consists of the marshalling of expertise from different disciplines to guide and advise on integration of the SDGs into national plans.
- ❖ Countries are also making the necessary legislative and regulatory changes to improve the process of planning. This has been coupled with institutional strengthening and capacity building, including access to tools and guidelines to foster policy coherence.
- ❖ Since NDPs and strategies are not self-implementing, there is a need for an institutional structure that translate them into actions. Monitoring, evaluation, and a focus on results are critically important.
- ❖ Experience from the Caribbean suggests that for a plan to shape a common vision, it needs to be informed by a whole-of-society approach. This means that stakeholders from across society need to be heard in the process of formulating the plan, including youth and grassroots organizations.
- ❖ It was emphasized that stakeholder engagement should not be treated as an event – once-off consultation - but instead as a sustained process that informs plan development and continues through the implementation phase.
- ❖ The need to address the relationship between national development planning generally, and immediate COVID-specific responses in particular, was raised during the discussion. How far should long term development plans change in response to the pandemic? One view expressed was that crises like COVID-19 may cause the short-term objectives to be adjusted, but the broad framework of development plans will remain relevant. Overall, the need for a degree of flexibility in the planning process was recognized.
- ❖ There needs to be a continued focus on leaving no one behind during the crisis response and recovery, ensuring that plans remain sensitive to impacts on the most vulnerable and marginalized.

Topic 2: Integration at the country level: good practices and lessons learned, including COVID-19 response measures

- ❖ The voluntary national reviews (VNRs) and other sources provide examples of approaches taken by countries to integrate the 2030 agenda into national plans and strategies. Countries are also integrating regional and continental agendas into their plans, for instance the 2063 Agenda of the African Union.
- ❖ In many instances, the SDG targets and indicators are being addressed through (or have a link with) various policies, projects, and programmes that government is implementing. This can be termed an alignment approach, where the objectives of national policy are consistent with the SDGs.
- ❖ Countries are also taking approaches to integration that go beyond alignment. Among them is Botswana, which has taken a structured approach, which entails a systematic technique to plan for the attainment of specific SDG targets. This involves a methodical process that may necessitate the development or adjustment of policy, programme or projects to integrate and address a specific target. SDG Planning Guidelines have been developed that advocate for the use of a Structured Approach to integrate SDG targets and indicators in policy, planning and financial frameworks. The



Guidelines are currently being piloted in 6 ministries in Botswana. They are perceived to be a tool that has great potential to contribute to acceleration efforts.

- ❖ It is considered that the entity mandated to coordinate SDG implementation has a crucial role to play in ensuring the integration of SDGs in planning and financial instruments in the country. It has to ensure policy coherence and that gaps in terms of capacity, skills and resources for integration of the SDGs are identified and resources provided.
- ❖ Data remains one of the major challenges in a structured approach. The experience in Botswana is such that not many SDG indicators have been used or adopted in planning as they lack baseline data. In this context, number of SDG targets and indicators have been integrated into the current NDP and/or sectoral plans where specific annual targets have been determined. This calls for adequate allocation of resources for data development and related capacities
- ❖ One of the challenges identified was whether, with the advent of COVID-19, national plans and strategies ought now to be focused on addressing short term challenges, with a time horizon of one year, rather than looking at the medium to long term.
- ❖ in a post-COVID world, the state may play a larger role across a number of sectors, following the possibility of changes in the respective roles of government, private sector, and civil society.
- ❖ On gaps, there is a need to make available tools to enhance member States' understanding of the linkages between COVID-19 response and recovery and efforts and the achievement of the SDGs. What are key considerations in factoring COVID-19 into 2030 Agenda based plans and strategies. Pandemic response plans should include provisions to protect the rights and well-being of the most marginalized and those at risk of being left behind.
- ❖ The importance of securing the active participation of CSOs in the integration of 2030 Agenda into national plans and strategies was underlined. More needs to be done to include young people in the process of integrating the 2030 agenda into national plans and strategies.
- ❖ If one of the outcomes of the pandemic is greater recourse to ICTs, for instance in e-government and e-learning, then universal access becomes even more critical than before. In a post-COVID world those without Internet access, older persons, and persons with disabilities may be further disadvantaged.
- ❖ In addition, though the SDGs are in the process of being localised, the Agenda 2063 is still muted at the subnational and local levels.

