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Transforming institutions and governance to build forward better towards 2030

Note by the Secretariat

The Secretariat has the honour to transmit herewith to the Committee of Experts on Public Administration the paper prepared by Committee members Louis Meuleman and Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, in collaboration with Marta Acosta, Yamini Aiyar, Rolf Alter, Augustin Fosu, Paul Jackson, Aigul Kosherbayeva, Ronald Mendoza, Lamia Moubayed Bissat, Soonae Park, Carlos Santiso, Henry Sardaryan, David Sengeh, Sherifa Sherif, Lan Xue and Najat Zarrouk.

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Transforming institutions and governance to build forward better towards 2030

Summary

The present paper is intended to provide a basis for the discussions of the Committee of Experts on Public Administration on its substantive input for the thematic review of the 2022 high-level political forum on sustainable development and its in-depth review of Sustainable Development Goals 4, 5, 14, 15 and 17. The theme of the paper is aligned with that of the forum and of the Economic and Social Council for the 2022 session: "Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development".

The paper covers the progress, lessons learned and challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on the implementation of Goals 4, 5, 14 and 15 and on leaving no one behind from a public administration and governance perspective, as well as reflections on the challenges of State-building. The authors suggest that building strong and effective public institutions is crucial for achieving the Goals and building forward better after the pandemic. This should be accompanied by investments in the public sector workforce to align competences and values with the challenges ahead. Supporting developing countries in making their public institutions, societal and physical infrastructure and economies more resilient and agile not only against COVID-19 but against all potential future shocks is crucial and in the interest of all nations. Global cooperation and solidarity are therefore critical, and all countries should work together to address the virus and ensure equitable vaccine distribution while also ensuring that no one – and no country – is left behind.

The authors conclude the paper with a set of recommendations and key messages for possible inclusion in the ministerial declaration of the 2022 high-level political forum.

I. Introduction

1. As the world's population has tripled over the past 70 years, major challenges have remained, such as diseases, hunger, inequalities, biodiversity loss and climate change. The still ongoing pandemic has caused millions of lives to be lost, taken an unprecedented human and economic toll and resulted in recovery efforts that have often been uneven, inequitable and insufficiently geared towards achieving sustainable development. The pandemic is threatening decades of developmental progress, hampering the urgent transition to greener, more inclusive economies and delaying or preventing progress on the Sustainable Development Goals.[1]

2. The pandemic further underscores the critical importance of public administration as a bastion of democracy and people-centred values, a field that promotes action and that can support sustainable recovery from the pandemic and achievement of the Goals. As society builds back better, or builds forward better, there is a need to rediscover public administration as a science and a system of values priming the general interest and service of the people.

3. An essential role of public governance and governing is establishing the rules of the game for the functioning of society and the economy through legislation, regulation and the distribution of valuable resources and dispensations so that adequate services are provided on the basis of the needs of people and target groups and so that governments and organizations are held accountable.

4. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has underscored the crucial role of public institutions in providing essential public services to those who need them the most. Institutional weaknesses that existed before the pandemic have become more prevalent and prominent during the crisis, with women and vulnerable groups all too often left behind. Capable, adept and agile institutions are required that embrace and utilize whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches, involving all levels of government and all relevant stakeholders, while acting in a coherent and cohesive fashion. Strategic alliances and collaborative efforts that involve all parts of society, including young people, and foster inclusion and participation are key.

5. The importance of strong institutions – in particular those that foster greater inclusion, good governance, trust in the public sector and social cohesion – for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals is clear, given that governance issues remain at the forefront five years after its adoption.[2] As countries consider policy approaches, put in place institutional arrangements, develop tools and allocate resources, taking into account the needs of the majority of people will be paramount rather than only focusing on the needs and issues of a small but powerful elite layer of society. Marginalization, discrimination, inequalities and exclusion of population groups remain critical risks in systems of government.

6. Public administration comprises effective public services, social protection, inclusion and equal opportunities for all. The pandemic has confirmed that many years of focusing on efficiency rather than on effectiveness have eroded the capacity of public administration in many countries to deliver the services that are needed. In the context of crisis response policy, effective public services also serve as building blocks for social cohesion and trust, which are so critically important for a more effective pandemic management response. Countries must take all of these aspects

[1] *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2021* (United Nations publication, 2021).

[2] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Public Sector Report 2021* (United Nations publication, 2021).

into consideration as they respond to and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and tackle the implementation of the Goals without being selective.

7. Implementing the Goals is a multisector, multilevel and multi-actor challenge. The 11 principles of effective governance for sustainable development of the Committee of Experts on Public Administration are proving to be a good source of guidance and inspiration for countries, and their application should be further encouraged.

8. The Committee focuses on key elements of Goals 16 and 17 while paying particular attention to the cross-cutting nature of all the Goals. Analysis and recommendations regarding these two enabling governance Goals are therefore not presented separately but in an integrated way throughout the present paper.

II. Governance and public administration perspectives on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals under review in 2022

A. Building strong institutions to ensure quality education

9. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was not on track to meet reading and mathematics targets, and school attendance and completion remained insufficient in many parts of the world. Access to education in some regions has been hampered by high levels of poverty, armed conflict and, in some instances, extremism, gender inequality and other challenges, which have resulted in an increase in the number of children out of school. Achieving Goal 4 will depend on, among others, strong institutions fostering high-quality education, which specifically entails appropriate skills development, gender parity and the provision of suitable school infrastructure, equipment, educational materials and resources, scholarships and teachers.

