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Stocktaking of progress on Sustainable Development Goal 16

Progress on institutional aspects of Sustainable Development Goal 16: access to information, transparency, participation and accountability

Note by the Secretariat

Summary

    The present note includes recent developments in relation to selected institutional aspects of Sustainable Development Goal 16, namely, access to information, transparency, participation and accountability. It also examines global trends and institutional developments at the national level, over the past two decades, and reviews what is known about the effectiveness and impact of various initiatives. Finally, it offers some conclusions that could inform the discussions of the Committee on the issue.

    Monitoring the developments of institutional aspects of the Sustainable Development Goals is challenging. No comprehensive system exists that would provide simple, readily understandable information on the trends for all the institutional dimensions considered in the present note and for all countries. In general, more evidence is available on the process side of the performance of initiatives (inputs and outputs) than on their outcomes and broader impact.

    Over the past two decades, there has been a steady wave of international and national legal instruments and other initiatives that have framed institutional developments in relation to the institutional principles considered in the present note. Rapid changes in information technologies have continued to modify the space in which policies and institutions related to transparency, participation and accountability develop. It is undeniable that there has been a wave of laws on access to information, the adoption of new norms and standards for fiscal transparency and the development of open government data and new channels for direct citizen participation and, at first glance, such changes can be seen as a sign of progress.

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* E/C.16/2019/1.

However, when the focus is on the outcomes and impact of the observed changes, it is difficult to construct a clear global picture of the progress achieved. The impact of transparency, accountability and participation initiatives varies widely. There is often a gap between the assumed benefits of such initiatives and their actual impact. Unclear assumptions about the links between specific actions or processes and expected outcomes often result in unmet expectations. Recent literature has pointed to the importance of using broad strategies that combine multiple instruments, as opposed to individual institutional mechanisms. Experts all underline the importance of context and the lack of replicability of institutional instruments.

Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals provides a convenient framework for looking at institutions in a holistic manner. Together, the Goals and their targets provide a map that countries can use to identify the sources of information across all sectors that are relevant for assessing progress on institutional dimensions.

I. Introduction

1.   Institutions are paramount to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and all of the Sustainable Development Goals. The 2030 Agenda and the Goals feature institutions prominently, both as a cross-cutting theme in many of the Goals and as part of the focus of Goal 16, to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. The strengthening of national institutions to deliver the Goals is seen as a priority in many Member States, as shown in their voluntary presentations at the high-level political forum on sustainable development.

2.   At its seventeenth session, the Committee of Experts on Public Administration decided to include in the agenda for its eighteenth session a stocktaking of progress made towards meeting Goal 16. The decision to include that item also relates to the first review of Goal 16 by the high-level political forum, in July 2019.

3.   The present note aims to take stock of developments at the national level in relation to selected institutional principles highlighted in Goal 16 targets, including: (a) transparency, including access to information; (b) participation and inclusiveness of decision-making processes; and (c) accountability. Those principles apply to institutions in general, both at the systemic level and at the level of specific Goals. They are a subset of the principles of effective governance for sustainable development put forward by the Committee and endorsed in 2018 by the Economic and Social Council.[1,2]

4.   The note highlights the conceptual and practical difficulties associated with defining and measuring progress on those dimensions. It includes the results of surveys on global trends and institutional developments at the national level over the past two decades, as well as information on what is known about the effectiveness and impact of various initiatives.[3] Finally, it offers conclusions that could inform the discussions of the Committee on such issues.

5.   The present note focuses on the public sector. It does not examine the role of States in fostering transparency and accountability in the private sector – an area of critical importance for the success of the Goals – but instead looks at hybrid governance arrangements, such as multi-stakeholder partnerships, in a limited way.

II. Difficulty of measuring progress on institutional dimensions

6.   Measuring the institutional aspects of Goal 16 poses various challenges that make it difficult to define the progress achieved in any of those dimensions. Given that those difficulties have an impact on any attempt to review global trends, they are outlined briefly below.

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[1] See Economic and Social Council resolution 2018/12, para. 10, and Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2005, Supplement No. 24 (E/2018/44-E/C.16/2018/8), para. 31.

