

Readiness Assessment of Parliaments to engage with the Sustainable Development Goals: Application of the Self-Assessment Toolkit

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Abstract

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a ground breaking global commitment to end poverty and set the world on the sustainable path to inclusive development. It was endorsed by government leaders at the United Nations Summit in September 2015. A set of seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 actionable targets lies at the core of this ambitious agenda. The 2030 Agenda places people at the centre of the development process. It calls on governments, Parliaments and other stakeholders to design and deliver laws and programmes that meet needs of the people, breakdown policy silos, uphold human rights, and leave no one behind. The purpose of this paper is to investigate and analyse the readiness of Parliaments to engage with SDGs. Based on the literature analysis and author's practical experiences, a review of the self-assessment toolkit on SDGs for Parliaments and a list of readiness assessment factors were done and presented in this paper. The discussions in this paper can support researchers and practitioners in effectively applying the self-assessment tool.

Key words: *Readiness, Sustainable Development Goals, Parliaments*

Introduction

Readiness assessment is an evolving concept growing within the field of evaluation and project management. Kusek and Rist (2004:4) observe that a readiness assessment provides the analytical framework for rating a country's ability to monitor and evaluate its progress in achieving designated development goals. Readiness assessment identifies the potential challenges that might arise when implementing new procedures, structures, and processes within a current organisational context. In the context of this discussion, self-assessment as opposed to an external expert evaluation, helps ensure that parliament assumes ownership of the exercise's findings (Inter-Parliamentary Union and United Nations Development Program, 2017:13)

This paper provides a readiness assessment of how parliaments are prepared and ready to engage with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Parliamentarians can enact enabling laws, provide oversight, scrutinise budgets and provide representation and leadership for the realisation of SDGs. The paper provides a general description of the roles of Parliaments in relation to the SDGs through the lenses of the Inter-Parliamentary Union's (IPU) self-assessment toolkit on Parliaments and SDGs.

Parliaments and SDGs

The Global Parliamentary Report (2012:19) emphasizes that there are still things that a parliament alone can do and cannot be replicated by other institutions. First creation, amendment and approval of law occur principally through the legislature. Although there are various consultative mechanisms for turning citizen concern into policy and executive action, it is parliament that ultimately provides the mechanism upon which law is sanctioned. Parliamentarians can exercise a leadership role in policy formulation, the development of legislation and most importantly its implementation a national level (Krysostan, 2014:26).

Secondly, parliaments exist to call government to account (The Global Parliamentary Report, 2012:19). They provide the forum wherein government ministers and officials are held to account for their policies and actions in public.

Thirdly, the parliament is the single most important representative institution. It must aggregate public opinion and make policy decisions on the basis of what is best for the populace as a whole. When these roles of parliament are played effectively, parliament can contribute to the effective governance elements, namely: state capability, accountability and responsiveness (Nxele et.al 2014:1).

Looking back at the process leading up to the MDGs, it was urged that during the initial process of creating the MDGs and later on agreeing on them, ensuring the involvement of national and regional Parliaments was not prioritised (Krysostan: 27). The All Africa Parliamentary Group notes that parliamentarians can enable laws, provide oversight, scrutinise budgets and provide representation and leadership for the post-2015 agenda (Rao 2014:2).

The Self-Assessment Toolkit

Overview

According to Boud in Spiller (2012:3), all assessments including self-assessments comprise of two main elements: making decisions about the standards of performance expected and then making judgements about the quality of the performance in relation to these standards. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU 2016:17) guides that a self –assessment process should start with a set of questions that can be used to systematically consider the different issues that need to be discussed.

In 2016, the Inter-parliamentary Union (IPU) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) designed a self-assessment toolkit for parliaments and the SDGs. The self-assessment toolkit was launched in Kampala, Uganda on 3rd March 2017 during the regional seminar on SDGs for Parliaments of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Though there a number of frameworks developed to guide parliaments and parliamentarians in engaging with SDGs like the Parliamentary Handbook on the role of Parliamentarians in advancing the sustainable development agenda by the European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development (EPF) and the Parliamentary Handbook on the Parliament's role in implementing the Sustainable development Goals by UNDP, this paper mainly focuses on the self-assessment toolkit.

The main objectives of the toolkit are to assist Parliaments: assess their preparedness to engage with SDGs and identify additional strategies, mechanisms and partnerships to support implementation of SDGs more effectively (IPU, 2016:3). The assessment provides useful information that will improve performance of key functions like legislation, representation, oversight and budgeting.