10. While overall progress in education before the COVID-19 pandemic was already too slow to achieve Goal 4 by 2030, progress has been made in achieving universal primary education in some regions. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, school enrolment increased, from 52 per cent in 1990 to 78 per cent in 2012.[3] However, the region has the highest number of out-of-school children compared with any other region in the world.

11. The COVID-19 pandemic was a stress test for higher education systems globally and a major challenge to fair access to education for all, especially in developing countries, owing to the digital divide. It has put the resilience of education systems to the test, forcing many countries to switch to distance learning. However, distance learning has not been possible in all countries owing to a lack of digital connectivity, unequal access to e-learning platforms and limited use or unavailability of digital devices in low-income households. As a result, the crisis has proven to be a major driver of increasing education inequality, which represents a major setback and a key risk of widening the education gap.

12. The COVID-19 pandemic forced schools and universities to rethink their ideas on providing access to all students and ensuring that no one is left behind. Universities in Africa responded to the global challenge through the provision of COVID-19 testing facilities and care centres and the local production of personal protective equipment and ventilation solutions. The collaborative efforts of higher education

[3] Lerato Mogoatlhe, “What does universal quality education really mean for sub-Saharan Africa?”, Global Citizen, 4 March 2020.

institutions across the continent that partnered with local telecommunications companies to aid in the shift to online learning has also been acknowledged. In addition, partnerships were fostered to draw assistance from civil society, businesses and communities.

13. In Latin America, only 25 per cent of poor households are connected to the Internet and have a mobile device, and 44 per cent of schools are not connected. A total of 32 million children from 5 to 12 years of age (or 46 per cent) cannot switch to e-learning. Some countries, such as Bolivia, have had to suspend schooling because of the impossibility of maintaining it online.

14. One of the indicators for quality education is tertiary education enrolment. Data on tertiary enrolment by gender in sub-Saharan Africa indicate that female enrolment was consistently slightly lower than male enrolment from 2016 to 2020. A comparison between tertiary enrolment in sub-Saharan Africa and other regions of the world shows that both male and female enrolment are much lower in sub-Saharan Africa.

15. Great advances have been made regarding the provision of education in South Africa, including through legislation on fee-free primary schooling for the poorest 40 per cent of the population.[4] Notwithstanding these efforts to reduce inequalities in the education sector, the quality of education still varies widely, and the school system is considered to effectively consist of two differently functioning subsystems, reflecting the historical divide in schooling between white children and children of colour.[5]

16. The education system in Zimbabwe has retained its ranking as among the best in Africa despite a protracted economic crisis with wide-reaching impacts. Upon its independence, in 1980, the country introduced free compulsory primary and secondary education. However, State funding for schools is now inadequate, and the economic situation during the past decade has hampered the ability of some Zimbabweans to send their children to school. Low teacher morale owing to low salaries poses another serious challenge to the education system.[6]

17. In Kenya, the Government introduced a policy of free primary education, which led to a significant increase in pupil enrolment across the country in 2003. In 2018, the World Bank ranked Kenya as the top African country for education outcomes.[7] In 2007, the Government announced Kenya Vision 2030 with the goal of globally competitive high-quality education for sustainable development by 2030. To improve the quality of education in Kenya, the global initiative entitled "Child-Friendly Schools" was implemented in the country.[8] Notwithstanding these efforts, overall learning conditions and outcomes for children remain unsatisfactory in Kenya.[9]

18. In Asia, child-friendly schools have been implemented in several countries, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

19. The education system in Singapore is considered the best in the world, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Sri Lanka has the

[4] Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity, "Educational access in South Africa", Country Policy Brief (March 2008).

[5] Brahm Fleisch, *Primary Education in Crisis: Why South African Schoolchildren Underachieve in Reading and Mathematics* (Cape Town, Juta & Company, 2008).

[6] See https://www.zw.undp.org/content/zimbabwe/en/home/post-2015/mdgoverview/overview/mdg2.html.

[7] Kat Pattillo, "How Kenya became the strongest education system in Africa: 10 little-known moments that shaped history – from Kikuyu boycotts to Alliance, the Airlifts, Mau and M-Pesa", EdWell, 6 August 2020.

[8] United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *Child-Friendly Schools Manual* (New York, 2009).

[9] Australian Council for Educational Research Centre for Global Education Monitoring, "Uwezo: Monitoring children's competencies in East Africa", Assessment Series No. 7 (November 2014).

highest reported youth literacy rate in South Asia, at 98.7 per cent. The policy of its Government is to provide free education from the primary stage to the first-degree level of university education. Fundamental challenges include a lack of access to high-quality education, trained teachers and government funding for education.

20. In Bangladesh, all citizens must undertake 10 years of compulsory education. Primary and secondary education is financed by the State and free of charge in public schools. The country has achieved near-universal net primary enrolment, with approximately 98 per cent of children of primary school age enrolled in school. However, the quality of education in Bangladesh remains low. Major barriers to gaining access to education continue to exist for marginalized and excluded children, who are the most vulnerable to low learning outcomes and high dropout rates at both the primary and secondary levels.