[2] Developments in relation to other key institutional principles or dimensions, such as non-discrimination and anti-corruption, are not included in the present document owing to limited space. They will be reviewed in the forthcoming work of the Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, including the 2019 edition of the *World Public Sector Report*.

[3] Effectiveness is examined herein only in relation to institutional arrangements relevant to transparency, accountability and participation. It does not elaborate specifically on dimensions of that concept put forward by the Committee in its principles of effective governance, namely competence, sound policymaking and collaboration.

7.   As is the case in other areas of the Sustainable Development Goals, work on the themes addressed by Goal 16 has a long history that predates the adoption of the Goals. Transparency, accountability, participation and other institutional principles are broad concepts and are approached differently by scholars and practitioners from different disciplines. The various expert communities, including international institutions that promote work on governance, adopt different semantic maps of those concepts.

8.   Generally speaking, it is difficult to define progress for any of the institutional dimensions considered in the present note. One reason is that, for each dimension, the desirability of change in one or the other direction is not a priori straightforward, as tensions may arise with other institutional or human rights principles. For example, in order to define the "appropriate" degree of transparency in a given environment, it is necessary to balance considerations of privacy and security, among other factors. Critically, different groups of society may have very different perspectives on where the appropriate balance lies. As the mix of world views differs across societies, so the institutional choices that best reflect societal consensus will also vary. Also, in any country, the preferred balance between principles may change over time, owing to social, political or technological developments.

9.   A second reason stems from the relationships that exist among the institutional principles discussed herein. There are multiple and dynamic causal interactions among them, and context is a key variable for understanding how they interact and what outcomes they produce (e.g., improved services, trust). For example, an institutional change that results in increased transparency in one context may produce a different effect in another context. It is therefore often difficult to define unambiguously the baselines or current status of any of them.

10.   Within each dimension, there remain conceptual debates on what matters for development outcomes, i.e. the linkage between the development of institutions and processes in a certain area (e.g., access to information) and their impact on societal outcomes (e.g., better access to public services or reductions in corruption). This translates into difficulty in unambiguously defining progress at the level of broad principles – such as accountability or transparency – in a way that would be valid in all contexts and at all times. Therefore, progress can only be meaningfully defined with reference to local political and institutional contexts and dynamics. That heterogeneity and dependence on national context were recognized by the Committee when it elaborated its principles of effective governance.

11.   Goal 16 encompasses a diverse set of fields in which measurement work has developed independently. Within each field, there are conceptual debates as to what should be measured and how. By way of reflecting this, under each of the institutional principles examined in the present document, a number of indicators and indices have been developed to measure different dimensions and subdimensions. The indicators produced by different initiatives have different scopes, reflect different underlying theories or assumptions about governance and support different agendas in terms of progress. Most indicators are complex and can be hard to interpret out of their context. The methodologies of indices tend to change quite frequently, making long-term series hard to find. One of the consequences of this multiplicity of approaches is that different surveys on the same issue sometimes uncover conflicting trends. [4]

12.   Measuring the effectiveness and impact of institutional arrangements is most difficult. Generally speaking, the effectiveness of public institutions is the extent to

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[4] A discussion on the indicators relating to Goal 16 is provided in another paper by the secretariat prepared for the eighteenth session of the Committee, on relating the principles of effective governance for sustainable development to practices and results (E/C.16/2019/4).

which they are able to deliver the goals for which they were set up. Effectiveness is always defined with respect to an outside objective or goal. In the context of implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, the effectiveness of institutions should be measured in terms of how well they support the realization of specific Goals and targets. One has to distinguish between two degrees or types of effectiveness: the immediate outcomes, i.e. whether institutions are able to meet their intended purposes; and the broader impact, i.e. whether institutions are conducive to enhanced outcomes for citizens in terms of quality of life, public services, civic engagement and other dimensions of well-being. Table 1 presents examples of generic questions and dimensions of interest in relation to the measurement of inputs, processes, outputs, outcomes and impacts for the institutional principles covered in the present note.