Topic 3: Exploring interlinkages – informing plans and strategies (Sami)

- ❖ The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) combine complex interlinkages and understanding the interactions, including synergies and possible conflicts between them is a continuous challenge to integrating the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs into national policies, especially developing and least developed countries. The SDG policy environment is a complex system characterized by interwoven feedback loops, lengthy time lags between causes and perceived effects, inertias and nonlinearities that are typically underappreciated. Integrated planning tools can be used to support understanding of the whole-of-society impacts of the pandemic.
- ❖ Shifting from a siloed approach to an integrated approach is imperative for achieving the SDGs. Understanding the interlinkages between SDG targets is important for practicing an integrated approach which addresses how achieving one target impacts achieving others and identify synergies or trade-offs between the SDG targets. There are practical and science-based tool that can support national policymaking, shifting from a silo-based approach to an integrated approach in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



- ❖ Integrated modelling of the SDGs provides a framework for policy and can guide investment choices in the context of COVID-19. Countries long-term response to COVID-19 can ensure building back better with the SDGs and determine the shape of our economies and lives in the future. It also provides an opportunity for a new policy agenda that is green, sustainable and inclusive.
- ❖ Available methodologies and modelling tools for SDG integration and assessing interlinkages can be divided into broad categories, viz; qualitative (Conceptual and Rapid) that inform priorities and policy coherence and quantitative (Dynamic and Data Intensive) that evaluate policies, interventions and quantify trade-offs and co-benefits.
- ❖ Significant gaps remain in scenario frameworks and modelling capabilities. The accessibility of tools and approaches varies, with some of the approaches on the qualitative end of the spectrum requiring little or no specialized software. Dynamic models have higher requirements in terms of data and technical skills.
- ❖ It was explained that system dynamics models, for instance the iSDG model, provide insights into the impact of policies by modelling the underlying system: economy, society, and environment, with their key processes, indicators, and drivers. This involves a shift in perspective – whether 2030 Agenda, Agenda 2063, or NDP - the focus is to model policy impacts. Rather than measuring synergies between SDGs, such models enable insight into synergies between policies directed to achieve the SDGs. Models can quantify the interlinkages.
- ❖ Quantitative modelling can complement existing priority-setting by governments, while also helping to reveal both synergies and trade-offs that may otherwise not have been considered. For example, the IGES interlinkages tool enables a quantitative analysis of the SDG interlinkages, which can be applied for various purposes including SDG planning and priority-setting, making institutional arrangements, allocating resources efficiently, and monitoring the progress of the SDGs.
- ❖ Successful use of quantitative tools and models is very much linked to institutionalization, which involves the fundamental question of capacity development. Crucial here is the ability to translate the technical understanding of interlinkages to the policy level, making it a success factor in crossing from siloed planning to integrated planning. There is a growing understanding and acceptance of integrated planning. Nonetheless, there are challenges involve when introducing modelling in settings where capacity gaps exist, and policymakers are not familiar with the outputs of such tools.
- ❖ Modelling to inform the COVID-19 response may involve tools designed for the immediate response, such as epidemiological models, as well as quantitative models that are more useful in assessing longer-term responses. The latter can help inform decisions about what kind of investment will yield the greatest return for society, for instance in relation to growth and employment.
- ❖ Challenges in operationalizing quantitative models, particularly in developing countries, revolve around capacity and time. Relevant technical staff are already burdened with a great deal of work, with a focus on issues of immediate importance, such as crisis response. Consequently, the short-term responses are not anchored in long-term plans and strategies. One illustration is the misalignment between national budgets and NDPs or the SDGs.
- ❖ Entering the Decade of Action, planning ought to be oriented towards adaptative management, which would involve continual updating of analyses to keep up with changing circumstances. There is a need to bolster the analytical and institutional capacity to respond to unexpected



effects and developments. There is a need to go beyond good practices and approaches, finding ways to nudge countries towards desired sustainable development pathways.