21. Since 2007, India has made significant progress in education, with the overall enrolment rate for primary school-going children at over 95 per cent. However, surveys have highlighted that access to schooling has not translated into quality of learning. India is also among the countries with the world's longest pandemic-induced school closures, some at over 600 days, with significant consequences for education and learning. In addition, a large part of India does not have access to online education. In a recent survey of over 1,400 underprivileged homes, students in only 8 per cent of rural households and 24 per cent of urban households had such access. The challenge will be to bridge these pandemic-induced gaps and to strengthen the school system to address long-term challenges. This means reorienting the metrics of performance away from school inputs to outcomes and a greater degree of decentralization in school management so that teachers and school leaders are empowered to better align school functioning with school needs.

B. Building strong institutions to achieve gender equality

22. Gender inequalities, violence and discrimination against women continue to be major challenges, and climate change and natural disasters continue to have a disproportionate effect on women and children, as do conflict, migration and wars.

23. Conflict often exacerbates gender inequality and violence against women. Poverty is also a risk factor associated with gender-based violence that often intersects with and reinforces gender inequality. Various microfinance and other economic empowerment approaches have been implemented to try to address this intersection. The most frequently reported form of violence related directly to the COVID-19 pandemic is rapidly increasing sexual and gender-based violence, often perpetrated during the lockdown.

24. Efforts to fulfil Goal 5 – achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls – through gender mainstreaming are yielding fewer results than expected. A major cause is weak institutions across countries with reduced capabilities with which to implement such mainstreaming.

25. Gender mainstreaming is, among others, reflected in the labour force participation rate of men and women, which shows significant disparities worldwide, indicating institutional shortfalls in such mainstreaming.[10] Labour force participation rates for women between 2015 and 2021 are consistently below those of their male counterparts, notwithstanding policies to address gender inequality across the globe.

26. While Africa performs well overall on gender equality at work, with a higher-than-average labour force participation rate than that of the rest of the world, most

[10] International Labour Organization estimates, 2020.

African women work in the informal sector and have not been able to break into higher-paid, quality jobs and leading positions.[11] Although Africa has made remarkable progress regarding women's participation in policymaking, the continent still needs to attain the 50 per cent gender parity target set in the Goals.[12]

27. South Africa has the highest gender parity score, 0.76.[13] The Constitution enshrines the right to equality, equal protection and the benefit of the law, as well as to non-discrimination. The country's National Development Plan 2030, adopted in 2012, identifies women as the most affected by inequality, poverty and unemployment. In 2014, a new Department for Women was established to promote gender equality through oversight, advocacy, monitoring and evaluation.[14]

28. Although Botswana continues to make efforts towards gender equality, there are challenges that limit progress, such as cultural practices that perpetuate gender-based violence, inadequate representation of women in decision-making, poverty in women-headed households and laws that favour males over females (e.g. inheritance laws). In 2012, women in decision-making positions accounted for 20.6 per cent at the local governance level and 30.6 per cent within the four political parties.[15]

29. In Zimbabwe, although more women are in the labour market and public office than before, large inequalities still exist in some regions, with women systematically being denied the same work/labour rights as men. Unpaid care and domestic work, carried out mostly by women, and discrimination against women in public office remain huge barriers. Women earn 77 cents for every dollar that men receive for the same work. In 2018, only 24 per cent of national parliamentarians were women.[16]

30. In Kenya, the new Constitution of 2010 provided that no more than two thirds of the seats in the National Assembly should be held by persons of the same gender. In 2020, women captured 21.8 per cent – a marked improvement compared with the percentage for the previous parliament, but less than the expected one-third representation.[17]

31. In Latin America, not all women have benefited from advances in gender equality. In a World Bank study, it was found that, in 2010, women's wages equalled 71 per cent of those of men. Women of African and indigenous descent continue to be at a disadvantage.

32. In Brazil, the gap between men and women in labour force participation has changed little over the past decade, and women continue to be employed in areas with lower growth and lower wages and continue to have limited representation in politics.[18]

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[11] McKinsey Global Institute, *The Power of Parity: Advancing Women's Equality in Africa* (McKinsey & Company, November 2019).

[12] Hanan Morsy, "Mainstreaming gender in African policymaking: ensuring no voice is unheard", African Development Bank Group, 24 November 2019.

[13] McKinsey Global Institute, *The Power of Parity*.

[14] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) South Africa, "Gender equality and women empowerment" (n.d.). Available at https://www.za.undp.org/content/south_africa/en/home/operations/projects/womens_empowerment/gender-equality-and-women-empowerment--.html.

[15] UNDP Botswana, "Mainstreaming gender in policies in Botswana" (n.d.). Available at https://www.bw.undp.org/content/botswana/en/home/operations/projects/democratic_governance/mainstreaming-gender-in-policies-in-botswana.html.

[16] UNDP Zimbabwe, "Sustainable development that leaves no one behind" (n.d.). Available at https://www.zw.undp.org/content/zimbabwe/en/home/sustainable-development.html.