13. Studies in the governance field tend to focus mostly on inputs and processes, less on outcomes and even less on impacts. Qualitative evaluations exist for a large number of initiatives relating to transparency, accountability and participation, but metareviews of those are few and far between – those known to the authors are highlighted in later sections.

Table 1
Questions to assess the effectiveness of initiatives relating to institutional principles of Goal 16

Institutional principle	Inputs and processes	Outputs	Outcomes	Impacts
Access to information	Adoption of laws on access to information and creation of related institutions Adaptation of organizations to meet the requirements in laws on access to information, including resources and capacity-building	Number of requests made to public institutions Outcomes of requests for information Measures of compliance with such laws for different institutions	Volume and type of information disclosed, over time Use made by requesters of information received Changes in the behaviour of public officials and public agencies	Do citizens feel empowered to request information from the Government? Has information contributed to improving public debate? Has information contributed to enhancing public sector accountability? Has information contributed to improving public services or to enhancing the effectiveness of public institutions?
Transparency	National initiatives on open government data Adoption of legal framework mandating or encouraging disclosure (targeted or not)	Information produced and published by government agencies Measures of compliance with the law	Types of information that are more or less available than in the past Changes in perceptions of transparency	Is the information published through initiatives on open government data and mandated disclosure relevant and useful to citizens, non-governmental organizations and firms? Has disclosure contributed to improving public services? Has information disclosure contributed to improving government accountability?

Institutional principle	Inputs and processes	Outputs	Outcomes	Impacts
Inclusive and participatory decision-making	Changes in legal framework with regard to participation Creation of participatory channels and mechanisms Organizational change to accommodate and manage participatory mechanisms in public institutions	Number of participatory events and channels created Number of people from different social groups who engage in participatory mechanisms	Impact of participation on decision-making and resource allocation Contribution of participation to more responsive and higher quality public services Changes in the behaviour of public officials as regards the way in which they interface with citizens Changes in citizens' perceptions of participation, empowerment	How significant is the civic space for participatory processes? How are participatory processes changing social dynamics, including civic engagement? How are power relations affected by participatory processes? Have participatory processes contributed to enhancing trust in Government?
Accountability	Constitutional or legal provisions for government accountability Charters for civil service Organizational processes for accountability (e.g., performance processes)	Compliance with formal processes for government reporting and oversight Implementation of civil service accountability-related measures	Outcomes of formal oversight processes, including possible sanctions Outcomes of internal accountability mechanisms in public agencies	Are institutional checks and balances more robust? How have work ethics and motivation changed in the public service? Are civil servants more responsive to the public?

III. Trends in and effectiveness of institutional aspects

A. Transparency

14.   For the purpose of the present note, transparency can be defined as the principle of enabling the public to gain information about the operations, structures, decision-making processes, outcomes and performance of the public sector. It encompasses multiple subdimensions and fields of expertise. Four categories of transparency are addressed herein: access to information frameworks; mandatory disclosure (also called "targeted transparency"); proactive, voluntary disclosure of information by Governments, including open government data; and fiscal transparency.
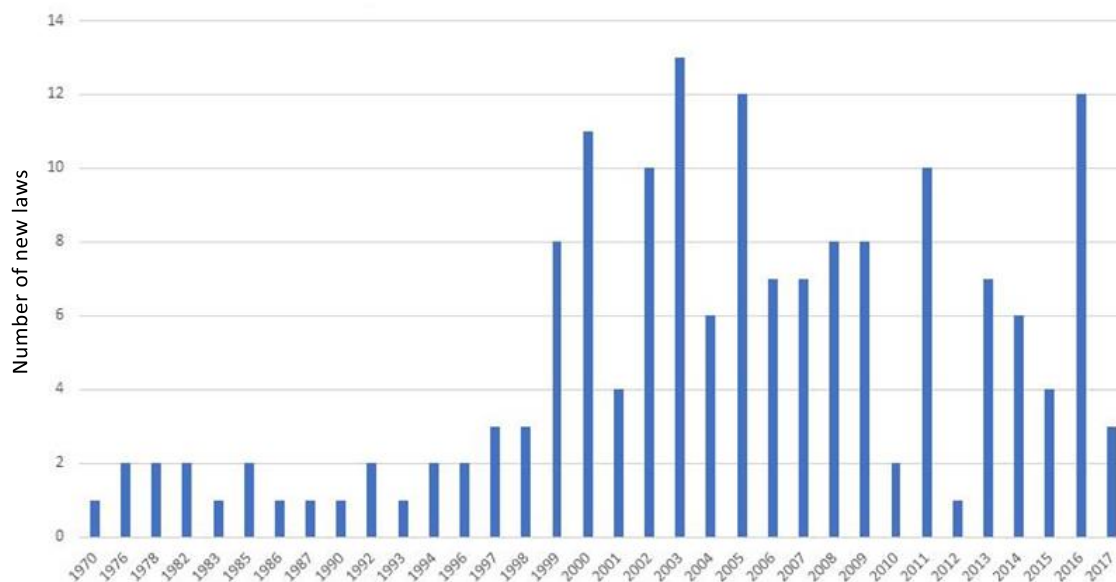
Access to information frameworks

