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Key Players in National SDG Accountability: The Role of Parliaments

Summary

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda will require strong accountable institutions. Since no global compliance mechanisms are in place, member states need to establish or use their own institutions to be held accountable for SDG implementation. In July 2021, governments, civil society and the private sector will gather at the annual UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) to take stock of progress on the 17 SDGs. The event provides an opportunity to assess progress made in the establishment of national-level accountability frameworks for the SDGs.

As representatives of the people, parliaments should play a key role in localising the 2030 Agenda and holding governments accountable to their commitments. Over recent years, some progress has been made in enabling parliaments around the world to fulfil their accountability functions. Most notably, almost half of the countries that presented Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) between 2016 and 2019 reported that capacity-building events took place to inform members of parliament about the SDGs, and parliaments are being increasingly consulted by governments in the process of preparing the VNRs.

However, in addition to a lack of awareness about the 2030 Agenda, several factors constrain parliaments' SDG accountability function. In many countries, parliamentarians lack access to the data needed to assess governments' SDG performance, and only few governments have committed to regularly report on SDG progress beyond the VNRs. Furthermore, only in a quarter of countries has responsibility

for the SDGs been clearly assigned within the structures of parliament itself. In addition, thus far, parliaments have only been weakly involved in processes of localising the SDGs through the adoption of national SDG implementation strategies and the development of national priority goals and indicators. In general, legislatures' ability to hold governments accountable has decreased amidst recent autocratisation trends.

Good practices to overcome these obstacles include the use of digital tools to increase the transparency of governments' fiscal behaviour vis-à-vis parliament and the creation of discursive formats to foster parliament-government dialogues about sustainability transformation. Peer learning will play an important role in disseminating information about such empowering practices among parliamentarians worldwide.

More importantly, however, national governments need to recognise parliaments as critical actors in the SDG process. Amidst current autocratisation trends worldwide, peer pressure by the international community, pressure by independent media and NGOs, and the support of UN agencies will be necessary to strengthen the role of parliaments in promoting SDG accountability.

Parliaments themselves should seek to establish dedicated SDG committees with formal powers to undertake in-depth examinations of government action as well as legislation. This will also contribute to the continuity of parliamentary SDG activities beyond electoral cycles.

Introduction

There is broad consensus that achieving the SDGs by 2030 requires strong and accountable institutions. Thanks to SDG 16 on “peace, justice and strong institutions”, elements of good governance, including accountability, have for the first time become part of a global development agenda and are recognised as enablers for all other SDGs.

As is the case with many other multilateral agreements, the SDGs are the product of a complex process of negotiations between states. They are based on the principle of global governance through the setting of legally non-binding goals, and there are no formal sanctions for countries that do not comply with the agreement.

Rather, it is incumbent on signatory governments themselves to establish institutional frameworks that hold governments accountable for SDG implementation. In its preamble, the Agenda calls for “effective, participatory, transparent and integrated” SDG review processes and suggests that parliaments should support these processes. Six years into the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, it is time for a critical stocktaking of how governments have acted on this call. Of particular interest in this paper is the question of which measures have been undertaken to promote horizontal accountability, which is exercised by the different branches of power that engage in mutual control, and by the network of independent state agencies that are specialised in government oversight.

This Briefing Paper – developed in the context of a larger comparative cross-national analysis of national SDG accountability frameworks (Breuer & Leininger, 2021) and drawing on practical insights from the global network Parliamentarians for the Global Goals (PfGG) – focuses on the role of parliaments in promoting SDG accountability.

Promoting accountability for SDG implementation – what role for parliaments?

Box 1: The concept of government accountability

The term “government accountability” describes a rule-based system in which governments are held responsible for their actions. It entails three central elements: (1) information that governments must provide about their activities and performance; (2) answerability, which implies the capacity to demand explanations from governments and the correspondent duty of governmental actors to justify their conduct; and (3) sanction, which implies the capacity to either punish governmental misconduct or underperformance, or to reward positive behaviour and good performance.

In liberal democracies, the role of parliament in ensuring governmental accountability is comprehensive since the executive branch of government is accountable to parliament as the representative of “the people” for all policy areas. Given the importance of parliaments, one could assume that they should be key players in international development agendas. However, this has not been the case in the past. Parliaments were not consulted on the adoption

of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000, and many legislators were not even aware of the existence of the framework. Therefore, in the intergovernmental negotiations for the SDGs, the Inter-Parliamentary Union ensured that the SDGs would include the views of parliamentarians.

The following main functions of parliaments in promoting accountability for the SDGs can be identified:

- making or amending laws in a way that ensures consistency with the 2030 Agenda;
- overseeing the actions of governments and their agencies in implementing the SDGs;
- representing the interests of their constituents in the process of localising the 2030 Agenda;
- budget evaluation that ensures an adequate allocation of financial resources to achieve the SDGs.