[17] Statista, "Proportion of seats held by women in the national parliament of Kenya from 2000 to 2020", database. Available at https://www.statista.com/statistics/1248316/proportion-of-seats-held-by-women-in-kenya-national-parliament (accessed on 21 January 2022).

[18] World Bank, "What does it mean to be a woman in Brazil? The answer will surprise you", 8 March 2017.

33. The gender inequality index reflects gender-based inequalities in three dimensions – reproductive health, empowerment and economic activity. In 2019, Mexico had a gender inequality index value of 0.322, ranking it 71 out of 162 countries.[19] In all, 48.4 per cent of parliamentary seats were held by women. The participation of women in the labour market was at 44.2 per cent compared with 78.5 per cent for men.

34. In Morocco, in 2020, 90.5 per cent of girls between 15 and 17 years of age in urban areas and 39.2 per cent of girls in that age group in rural areas were enrolled in school, compared with 56.3 per cent and 6.1 per cent, respectively, in 2000. Women in decision-making and leadership positions in the Parliament, the government and local governance represent more than 30 per cent.

C. Building strong institutions to protect life below water and life on land, taking into account interlinkages with action to combat climate change

35. The climate crisis continues largely unabated, and ecosystems continue to be threatened by human activities, resulting in increasing CO_2 emissions, biodiversity and habitat loss, pollution and degradation at alarming rates, with profound consequences for human survival and well-being.[20] Progress towards climate action (Goal 13) and the protection and conservation of marine and terrestrial ecosystems and resources (Goals 14 and 15) is insufficient, in some instances even declining or stagnating across regions.[21]

36. Countries in special situations, such as least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States, as well as coastal communities, are particularly affected. The reduction of biodiversity and natural resources, for example, is negatively affecting their livelihoods and food security.

37. It is therefore a crucial moment for strong institutions and policymakers enacting bold reforms. A particular concern is that the majority of indicators for Goal 13, on climate action, and Goal 16, on strong institutions, are in tier II of the Goals indicator system, meaning that data are not regularly produced by countries. Meaningful metrics that address the complexities of estimation of ecosystems have yet to be developed. Inadequate funding also remains a major transition barrier. Some of the institutional challenges can be addressed through strategic prioritization of mechanisms for policy coherence, which can allow for knowledge exchange, stimulation of partnerships and mobilization of new funds. This will require capacity-building in the public sector and ensuring that systemic arrangements of components necessary for monitoring and action are connected and functioning with adequate speed and strength.

[19] UNDP, “The next frontier: human development and the anthropocene”, briefing note for countries on the *Human Development Report 2020*: Mexico (2020).

[20] *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2021*.

[21] Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General, *Global Sustainable Development Report 2019: The Future is Now – Science for Achieving Sustainable Development* (New York, United Nations, 2019).

III. Assessment of the situation regarding the principle of leaving no one behind against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic and for implementation of the 2030 Agenda

A. Leaving no one behind

38. The COVID-19 pandemic has markedly slowed progress towards attaining the Goals, which are aimed at creating a better and more sustainable future for all by 2030. In order for the world to recover and build back better from the COVID-19 pandemic, no one (and no country) should be left behind in global efforts. Urgent action needs to be taken to prevent existing disparities from widening further, including between wealthy countries that have widespread access to vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics and poorer countries that are still struggling to vaccinate front-line health-care workers.

39. Under the heading of inclusiveness, leaving no one, and no country, behind and non-discrimination are key principles of effective governance, as formulated by the Committee and endorsed by the Economic and Social Council in 2018. In some countries, such as South Africa, the ambition to leave no one behind has a legal basis.

40. To build back better from COVID-19, it is important that countries build strong institutions capable of delivering the Goals, for example by ensuring policies that foster a more equal distribution of incomes and access to government services, promoting the public health sector and gender equality and enabling high-quality education. The COVID-19 pandemic has, for example, led to spiking unemployment rates with disproportionate impacts on low-income families, resulting in a call for adaptive social safety nets. It has shown the value of building universal social protection systems for all members of society.

41. The pandemic has also encouraged some Governments to establish innovative governance mechanisms, including COVID-19 policy trackers. The tracker used by Egypt is a dashboard that contains the country's response and recovery efforts. The pandemic has, however, also revealed an imbalance in how nations can respond and cooperate to mitigate its threat, with those who were already more vulnerable also the most prone to be left behind. Huge disparities have been observed in the ability of countries to implement the right policy packages to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on society and protect workers, including by reducing skill mismatches, encouraging job creation and enabling unemployed workers to find new employment more quickly. This calls for a renewed focus on people and their well-being and capabilities through regional and international cooperation.[22]

42. The emergence of new variants (Delta and Omicron) in both developed and developing countries, and related travel restrictions or bans, has caused further disruptions to economic activity, with financial stocks and labour markets reacting, making it even more difficult to build back from the pandemic. The pandemic is reshaping labour markets, and economies are adapting to whatever the new normal turns out to be.