15.   While access to information has strong connections with and is often considered part of transparency, its origins are linked to human rights. The notion of the right to information has been included in international legislation since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed in 1948, article 19 of which addresses the right to freedom of opinion and expression. Since then, a number of international legal instruments have been developed, including at the regional level, for example, the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention), which was adopted in 1998). The development of national regimes on access to information started earlier than other modern transparency movements.

16.   At the national level, the exercise of the right to information has been regulated through laws on access to information (also referred to as laws on the right to information or on freedom of information). In addition, sectoral laws (e.g., on the environment, consumer protection, anti-corruption or public procurement) often regulate access to specific types of information. In 2017, 118 countries had adopted a law or policy on the right to information, including 113 that had adopted laws and 5 that had adopted national decrees or policies (see also figure I). In addition, in 90 countries, the right to information was mentioned explicitly in their national constitutions. Over 40 countries were in the process of adopting a law on the right to information, either as a tabled or a pending bill.

17.   Several challenges are linked to the implementation of international and national instruments. Provisions for access to information in international instruments are often of a general nature and do not provide practical details on implementation or enforcement at the national level. Many international instruments remain vague or only establish minimum – often mainly procedural – standards, though they do not prevent countries from adopting further-reaching measures. Terms contained in international instruments are often open to interpretation. Even when provisions are clear in creating certain rights or obligations, they are not always implemented effectively by countries. Conversely, internal deficiencies of national legal systems can undermine the potential impact of international instruments.

Figure I
Development of national/federal freedom-of-information laws or decrees, 1970–2017

Source: Open Society Justice Initiative, 2017, list of countries that guarantee a right of access to information in national/federal laws or decrees.

18.   While laws on access to information exist in many countries, not all have been implemented effectively. Major issues include non-compliance, the lack of enforcement and poor monitoring of implementation. In many countries, requests for information are often denied. Among the main challenges to implementation are: unclear legal frameworks; the lack of independence of oversight bodies; the lack of political will to implement the law; the lack of human and financial resources; the lack of training and capacity-building for public officials; ineffective management systems; and low public awareness about the rights of citizens.

19.   As illustrated by longitudinal studies of national access-to-information regimes, Governments and public institutions have adapted their practices to the advent of information disclosure requirements in ways that are not always conducive to increased transparency. Increases in nominal transparency can be accompanied by restrictions to the type of material that is made public, in multiple ways. In a broader context, advances in government transparency may be concomitant to threats to privacy and increased surveillance.

20.   International instruments, and the access-to-information regimes derived therefrom, in general do not oblige the private sector to disclose information, even when it performs public service missions and delivers public services. Arguments of commercial confidentiality can be used to prevent access to information (e.g., information on pollutants from industrial facilities). The same often applies to arm's length agencies that are independent from line ministries. However, some countries have extended their access-to-information laws to include the private sector under specific conditions (e.g., private organizations receiving public funds) and for specific sectors.