The emerging role of parliaments in SDG accountability – a cross-national overview

A recent study by Breuer and Leininger (2021) investigates the extent to which parliaments already perform the SDG accountability functions attributed to them. The study, which is based on a systematic screening of 136 VNRs submitted to the HLPF between 2016 and 2019 for mentions of parliamentary activities, concludes that the degree to which national governments recognise parliaments as account holders in the SDG process is still limited.

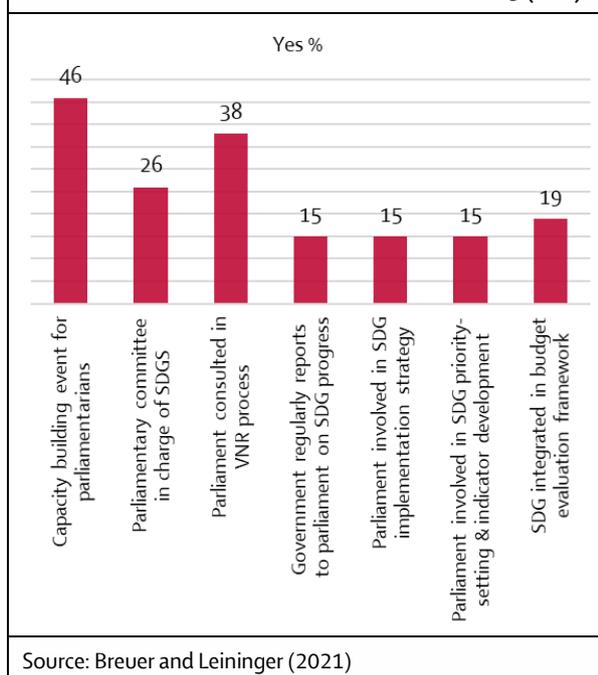
Out of 136 VNRs, 49 merely mention parliaments as important stakeholders, whereas 45 explicitly recognise their oversight role in the SDG process. Yet, these mentions are often vague and do not specify concrete mechanisms through which this role can be fulfilled.

To begin with, in order to exercise meaningful oversight, parliamentarians need to be knowledgeable about the 2030 Agenda. Their participation in capacity-building events thus constitutes an important step towards achieving SDG accountability. In this regard, it is positive to note that 46% of the analysed VNRs mention the participation of parliamentarians in such events.

Further, in order to exercise effective oversight, parliaments need to assign SDG responsibility within their own structures by creating a dedicated parliamentary SDG committee or entrusting the mandate of SDG oversight to an existing committee. Committee oversight is a strong accountability mechanism that enables parliamentarians to undertake in-depth examinations of governments’ SDG actions and to conduct hearings and assessments. Of the analysed VNRs, 26% mentioned that a parliamentary committee was put in charge of the SDGs.

At the global level, the SDG accountability system is led by the HLPF. As the principal international platform for monitoring SDG progress, the HLPF convenes annually to assess progress towards achieving the SDGs based on the VNRs. Although VNRs are normally government-led, a broad range of stakeholders should be involved in the review process in order to provide a balanced account of national SDG achievement.

Figure 1: Mentions of parliamentary SDG activities in 136 VNRs submitted between 2016 and 2019 (in %)



The conduction of a VNR thus presents an opportunity for parliaments to hold governments accountable for their efforts towards meeting the SDGs.

However, conducting a VNR is a complex process that is usually not carried out annually. Parliaments should therefore demand that, in addition, governments present periodic progress reports on the SDGs at the national level. While parliament was consulted on 38% of the analysed VNRs, only 15% mention that government has committed to regularly tabling SDG progress reports in parliament.

Of course, the representative function of parliaments should not only come to bear in retrospective review processes but also in future-oriented processes of national strategy formulation and planning. Since the adoption of the SDGs, many countries have started to align their national development plans with the SDGs or have adopted SDG implementation strategies. For the context-sensitive localisation of the SDGs, it is necessary that parliamentarians are able to feed their constituents' needs and priorities into these processes. Parliaments should thus contribute to the development or revision of national development strategies and plans through wide-ranging public consultation processes and – in cases where the legislature's approval is required – only adopt them after a comprehensive review and formal debate. Another avenue for parliaments to contribute towards localisation of the 2030 Agenda is their involvement in the selection of national priority goals and the development of related indicators for progress monitoring. Yet, so far, parliaments seem to be only weakly associated with these processes, with only 15% of VNRs mentioning the involvement of parliaments in the drafting of national SDG implementation strategies and in the selection of national SDG priorities and indicators.

One of the strongest accountability instruments of parliaments is their vital role in the budget process. Parliaments have the mandate to review and approve or reject the budget proposed by the executive and to oversee the use of public funds. Budgetary control thus equips them with the ability to impose sanctions on the executive by not granting budgets for a certain policy. Therefore, parliaments should integrate the SDGs into their evaluation frameworks for budget proposals. As of yet, only a minority of parliaments seem to be using this opportunity, seeing that only 19% of VNRs mention the national parliament's intention to integrate the SDGs in the budget process.