43. Developing countries have been particularly affected, especially if travel bans or restrictions had been put in place by developed countries, a practice sometimes seen as selective or biased against developing countries. While travel restrictions can be a good means to slow the spread of new variants of the virus, they should not be selective or go

[22] Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, "Combating COVID-19 and ensuring no one is left behind", 12 July 2021.

beyond health parameters to include economic and political dimensions. To be eliminated, the virus must be eliminated worldwide. In short, control of the spread of the virus (and its new variants), and more effective pandemic management across economically integrated jurisdictions, can be considered a global public good whose production is determined by the weakest link, given that even well-performing countries will be affected by the insufficient progress of countries that are left behind.

44. Facing the COVID-19 pandemic requires an unprecedented degree of cooperation and collaboration between governments and citizens and across all facets of government and society to implement spatial distancing and other policy measures.[23] The need for a coordinated response and solutions to problems should be seen beyond individual contexts. There is a need to refocus interventions from a global development standpoint, where the boundaries between developed and developing countries are increasingly blurred.[24] Therefore, non-silo thinking in terms of response and recovery strategies is vital to counteracting this crisis.

45. The pandemic, and the subsequent resurgence of variants in both developed and developing countries, accompanied by inequality in gaining access to vaccines, points to the fact that there is a need for better governance in managing the virus and in the provision and distribution of vaccines. In Africa, low and insufficient levels of vaccination prevail owing to a lack of access to vaccines, among other factors. In April 2021, less than 2 per cent of the population of Africa had been vaccinated. By contrast, over 40 per cent of the population of the United States of America and over 20 per cent of the population of Europe had received at least one dose of the vaccine. This discrepancy reinforces the need for countries to increase their collaboration, working together to build back better from the pandemic while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Equal access to vaccines provides an example of an ideal world strategy for maximizing collaborative efforts to uphold the promise of leaving no one behind.

46. The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the digital transformation of governments, which has proven critical to the continued provision of and access to essential services. It has also increased the risk of a widening digital divide between and within countries, as well as the related risks of the digital exclusion of vulnerable groups. The application of the principle of leaving no one behind in the digital age means ensuring that the digital transition is inclusive, fair and just. Trust in government in the digital age involves digital transformation processes that are people-centred and representative of the realities of societies, especially in developing countries, as well as addressing some of the most pressing challenges for government institutions, in particular corruption. This will also require embedding digital rights relating to the responsible and ethical use of disruptive technologies to improve people's lives.

47. More investment in health care, education and other basic public services is needed. In the wake of rising inequality and mounting public debt, countries will have to find innovative approaches to obtain enough resources. Against this backdrop, it is important to strike the right balance between ensuring the safety of public health and maintaining and sustaining economic activity.

B. Reflections on State-building

48. Goal 16 is aimed at promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable

[23] World Bank, "Governance and institutions COVID-19 response resources" (n.d.).

[24] Rory Horner, "Towards a new paradigm of global development? Beyond the limits of international development", *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 44, No. 3 (19 March 2019).

and inclusive institutions at all levels. This aspiration must be supported by building sustainable States. State-building is an extremely difficult and long process, an even greater challenge in times of huge demands on governmental services, such as during a pandemic and/or a natural disaster. Not all States are the same or look the same. One of the key factors in possible success, which is not without complexity, is to consider national political will and structures, cultures and traditions, such as collective decision-making with the participation of community and religious leaders.

49. Public administration and the governance of public institutions are more complex and problematic in conflict-affected countries, given that most of them have weak governance systems, poor-quality or partial institutions and contested sovereignty or violent conflict, as well as mistrust in governments that too often fail to deliver good-quality services, in particular those relating to education and health, which are among the most crucial public services for any population.

50. Public administration and government have shown that they are critical in managing conflict and violence, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, some governments are taking advantage of the pandemic to create increasingly repressive security institutions that put populations, especially marginalized groups, at risk of violence.

51. The following elements seem generally important to helping to construct strong States: developing an overall consistent strategy and aims that do not change over time; correctly estimating the amount of time that it takes to construct institutions; avoiding the prioritization of short-term programmes that involve significant spending, which can increase corruption and reduce effectiveness; creating incentives to tackle corruption; building sustainable institutions; maintaining policies and practices; understanding the local political terrain; and ensuring peace and security.

52. An important lesson learned is that the bulk of resources spent should be on development activities and not on weaponry, engaging in conflicts or the military. In order for institutions to function properly, they require fundamental changes to society at large, which need to be introduced by clearly defining access to State power and authority, as well as the distribution of resources. The State should be sustainable and not too dependent on other States, which requires robust succession planning and the appointment of qualified leaders. The development of a sustainable tax base is also crucial to maintain State institutions. It is important that international financial support be reliable over a longer time period, given that sudden disruptions in aid and financial transfers can have catastrophic consequences for a country’s economy.

53. Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated government digitalization, which will continue to progress and influence State-building in the future.

IV. Recommendations on building strong institutions to build back better from COVID-19

Ensuring that no one is left behind

54. As noted, facing the COVID-19 pandemic requires cooperation between governments and citizens across all facets of society on a global scale, including with regard to building strong health institutions. When countries are left behind, there are weak links in the chain to fight COVID-19. Countries need to work together to eliminate the pandemic and build back better, ensuring that no one is left behind. Policies for fighting COVID-19 should not be discriminatory or unfair, but rather should ensure regional and global cooperation and solidarity and should promote the equitable distribution of vaccines. There is an urgent need to address the huge

disparities in the ability of countries to fight the pandemic and roll out vaccines. This can also help to ease the shocks caused in the stock, financial and labour markets.