Methodology and approach to the Application of the toolkit (assessment)

The application of this tool is no cast on stone based on the uniqueness of the Parliament under assessment. As proposed by IPU and UNDP (2017:13), regular self-assessments of capacities and needs are key in enabling parliamentarians ensure that their parliaments actively contribute to SDG implementation processes on an ongoing basis. An initial self-assessment provides a baseline so that the future self-assessments could be run annually or bi-annually on what had been achieved, what ie yet to be achieved and lessons learnt.

The assessment is more enriched with a participatory approach involving various stakeholders with different perspectives beginning with Parliamentarians as principals to parliament staff, civil society organisations, SDG committee/for a, media, academia, development partners, among others.

As was the case for the launch of this toolkit in Uganda in 2017, the IPU and UNDP (2017:14) highly recommends that any self-assessment exercise is preceded by an SDG information seminar. The seminar serves the purpose of introducing the process to parliamentarians but also identifying parliamentarians who would be interested in fully participating in the exercise. For the assessment to be a success based on experiences of implementation of the MDGs, it's important to secure support of leadership, have sufficient logistics, set clear objectives, mobilise diversity of participants, have highly knowledgeable facilitators, have access to objective, reliable and up to date data sources, have a clear roadmap of what is to be done with the assessment outcomes and establish rigorous follow-up mechanisms.

Key elements and guiding questions

The toolkit provides a framework for discussion by asking eight self-assessment questions (IPU, 2016:17). These are the core points of discussions for this paper with examples from a number of Parliaments;

Building understanding of the SDGs in Parliament

The key guiding question here is, "is information about SDGs included in briefing materials and induction programmes for new parliamentarians after elections?" .The toolkit calls for each parliament to consider organising information seminars and capacity development activities to ensure that all parliamentary have the same baseline understanding of the 2030 Agenda, the SDGs and their supporting targets (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016:17). Emphasis is placed on reference materials for SDGs, seminars and training sessions. Evidently a number of trainings and SDG related materials for parliaments and parliamentarians have been prepared. This element in the tool-kit raised a whole question of capacity building of staff of parliament, members of parliament and other key stakeholders on the SDGs, on the planning, on the strategy and how it should go. A number of international level and national capacity building are already in place in many Parliaments for example the May 17, 2016 4th Implementation series webinar on the role of parliamentarians in the implementation of the 2030

Box 1. : Examples of good practices

- UK- The Parliament passed a bill that enshrines in law its commitment to spend 0.7% of its gross national income (GNI) on ODA every year (March 2015).
- Pakistan- The Parliament established an SDG secretariat to provide technical assistance to the legislative gaps and ensure the rights of their respective constituents (February, 2015).
- Trinidad and Tobago- The Parliament established a new joint select committee on the environment and sustainable development.
- Zambia-MPs in Parliament formed an SDG caucus (July, 2015).
- Jordan- Parliament adopted a law on Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency to increase private-sector investment in energy (2012).
- Serra Leone- The SDGs were linked to the 8 pillars of the Agenda for Prosperity, the 3rd PRSP of Sierra Leone, and aligned to each spending category of the 2016 National Budget, which was approved by Parliament.
- Uganda- The Parliament established a Parliamentary Forum on SDGs.

Source: UNDP, 2016 with modifications

agenda for sustainable development. Parliament of Uganda included SDGs as part of its content in the induction of the newly elected members of the 10th Parliament and further hosted an SDG meeting for Parliaments in Sub-Saharan Africa in March, 2017.

Bringing the SDGs from the global to the local level

The 2030 Agenda and SDGs have been endorsed as a global framework but their implementation need to be tailored to national priorities, and to build on existing national plans and efforts (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016:19). The key guiding question for assessment are, "*is there a national plan of the implementation of the SDGs?, has parliament formally endorsed the national plan?, do parliamentarians receive updates on national and international SDG implementation issues?*". The House of Commons (2016:41) observes that the national ownership of the SDGs is emphasised throughout the Agenda 2030 document. This means that countries have to own their development and politically committed to it.

Mainstreaming the SDGs within Parliamentary mechanisms

In assessing mainstreaming, the key guiding question is, "does the parliament have an institutional plan and structures that adequately identifies its priorities in relation to supporting SDG implementation and monitoring?" .The SDGs are a multisectoral, comprehensive sustainable development framework whose implementation require parliamentarians to take action on a range of policy issues across sectors, and to overcome institutional silos (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016:21). Rao (2014:2) sights structures and mechanisms for implementing SDGs as the plenary session of parliament; existing parliamentary committees, sector/thematic committees, but also SDG focused committees and complementary structures, such as cross-party caucuses. Different parliaments have adopted different structures hence evidence that this element is very applicable. The Uganda Parliament established a Parliamentary Forum of SDGs, Pakistan Parliament established an SDG secretariat, Zambia formed an SDG caucus.