Parliamentary SDG accountability in practice: Good practices and challenges

Although the above findings may seem discouraging at first, they need to be interpreted with care. The comparative analysis of the VNRs presented above provides insights regarding tendencies and gaps in SDG accountability. However, as government-issued reports, the VNRs do not reflect the full range of efforts by all SDG stakeholders.

In 2020, the global network PfGG was established with the purpose of strengthening peer-to-peer learning and sharing good parliamentary practices related to the SDGs. Insights gained through the PfGG's practical work confirm that the most effective way for parliaments to ensure SDG accountability is through the assignment of SDG responsibility within their structures, parliament's involvement in the localisation of the SDGs, the establishment of standard operating procedures (SOPs) and through integrating the SDGs into the budget control process.

Starting with the assignment of SDG responsibility within parliamentary structures, due to the different norms that regulate parliamentary activities in various countries, there are different approaches that range from embedding SDG monitoring into the work of an existing entity (such as the standing Committee for the Future of Finland's parliament or the German Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development), to formally establishing a new SDG committee, to more informal cross-party arrangements in the form of an All-Party Parliamentary Group or an SDG Caucus, such as the European Parliament's SDG Alliance or Kenya's SDG Caucus.

Yet, in several countries, SDG responsibility has not been officially assigned to a specific committee. This increases the risk of a traditional sectoral approach to SDG implementation that clashes with the 2030 Agenda's holistic and interlinked approach to sustainable development. Also, where SDG responsibility is not assigned to a specific committee, it is often naturally assumed by committees working in the field of international relations. In Sweden, for example, the Committee on Foreign Affairs is the most engaged in working on the SDGs. This may lead to the perception that the SDGs are meant to support international development rather than be applied domestically. Further, where SDG responsibility is not anchored institutionally, electoral turnover presents a threat to the continuity of SDG efforts. In the elections of

2018, the Parliament of Sierra Leone, for example, saw an exchange of 82% of legislators. This involved a slump in parliamentary SDG activities, since incoming legislators had little knowledge of the 2030 Agenda.

Second, localising the SDGs involves translating them into a (sub-)national context by establishing a set of national and/or local indicators to supplement the global SDG indicator framework. In Denmark, for example, the project "Our Goals", led by the central Danish authority on statistics, developed a framework of 197 supplementary national indicators in a process that included the input from a broad range of stakeholders.

Third, adopting SOPs to ensure that the SDGs are used as a lens in all parliamentary activities strengthens the accountability role of parliaments. The Finnish Parliament's Committee for the Future, for example, creates discursive arenas for dialogue with government about important policy lines for a sustainable future and reviews the work of the government regarding its suitability to achieve the SDGs. The committee's practices provide a good example of how parliaments can ensure government accountability, both prospectively and retrospectively. However, thus far, the committee has missed out on the opportunity to liaise with non-state stakeholders in order to include their voices in its dialogue with government. Another example is that of the Serbian Parliament, which uses digital tools to support its SDG oversight role. In partnership with the UNDP, it is currently developing a budget and expenditures web portal aimed at making the government's fiscal behaviour more transparent to members of parliament. Coupled with national SDG indicators and the conduction of regular government hearings, this digital platform holds a significant potential for the close monitoring of SDG progress.

Finally, looking at budget evaluation, the Austrian Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) has mapped its budget

performance indicators against SDG targets. This approach treats the SDGs as benchmarks for the assessment of the government's budget performance. However, it limits the PBO's use of the SDGs to that of a tool to ensure retrospective government accountability. In order to enhance prospective accountability, the PBO would also have to use the SDGs as the bases for parliamentary negotiations with governments on future budgets.

Despite the above good practices, many parliaments are still struggling to fulfil their function of holding government accountable in the SDG process. Among the biggest obstacles is the lack of access that parliamentarians have to quality data and statistics, especially in countries with low state capacity. Additionally, worldwide, SDG knowledge is limited, even among state officials. This constrains parliamentarians' ability to conduct their functions in a way that supports SDG implementation. Finally, thus far, only a few parliaments have organised processes that allow their constituents to make their needs and priorities heard in the SDG process. In order to do justice to their role as representatives of the people, parliaments should increase public education and outreach activities related to the SDGs.

Peer learning and knowledge-sharing will play an important role in overcoming these deficits. International networks of all-party parliamentarians, such as the PfGG, play an important role in the dissemination of information about good practices. Even more importantly, however, national governments need to recognise parliaments as critical actors in the implementation of the SDGs. Particularly in countries where the position of parliament vis-à-vis the executive is weak, peer pressure among governments, pressure by independent media and NGOs, and the support of UN agencies is needed to strengthen the role of parliaments in promoting SDG accountability.

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