Building strong institutions to ensure quality education

55. It is important that countries build strong institutions capable of delivering high-quality education. This can be achieved through the effective management of learning institutions, leadership and accountability, as well as through management systems capable of focusing on and controlling learning outcomes. Other measures include involving communities in the management of learning institutions, strengthening relationships with and support among all stakeholders and setting up structures that allow institutions to provide opportunities to engage with and empower students and their parents. The State should ensure a predictable and adequate budget allocation for these institutions. Promoting the use of technological equipment, such as tablets and interactive whiteboards, for better student-teacher interaction and improving the conditions for and empowering teachers, as well as developing their skills, are paramount. Furthermore, programmes that reduce the cost of schooling or provide incentives for attendance can be utilized. The child-friendly school model should be adopted more widely.

56. Education is central to climate change mitigation and adaptation and the sustainable use of natural resources. The reduction of waste and pollution, the recycling of materials and the use of environmentally benign products and services need to be accelerated by enhancing related education at all levels and in areas ranging from environmental science to civic action while tailoring them to the needs of girls and women in developing countries in particular, who have a primary role in gathering natural resources, including water, firewood and small-scale agriculture, for household consumption and use.

Building strong institutions to achieve gender equality

57. Gender mainstreaming needs to be further promoted, which involves the integration of a gender perspective into the preparation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, regulatory measures and spending programmes with a view to promoting equality between women and men and combating discrimination.[25] This can lead to increased well-being and the creation of a more socially just and sustainable society. Key elements to consider are adequate preparation, sufficient resources, stakeholder involvement, knowledge generation and gender expertise.

58. National policy and legislation that are translated at the institutional and corporate levels are required for stronger accountability on gender issues. There should be political commitment and a legal framework for better, higher-quality policymaking, better-functioning institutions and more effective processes so that policies respond more effectively to the needs of citizens of all genders.[26] Institutions need to make efforts to broaden the equitable participation of citizens of all genders at all levels of decision-making, which should ensure equal opportunities, recognition and status, as well as the equal sharing of the outcomes of development. Gender training needs to be continuous, up-to-date and more tailored to operational activities.

59. The skills, attitudes and behaviours of service providers should reflect a responsiveness to the needs and rights of women. Institutions need to make use of data disaggregated by sex in decision-making to gain a more informed understanding of an issue or a situation and to allow gender differences and inequalities to be identified and addressed.

[25] European Institute for Gender Equality, “What is gender mainstreaming?” (n.d.). Available at https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/what-is-gender-mainstreaming.

[26] Ibid.

Building strong institutions to protect ecosystems and support climate action

60. Strong institutions will need to be built to conserve ecosystems and natural resources and to support climate action. New metrics and measures that monitor the extent of natural capital are needed for assessing trends and critical locations for targeted interventions.

61. The education and empowerment of local communities, in particular of women, will be important, including for monitoring and data collection, as will efforts towards the restoration and improvement of environmental conditions. Local context-related components should be included in education curricula at all levels to raise awareness of challenges, such as climate change and biodiversity loss, as well as to elaborate measures that can increase conservation, sustainable use and resilience, including by empowering communities to adapt and innovate for their well-being.

62. Multi-stakeholder partnerships involving all relevant stakeholders will be critical for protecting and restoring marine and terrestrial ecosystems, addressing pollution and regulating resource use. Sustained partnerships should be stimulated, which may employ new financing models, new ecosystem valuation approaches (to raise financing partly from the private sector) and new solutions, such as the use of natural infrastructure for removing pollution, restoring environmental conditions and protecting against natural hazards. New natural capital valuation approaches can provide a basis for financing and building partnerships to implement sustainable solutions.

63. The unprecedented momentum towards climate action, supported by a number of country and private-sector pledges, should be used to foster collective agreements that attract more participants to the cause and to heighten the efforts of the global community to provide climate finance and technology transfers to developing countries in order to help them to enhance their efforts.

Promoting the better use of digital technology to support implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals under review

64. Digital transformation is embedded in and negotiated within broader political, societal and economic processes.[27] Business models based on data extraction, concentrations of power and the viral spread of misinformation and disinformation represent defining features of the current phase of digital transformation. For both private actors and governments, digital tools also allow unprecedented reach into people's everyday lives, including with regard to their health and education, was well as other areas. Digital transformation has the potential to bring both enormous long-term benefits and substantial disruption to many different areas. One such example is the rapid adoption of digital tools in the global educational sector since the outbreak of COVID-19. Improved institutional design can help to promote better use of digital technology in support of the implementation of the Goals under review.

V. Policy recommendations, commitments and cooperation measures for promoting a sustainable, resilient and inclusive recovery from the pandemic while advancing full implementation of the 2030 Agenda

65. The slogan "building back better" should also be interpreted as "building forward better", which can be accomplished by, among others, making public institutions resilient enough to deal better with future societal disruptions. This implies applying foresight methods, such as scenario planning, horizon scanning and

[27] Ilona Kickbusch and others, "The *Lancet* and *Financial Times* Commission on governing health futures 2030: growing up in a digital world", 24 October 2021.

visioning. The European Union promotes resilience and strategic foresight through, for example, regulatory impact assessments and by offering loans and grants of more than €700 billion to its 27 member States to invest in green and digital transitions, with the agreed targets of 37 per cent for climate and 20 per cent for digitalization projects. The European Union has also dedicated funding to ensuring a just transition.