Making laws in support of the SDGs

Parliament play a key role in supporting the implementation of the SDGs by building a legal framework that enables the goals to be achieved, pro-poor, gender-sensitive and human-based legislation (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016:24). One would need to ask, "has any review been undertaken to identify the legislative reforms required to support the SDGs?". The main task here for parliamentarians is to identify whether and how a law promotes, or can be amended to promote, more effective SDG implementation.

Financing SDGs

Achieving the SDGS will require immense financial investment from a variety of sources (House of Commons 2016:13). The UN has not been able to attach a specific cost to the SDGs but the World Bank Report Group (2015:1) estimates that to meet the investment needs of the Sustainable Development Goals, the global community needs to move the discussion from "Billions" in Official Development Assistance (ODA) to "Trillions" in investments of all kinds: public and private, national and global, in both capital and capacity. Parliaments adopt national budgets and oversee expenditure to ensure public funds have been used properly and effectively in a pro-poor, gender-sensitive and human rights-based approach (IPU, 2016:26).

While assessing this element, the key guiding question are, "did the most recent budget proposal describe how it takes the SDGs into account?, does the budget allocate specific funds for the implementation of the SDGs?" Krysostan (2014: 26) emphasises that parliamentarians hold the purse strings. They have the power to define the fiscal and budgetary regimes needed to mobilise national resources towards financing development efforts, create new and innovative sources of financing in addition to official development assistance.

Monitoring SDG implementation

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016:28) argues that SDGs will need to be carefully monitored both nationally and globally with a close link to accountability for the implementation of national policies and programmes aligned to the SDG framework. The key guiding question would be, "has the country prepared a national report its progress in the implementation of the SDGs and to whate extent does parliament review, debate and take action on progress reports and other relevant document?" Parliamentarians have the means to ensure oversight, accountability, transparency and the strengthening of the institutions of good governance at country level (Krysostan, 2014:26).

Effective scrutiny of the government's progress against the SDGs will be essential to ensure that there is continued momentum and scrutiny behind the government's contribution to reach the Goals by 2030, both domestically and internationally (House of Commons 2016:52). As the final Agenda 2030 document states:

> *"We also encourage member states to conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels which are country-led and country-driven. Such reviews should draw on contribution from indigenous peoples, civil society, the private sector and other stakeholders, in line with national circumstances, policies and priorities. National parliaments as well as other institutions can also support these processes (United Nations 2015:28)."*

House of Commons (2016:48) emphasised that international progress on the SDGs will be tracked against a set of global indicators agreed by the UN Statistical Commission in March 2016. Member states are called upon to develop their national indicators in line with the principle of the 2030 Agenda that targets are defined as aspirational and global, with each government setting its own national targets guided by the global level of ambition but taking into account national circumstances. This bestows lots of responsibility for parliaments to monitor performance of governments.

Engaging with the public

Parliamentarians represent their electorate and can give expression to the will and voice of citizens. (Krysostan: 26). Making SDGs people-centered means that people from all walks of life should have a say in the legal and policy processes that affect them as well as demanding for corrective action from decision-makers in both government and parliament (The Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016:30). One would need to ask, "Does parliament hold regular public consultations on SDGs or is there an on open-access online platform to engage with the public on the SDGs". Public engagement in parliament has been is in difference forms for example using petitions arising for pressing issues, open days for parliaments like the House of Commons, parliamentary outreach programs like in the Parliament of Kenya, South Africa and Uganda among other hence all these avenues are useful for implementation of SDGs.

Ensuring the SDGs serve the most vulnerable

The 2030 Agenda specifically states "no one will be left behind" making it very clear that to achieve those aims, countries need to directly tackle gender inequality and make every effort to engage marginalised and vulnerable groups (IPU 2016:32). The key guiding question during the assessment are, "have marginalised and vulnerable groups clearly been identified and do national targets and indicators take into account underrepresented, marginalised and vulnerable groups". Many parliaments are undertaking different initiatives to address vulnerabilities for example having special representation of women in Parliament for the case of Uganda and Rwanda

Discussions and conclusions

Parliaments and Parliamentarians are a key element in advancing the SDGs at home and abroad. Their role in holding the executive branch accountable during the SDG negotiation process, ensuring transparency and accountability is of major importance. Yet, parliamentary influence and involvement in the process has previously not been fully capitalised on and leveraged. This toolkit provides parliaments and parliamentarians with a good overview of opportunities, tools and avenues that can be explored to ensure that the SDGs are advanced and fully integrated into the global development agenda. The toolkit provides researchers, evaluation practitioners, development partners and other key stakeholders a platform upon which to assess the readiness and capacity of Parliaments to engage with SDGs and possible areas where support is required. The critical question is how Parliamentarians choose to utilise information from the assessment and reflect on the impact of parliaments efforts after assessing the SDGs.

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