

Background note on governance & accountability

Beyond 2015 ETF workshop

22-23 October 2015

Session: Zooming in on key Agenda 2030 issues

Introduction

Governance - or just governance as it was called it in our original ETF position paper – has 6 mutually reinforcing components. It must be human rights-based, participatory, transparent, equitable, accountable and it must guarantee access to justice, respect the rule of law and fight against corruption. In this session we will focus on the democratic governance of institutions, participation and accountability.

Agenda 2030 is disappointingly weak on both governance and accountability. It barely addresses governance issues from any perspective – be that with regard to the 3 dimensions of sustainable development (eg. equitable management of natural resources), or national and international governance (eg. democratic participation of all countries in international bodies and institutions).

Despite a laudable set of principles that countries should aspire to respect when developing “follow up and review” processes, the Agenda does not propose robust mechanisms which allow civil society and individuals to hold their governments to account for implementation, quite apart from the fact that there is a huge difference between follow-up and review and accountability.

Furthermore, the Agenda is highly ambiguous when it touches on the enabling environment which is necessary for governance, participation and accountability to become a reality, such as the realisation of civil and political rights (eg. freedom of speech, freedom of association etc).

The EU pushed hard on governance and accountability during the UN negotiations – clearly with mixed results. Going forward, the EU must continue to influence the working of the High Level Political Forum – the UN body charged with follow-up and review of Agenda 2030 – to get the best results from both governance and accountability perspectives. Furthermore, in the EU context, we must continue to insist that EU Member States and the EU institutions put in place truly participatory processes at national and regional (EU-wide) levels, which will enable people and organised civil society alike to influence implementation plans and to engage in a systematic way in monitoring, accountability and review. Robust, independent accountability mechanisms from local to regional level are necessary. In addition, the EU must develop a means to differentiate between parts of Agenda 2030 for which MS are primarily responsible and those for which an EU lead is necessary, preferable or de facto the case and for which the EU institutions should be held to account. Lastly, accountability must incorporate the concept of Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development and the impact of EU policies, therefore, on other people’s prospects for Sustainable Development and other countries’ ability to realise their people’s human rights.

What is at stake?

Current EU Governance arrangements:

- Vice-President Timmermans has horizontal responsibility for sustainable development, but it will be necessary to ensure that all DGs and other EU institutions are made aware of their responsibility in implementing, or at the very least in respecting the provisions of, Agenda 2030.
- The European Parliament currently has a very weak role and this role has resided primarily with the Development Committee. They currently have no specific plans for follow up. However, whereas for the Development Committee, there is no co-decision making on the topic, implementation of the SDGs within EU policy and legislation will need to be followed by other EP Committee formations where there is a co-decision mandate.
- Council meetings risk continuing in a silo format, so there is no whole-of-government approach. Would implementation fit within the General Affairs Council? So far has been in Foreign Affairs/Development and Environment Councils and then Conclusions adopted in General Affairs. This begs the question regarding how to ensure that the integrated approach is not lost in the governance and accountability mechanisms. Are there good examples of integrated whole of government approaches? Sweden?

Accountability:

- In terms of accountability, the role of the European Parliament to date needs to be strengthened and improved so the EP can ensure communication, engagement and accountability to constituencies. National parliaments will have an important role. Are there already examples of National Parliamentarians taking forward the discussions and plans for scrutiny in a cross-party and cross committee manner?
- As well as national governments, the role of local authorities in Member States – they are nearer to the people where the impact of decisions is felt and are key actors for accountability to citizens.
- Some accountability mechanisms are in place for Policy coherence for sustainable development – such as a standing rapporteur in the EP, a scrutiny board for impact assessments of planned EU policies – but not enough.
- The EU is usually ready to organize consultations but transparency of the outcomes is not always guaranteed or how the final communications and strategies have taken into account (or not) the views of stakeholders.
- The private sector is being considered an important implementation actor for Agenda 2030, but currently without any proposed accountability mechanisms.

Guiding questions for the debate

- What format or formats would best deliver a participatory and multi-stakeholder process to ensure effective monitoring, accountability and review mechanisms at EU level?
- What mechanisms should be in place to improve private sector (and other actors'?) accountability where they play a role in implementation?
- How can the EU and MS work together to improve accountability mechanisms at the international level?