66. Digital infrastructure and tools have been shown to be extremely important in tackling the pandemic and will continue to be needed, including to support implementation of the Goals by 2030. Digitalization can make governments much more effective and enables the more rapid provision of government services and more inclusive communication with citizens. Social media platforms have become the main source of news and information for not only young people but most people. They are huge accelerators for the distribution of essential information, but at the same time they can provide platforms for fake news and theories that are aimed at undermining trust in and the stability of democratic institutions. Thus, they have the potential to support institutions and governance in attaining the 2030 Agenda, but also to undermine them, while their own accountability is limited or absent.[28] In the trade-off between ensuring freedom of communication and restricting the spread of damaging information, it may be time to strengthen global cooperation against abuse of social media.

67. Central to the global debate on the future of government in the digital era are the broader ethical challenges of new technologies and their responsible use in, for and by the public sector. Reinforcing trust in the digital era has many dimensions, including trust in the capacity of governments to deliver services that are cost-effective; trust in the capacity of institutions to ensure that these services are delivered in an inclusive and fair manner, especially to those who need them the most; and trust in democracy to mitigate the risks of disinformation and polarization. In this regard, the United Nations is a critical platform for resolving central issues, including by fostering the human-centred development of artificial intelligence, respecting human rights and ensuring that no one is left out of the digital transition. The adoption of the first global Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence is an important step towards regulation in the digital era.[29]

68. “Building forward better and stronger” is also a good slogan for those parts of social and economic life that have not been fundamentally changed as a result of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing climate change crisis. However, the tasks, means, working methods and workforce of the public sector have fundamentally changed, with some changes appearing to be more substantial in certain countries than in others. The prominent features of the new normal include the new strengths mentioned in the paragraphs below, as well as associated weaknesses, which should be addressed.

69. First, there is a new recognition of the crucial role of public institutions in creating values, putting service back into public service for sustainable development and ensuring transparent and effective regulatory authorities for functioning markets and the rule of law. However, this needs to be accompanied by partnerships with civil society, business operators, the private sector, academia and science.

70. Second, practical experience and learning from past errors regarding crisis management are assets of effective public administration. Crises are not permanent, and crisis management should have its limits. Governments should not hesitate to scale down from crisis governance mode to normal governance mode as soon as is

[28] Yaël Eisenstat, “How to hold social media accountable for undermining democracy”, *Harvard Business Review*, 11 January 2021; and Lisa Schirch, ed., *Social Media Impacts on Conflict and Democracy: The Techtonic Shift* (London, Routledge, 2021).

[29] Adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO in November 2021.

possible while maintaining additional new capacity to switch quickly to crisis governance mode when a new crisis emerges. This is a test case for responsible political leadership because crisis management comes with special powers, which should not be extended beyond reasonable limits or abused.

71. Third, the crisis has forced many public servants to work from home, and they may be working in hybrid circumstances going forward. This has given them greater flexibility and saved them commuting time. However, a new balance must be found between working from home and working in person in government offices to serve all people with integrity and transparency and under independent oversight. This reality must include public servants in the health and education sectors who, in a changing labour market and work environment, interact directly with citizens.

72. Fourth, civil servants are facing new challenges related to crisis management, Goal implementation and the implementation of climate change policies. New mindsets and behaviours in public institutions need to be promoted to better prepare for related complexity and uncertainties.[30] Both competences and values must be aligned with current and future requirements at all levels of governance.

73. It is necessary to address the long-term underlying causes of conflict and exclusion, including State legitimacy, the misuse of power, inequality and poverty. Governments and multilateral institutions are capable of the long-term policy changes required in development approaches to facilitate inclusion.

74. The COVID-19 pandemic is not just a health, humanitarian and socioeconomic crisis; it is a governance crisis testing the resilience of governance systems and institutions. A lack of sufficient accountability and oversight mechanisms in crisis response and recovery significantly increases the risk of corruption. It is important to integrate transparency, accountability and anti-corruption into both response and recovery priorities. The aim should be to strengthen governance arrangements, promote social accountability and the role of civil society, and harness the benefits of technology and innovation in enhancing transparency and openness. In addition, it is necessary to increase the capacities of centres of government with regard to strategic planning and co-ordination to manage government operations.

75. Competent public administration, governance and institutions are necessary for the coordination of sustainable policies. With weak public institutions or structures, the public sector remains vulnerable to external pressures, including corruption and repressive behaviour by regimes that seek to enhance their own power, undermining effective and inclusive governance.

76. Effectively addressing the Goals under review at the national and subnational levels requires high-quality and contextualized public institutions and governance with mechanisms to monitor progress, including by using meaningful indicators. The current set of official Goal indicators could be improved. Given that only a short time remains until 2030, potentially leaving insufficient time to develop new official indicators, countries could use auxiliary indicators to complement the set of globally agreed Goal indicators. Although they sometimes lack statistical data or rely on qualitative assessments, some national statistical offices think that using them results in more balanced monitoring and could also help to accelerate the maturation of official Goal indicators.