21.   To date, there has been relatively little empirical research and evidence on the effectiveness of access-to-information instruments. Most of the studies undertaken cover the performance of access-to-information regimes in terms of process and compliance of public institutions. Several studies have covered the impact of access-

to-information laws on institutional change. For example, a large study conducted in 2006 by the Open Society Justice Initiative found that, overall, the presence of freedom-of-information laws increased the responsiveness of public officials. Case studies have shown that laws on access to information can effect positive social change, especially when used in conjunction with participation and empowerment, for example in social accountability initiatives.

Mandatory disclosure

22.   Much of the information disclosed by public agencies or private firms that provide public services comes from compliance with laws or regulations. This is true for such information as accounts published by firms, school performance data published by education ministries, water quality indicators published by utilities, food labelling and the disclosure of provisions included in financial products (e.g., mortgages). In many sectors, mandated transparency has increased over the years, often in response to objectives relating to enhanced accountability or the improvement of outcomes for citizens. Owing to the wide range of areas covered by such "targeted transparency", no global or even national maps of such provisions exist.

23.   In terms of effectiveness, many evaluations of disclosure strategies and their impact on public awareness, consumer choices, health and education outcomes, the quality of public services and other outcomes have been produced in a piecemeal, often sectoral fashion. Such initiatives exhibit a great diversity of outcomes that are often linked to detailed characteristics of their design and implementation. For example, the choice of which information to disclose and the way in which it is presented often greatly influence the impact thereof.

Proactive disclosure and open government data

24.   There have been massive strides made over the past decade in the proactive publication of government data on government websites. Most Governments now offer information and transactional services online. For example, as of 2018, most countries offer e-procurement tools, with a rapid progression in the diffusion of such tools during the past few years. As of 2018, 139 countries had gone a step further and implemented open government data initiatives that made data available to the public through central portals, compared with only 46 such initiatives in 2014. Most of those portals offered data in machine-readable format, according to commonly accepted open government data standards. Several organizations were monitoring the type of data that are published by different Governments through such initiatives. The Open Government Partnership, launched in 2011, has been a highly visible initiative to promote open government, including (but not limited to) open government data. As of 2018, the partnership had 79 member countries (see figure II).

Figure II
Evolution of the membership of the Open Government Partnership, 2011–2018
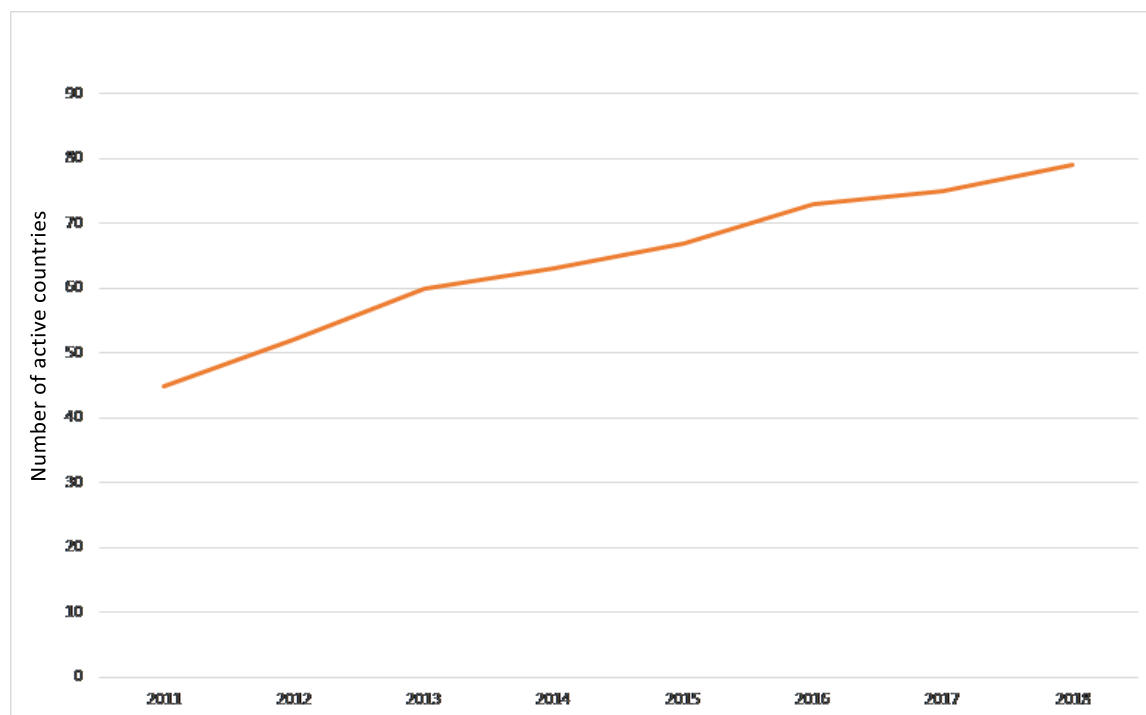
Source: Open Government Partnership, 2018.