Topic 4: Institutions for integration and planning – key lessons learned

- ❖ Legitimate and credible institutions can help guide collaborative and integrated planning processes. There is a process of engagement and co-creation of knowledge involved in the effective approaches and technical tools.
- ❖ The COVID-19 pandemic has been a great equalizer with respect to the performance of public institutions. The crisis has underlined the need to reassert the key role of an effective, responsive and capable public sector in responding to society's needs, building resilience and dealing with crises when they arise. To prepare for the next pandemic, institutions need to combine stability with flexibility.
- ❖ Mainstreaming and integration are highly contextualized, conditioned by national practices, approaches, and governance traditions. Within different countries, there will be a preference for differing institutional structures, for instance more hierarchical and centralized, or exhibiting a greater degree of decentralization.
- ❖ Fast-tracking implementation of the SDGs is an imperative, but it cannot be carried out without trial and error and experimentation. There needs to be a greater tolerance for risk; however, institutions tend to punish failure, creating a disincentive for innovation.
- ❖ Multi-level governance – coordination of top up and bottom down relations between different levels of government – offers potential for accelerating the implementation of the SDGs. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the difficulty of achieving multi-level governance.
- ❖ Sub-national governments have, in many countries, been at the forefront in responding to the crisis. Therefore, a centralized, hierarchical response will not deliver the best results since it is not adaptive enough to local realities. However, a purely bottom-up response is not optimal either. In many cases local and regional governments lack the specialized technical expertise, as well as access to resources, that can be brought to bear by central government institutions. For immediate response to crises, there is a need to real-time, collaborative multi-level governance.
- ❖ Decentralizing action on the SDGs is not without costs, both financial, because of the creation of an extra layer of government, but also the potential cost of dilution of action, because local and regional levels of government may have policy priorities at odds with national SDG implementation plans. Analysis of the VNRs indicates that large numbers of countries reviewed do not provide for formal representation of sub-national levels of government in national SDG coordination bodies.
- ❖ Vigilance is needed to ensure that COVID-19 stimulus funds support a sustainable future. Emerging trends on sustainable financing, budgeting and procurement should not be blocked.
- ❖ National planning institutions play a key role in integrating government's political platforms, subject to change depending on elections, with the 2030 Agenda and long-term national visions. The instrument for such integration can be the medium-term plan or general government policy, which concretizes general targets into specific activities and related budgetary commitments.
- ❖ The integration of the SDGs into national development plans and strategies remains relevant, five years into the 2030 Agenda. Integration is a continual process, beginning with a formal analysis of interlinkages and priorities, and then moving on to implementation and adaptation, including in response to changes in administration. Continuity in planning across administrations can also be aided when membership in coordinating bodies, like national sustainable development councils, has degree of stability, irrespective of changes in the executive branch.



- ❖ COVID-19 is challenging planning institutions to work towards coherence between pandemic response measures and the goals in longer-term national development plans and strategies. What are the additional burdens imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic on public institutions? How can institutions address these challenges?
- ❖ There is a need to examine how UNSDCFs are incorporating a coordinated COVID-19 response.
- ❖ The COVID-19 crisis highlights the importance of properly designing and effectively implementing national sustainable development plans and strategies. Such strategies can help enhance resilience and build capacity to withstand external shocks.
- ❖ The socio-economic impact of COVID-19 underlines the relevance of response and recovery measures based on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The SDGs, with their universal scope and interlinked nature, are more essential than ever during this crisis and its aftermath.