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Global sustainability – Local needs

Why the civil service needs a 2030 Agenda “update”

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Why the civil service needs a 2030 Agenda “update”

Bonn, 20 November 2018. The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development represents a challenge for the civil service. Civil servants are expected to coordinate their activities with the private sector and civil society, make sense of thousands of indicators and tie the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in with the needs of citizens at local level. Politicians and administrators need to establish frameworks and make decisions that will determine how safe a city is, what education opportunities children have and whether air pollution is to be reduced. These three examples illustrate that the 2030 Agenda will only be implemented if the public sector makes a major contribution – in all of the 193 signatory countries.

Civil servants have to be prepared to take on new tasks if they are to perform their pivotal role properly in implementing the 17 SDGs. They need an “update” in line with the 2030 Agenda that ensures they have the latest knowledge and key competencies at their fingertips, especially social and communication skills.

Breaking down silo mentalities will be one of the factors on which the success of the global development agenda will hinge as all the sustainability goals are closely interwined. For instance, the goal of ensuring equal access to high-quality education does not only affect the education sector itself – it also raises questions about fighting poverty, healthcare, mobility and sustainable urban planning

Public decision-makers aiming for sustainable processes of policy planning need knowledge and social skills in order to recognise the relevance of other topic areas and involve additional stakeholders. This holds true both on various political levels and for cooperation with actors from civil society and the private sector, who are key to implementing the agenda.

A particular aptitude for communication is also required alongside social skills. Civil servants are tasked with translating the language of the 2030 Agenda for the general public and presenting measures being undertaken to implement it in a way that is easy to understand. At the same time, they are also called on to feed people's needs back into the processes of policy-making and to make sure that the agenda is being delivered on the ground.

Civil servants and officials obtain a significant portion of the knowledge and skills they need for public service at schools of public administration. Thus these institutions must also teach the SDGs and the competencies required to achieve them, whether this be through training preparing candidates for their entry into ser-

vice or through continuing professional development later in their careers. Their central position in the training system for public officials gives the schools of public administration particularly strong leverage as a starting point for embedding the global sustainability goals across a broad base.

However, the schools of public administration in many developing countries and emerging economies – but also in industrialised nations – face a challenge: the institutions themselves do not possess the requisite knowledge and capabilities for devising up-to-date training courses on the 2030 Agenda. Awareness of the sustainability agenda and political support from senior management are also lacking in many places, preventing new content from being added to curricula.

To address this, the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) developed a new initiative as part of the Managing Global Governance programme. Together with schools of public administration from Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Mexico and South Africa and a number of UN institutions, it devised an action plan for strengthening the public sector in preparation for implementing the 2030 Agenda. This focuses on continuing professional development opportunities for trainers (“train the trainers”) and executive leaders, thereby tackling the biggest challenges in a targeted way.

Alongside the suggestions being made for training courses for key groups, the proposed New York Programme of Action envisages a systematic, international exchange of experiences between schools of public administration and other actors from the academic and research community, civil society and the private sector. Regular peer reviews and a structured dialogue on successes and practical potential solutions are intended to facilitate mutual learning across national borders. At the same time, international cooperation with renown research and training establishments and their involvement in processes like the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) will help local actors put the 2030 Agenda at the top of their institutions' to-do lists.

The 2030 Agenda is not going to implement itself. Rather, this will require competent and committed actors. A cross-border exchange between schools of public administration can trigger the 2030 Agenda “update” that educational and training institutions require. It can thereby help implement the agenda effectively, something that will only succeed if the civil service is fully up to speed.