25.   It would seem there has been no global review of the effectiveness of open government data initiatives, the assumed benefits of which include added value for non-government actors, especially the private sector, transparency and improved accountability. However, evidence from individual countries seems to indicate that those objectives are not always met. The lack of demand for open data from the local private sector and citizens can result from their insufficient involvement in the conception and design of such initiatives. International initiatives that follow the development of open government data highlight disconnects between the data that are published and the needs of different groups of society. Whereas open government data is often heralded as promoting government accountability, critics of that movement have expressed concerns that Governments place priority on releasing large amounts of raw, unstructured data that are not readily usable by ordinary citizens. Experts have pointed out the need for public capacity-building to interpret the data that are published (e.g., through non-governmental organizations, which can act as intermediaries, or the press). They also express concern that Governments can use the concept of open government to give the appearance of being more open while still lacking transparency and accountability.

Fiscal and budget transparency

26.   Fiscal and budget transparency have a long history. The latter is encompassed in the former, which also includes transparency in tax matters and other domains. The High-level Principles on Fiscal Transparency, Participation and Accountability were developed in 2012 by the Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency, and the General Assembly took note of them in its resolution 67/218.

27.   Budget transparency is monitored by several international institutions. The open budget surveys of the International Budget Partnership, an international

non-governmental organization, are perhaps the best known regular source of information on national practices in this area. According to the International Budget Partnership, at the global level, the public availability of budget information improved slowly but regularly from 2008 to 2015 but declined between 2015 and 2017. On the whole, more budget information seems to be available at present than a decade ago. There is a wide range of variations in disclosure practices across countries and regions.

28. Beyond the data produced by international surveys, issues regarding budget transparency encompass other dimensions. Typically, parts of government revenues and expenditures are managed outside the main budget (e.g., special purpose funds created to receive and manage natural resource revenues or certain tax proceeds). Information on such funds may be less transparent than that concerning the main budget and may not be covered by international monitoring initiatives.

29. Information on government revenues (and associated expenditures) from natural resources, because of their importance to the public resources of many countries, has been the subject of much attention in the area of transparency. Specific transparency initiatives have been put in place in extractive industries. Among those, the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, established in 2003, is the best known. As at November 2015, 31 countries were "compliant" with the Initiative and another 49 were "candidates". In total, 49 countries had disclosed payments and revenues worth some $1.67 trillion in more than 200 reports under the Initiative, and over 90 major companies involved in oil, gas and mining were committed to supporting the Initiative. While the Initiative has been abundantly studied, research seems to be divided as regards its impact on governance and outcomes for citizens.

30. The lack of transparency by Governments around public-private partnerships has also been a concern. More and more countries are proactively publishing information on such partnerships. Several countries have launched disclosure portals to make non-confidential information relating to public-private partnerships contracts available to the public. Proactive releases of data on concessions, including the release of contractual agreements, licenses and accompanying spatial data, have been on the rise globally and are specifically encouraged by partnerships such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. There is, however, no universal standard for the disclosure of information related to logging, mining and agricultural concessions, which often results in data quality issues.