77. Problems of mistrust and issues may surround the legitimacy of some governments. The technical ability of public officials is a necessary but insufficient

[30] Recommended practices can be found in United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Changing Mindsets to Realize the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: How to Promote New Mindsets and Behaviors in Public Institutions to Implement the Sustainable Development Goals* (United Nations publication, 2021).

condition for building trust. Trust is also built through the provision of clear and verified information, among other actions, such as the communication of evidence about vaccinations to the population.

78. The development of local governance networks and community partnerships can help to build trust and enable governments and communities to build forward from COVID-19 together. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the organization United Cities and Local Governments has organized several activities with various stakeholders to raise awareness of and highlight best practices, including in Africa, where local and regional governments are on the frontline to deal and cope with the pandemic.

79. The pandemic and other recent crises have made it clear that different levels of government cannot provide the necessary services and protection to citizens if they work in silos. In countries including India, for example, strong subnational governance, in particular at the local level, played an important role in ensuring that COVID-19 health-related responses reached patients. States with strong local governments, such as Kerala, were far better at responding to COVID-19 than states where local governments lacked fiscal and administrative powers. Beyond COVID-19, many of the critical challenges confronting the globe will require the strong participation of local governments, which need better intergovernmental coordination and cooperation. This requires building new federal institutions that enable institutionalized spaces for coordination and cooperation across levels of governments. As part of their crisis management, many countries have created ad hoc multilevel committees or other forms of collaboration between the national Government and the tiers of the subnational government. In regions where supranational rules or agreements apply, the regional level is part of the multilevel governance architecture. These new institutional mechanisms for quick and effective collaboration should not be abolished completely after a crisis, but should at least remain in a kind of standby mode, ready to be used again when necessary, which would enhance the institutional resilience of governments and societies as a whole.

80. International cooperation amplifies the efforts of individual countries in the fight against and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and is not only useful but indispensable. It is essential to confront this shared threat, as well as to support and facilitate inclusive and sustainable recovery. The pandemic revealed the need for inclusive multilateralism – cooperation, collective action and common principles – while respecting people's differences as much as their common values. The pandemic also exposed new vulnerabilities in multilateral governance and the need to balance national interest, global needs and challenges within countries related to subnational coordination and federal negotiation. In 2020, countries were quick to close their borders, perhaps for the first time in contemporary history. New challenges for global and multilateral institutions have now emerged, visible most starkly in the challenge of vaccine equity, which seems to be the only route to fighting COVID-19 and which has been highlighted by the emergence of the Omicron variant.

VI. Key messages for inclusion in the ministerial declaration of the 2022 high-level political forum

Building strong and effective public institutions is crucial for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and building forward better from the COVID-19 pandemic

81. Building back better from COVID-19 while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls for the building of strong institutions at all levels – global, regional, national and subnational. That requires

political will, a change of mindset, commitment, awareness and knowledge. Effective cooperation among all countries is imperative, including on the sharing of data and information, digitalization, vaccine distribution, education and training.

Assisting developing countries in making their public institutions, societal and physical infrastructure and economies more resilient and agile against not only COVID-19 but all potential future shocks is crucial and in the interest of all nations

82. None of the institution-building objectives to support the Sustainable Development Goals can be attained without ensuring that COVID-19 has been well contained, at least in the short run, and that the plight of the poor across countries is adequately addressed. Starting now, measures that are geared towards recovery, which entail a focus on reopening and rebuilding economies in a sustainable manner, are needed. Such measures would include assisting developing countries in their continued efforts to achieve the Goals and respond to and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, including by managing their debt levels, rebuilding their economies and improving their health sector in particular. Reaching the end of the global pandemic will only be possible by supporting the weakest countries and leaving no one behind.

Investing in the public sector workforce is needed to align competences and values with the challenges ahead

83. Better crisis management is needed to overcome the current pandemic and future challenges, as well as the development of competencies to foster implementation of the Goals. Such competences and values must be strengthened among the public workforce, which includes, among others, upgrading the technical skills necessary for climate change policies. Awareness of the Goals, the critical importance of collaboration for policy coherence and the role of leadership is a key element for training existing members of the workforce and hiring qualified new staff. Digitalization should be considered a useful tool that must comprise mindfulness of inclusiveness, sustainability, ethics and humanity to be truly at the service of the people. Conceived in this way, the digitalization of the public sector requires resources, talents and infrastructure. Global needs and priorities need to be identified, addressed and monitored, while it should be remembered that more than 3 billion people in the world are not connected, including most people in Africa.

Global cooperation and solidarity are critical, and all countries should work together to fight the virus and ensure equitable vaccine distribution while ensuring that no one – and no country – is left behind

84. Global cooperation would involve all countries and include the sharing of data and information, as well as the equal distribution of vaccines. Furthermore, the cross-border nature of COVID-19 implies that the short-term efforts of a given country not taking into account the efforts or lack thereof of other countries might not serve its long-term interest. In this regard, effective monitoring and coordination by multilateral organizations are needed in order to engender effective cooperation.