General conclusions on transparency

31. Empirical evidence provides a multifaceted picture about the successes and impact that can be achieved through transparency initiatives. Results show that transparency may be an important deterrent of corruption, but the relationship between the two is not straightforward. Greater fiscal transparency appears to be linked to a higher quality of financial management and public procurement. The efficacy of transparency in encouraging greater government accountability and performance is highly variable. Likewise, there are no universal patterns in terms of the impact of transparency on citizen participation, trust in government and citizen satisfaction.

32. Until recently, the movements advocating the right to information and open government data had evolved independently from one another. A recent trend has been the tendency of some Governments to emphasize open government data initiatives, sometimes minimizing the importance or suggesting the redundancy of access-to-information frameworks. Yet the two types of mechanisms complement each other: access-to-information laws often constitute the basis upon which open government data initiatives can be built. They also provide for access to data that may not be

disclosed spontaneously by Governments but that are critically important in order for stakeholders to keep Governments accountable. The challenge for the future is how to establish appropriate transparency infrastructure and put in place the enabling conditions that can enhance the impact of all types of transparency initiatives.

B. Inclusive and participatory decision-making

33. The notions conveyed by the terms used in target 16.7 of Goal 16 encompass or intersect with commonly used terms, such as engagement, participation and collaborative governance. The present section considers only direct participation, as opposed to indirect participation through representative systems.

34. The past few decades have witnessed the development of a myriad of participatory mechanisms in many countries, fields and forms and at different geographical levels. Table 2 provides examples of different types of mechanisms, categorized around three variables: consultation versus decision-making powers; sectoral versus cross-sectoral; and geographical level. The present note considers only a subset of those categories.

Table 2
**Examples of participatory mechanisms**

	Consultation activities		Participation in decision-making	
	National	Local	National	Local
Cross-sectoral	National economic and social councils National sustainable development councils	Local activities on Agenda 21	Formal (open) consultations in policy processes	Participatory planning and budgeting
Sectoral	Sectoral councils and advisory committees	Social impact assessments Environmental impact assessments	Multi-stakeholder partnerships Co-production of public services	Participatory management or co-management of natural resources

Note: Some mechanisms are relevant at both the national and local levels.

Formal consultations in policy processes

35. In many countries, Governments have put in place processes for consulting with stakeholders at different stages of the elaboration of new policies. Developments in this area are monitored in different ways. The worldwide governance indicators of the World Bank include a component on public participation in decision-making. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development includes indicators on participation in policymaking in its *Government at a Glance* publications. The indicators used in both publications are not obvious to interpret in a comparative way. Since 2012, the United Nations e-Government Survey has monitored e-participation in 193 countries, distinguishing among the provision of information, consultation and the consideration of the results of consultations in decision-making. The trends show an increase in the number of countries that use e-consultation and also indicate that Governments often acknowledge how e-consultations have informed decision-making (see figure III).

Figure III
Number of countries conducting e-consultations in different policy areas, 2014 and 2016

■ E-consultation only   ■ Results of consultations included in decision-making
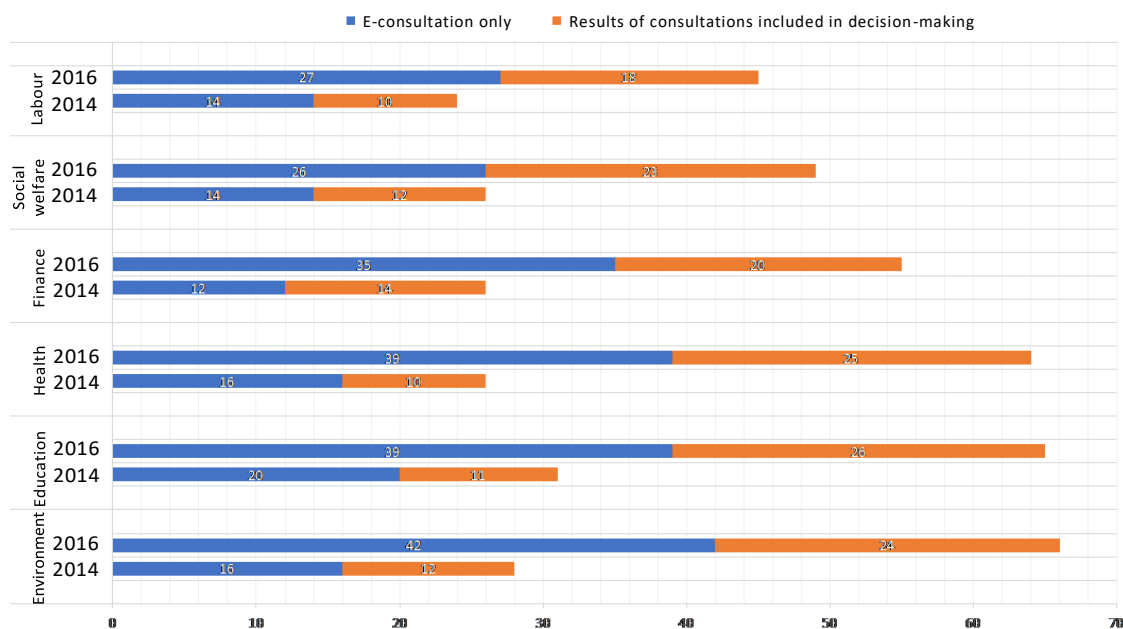
Source: United Nations e-Government Surveys, 2014 and 2016.

Cross-sectoral consultation mechanisms

36. Consultation mechanisms at the systemic (cross-sectoral) level include traditional "corporatist" advisory councils, such as economic and social councils, and structures linked to the sustainable development tradition, such as national sustainable development councils. The former type of institution is widespread around the world; their role is consultative and their impacts have been varied. The latter type emerged after the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 and has received renewed attention since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda. Those institutions are now widespread, with many councils playing active parts in the institutional arrangements for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals at the national level. Compared with economic and social councils, the effectiveness and impact of national sustainable development councils have not been extensively documented.

Participation at the sectoral level

37. Over the years, many countries have put in place consultative mechanisms at the sectoral level. As mentioned in the *World Public Sector Report 2018*, this has encompassed a great variety of institutional mechanisms and channels for engagement. The types of structures for stakeholder engagement used in various sectors include multi-stakeholder networks and platforms, multisectoral committees or councils and advisory and expert committees. Consultation approaches also include public hearings, workshops, consultations through open meetings and the incorporation of stakeholders in teams responsible for preparing policies, plans or programmes. The level of stakeholder engagement and the structures and approaches used vary across sectors and from country to country.

38.   No comprehensive global mapping of the different types of consultative mechanisms seems to exist for any sector. Similarly, a systematic analysis of those consultative mechanisms has not been undertaken. Taking the water sector as an example, as this is one of the most studied, research seems to indicate that participatory approaches and tools have been effective in promoting information-sharing and consultation for policy planning and, to a certain extent, for policy implementation, but less so for advancing more active forms of engagement, such as collaboration and empowerment.

39.   A wide range of participatory mechanisms go beyond consultation and focus on public participation in implementation, mostly at the local level. Public participation in infrastructure projects, school-based management projects and community engagement in the delivery of primary health-care services are among those that have been studied extensively in the context of developing countries, in particular because they were promoted by donors. Evidence of the effectiveness of those arrangements is inconsistent, both in terms of changes in outcomes and in terms of the empowerment of citizens and civil society. Experts have recently emphasized the importance of enhancing vertical coordination in participatory mechanisms geared at social accountability.

40.   The participatory management of common-pool resources, such as water, forests and fisheries, is an area that has witnessed rapid development over the past three decades. Such arrangements can emerge spontaneously or be initiated by Governments. For example, in developing countries, the handing over to rural communities of the rights to existing natural forests emerged in the 1980s. No global mapping exists for those types of arrangements.

41.   Much of the literature on community-based natural resource management has focused on the conditions under which community participation leads to greater resource sustainability. Many case studies suggest the viability of community management of natural resources, with or without State assistance. Yet the outcomes observed are highly heterogeneous and often do not lend themselves to extrapolation outside their local contexts. Existing reviews suggest that the objectives of resource sustainability and increased equity in the distribution of benefits from resource use are not automatically consistent. They also suggest that projects sponsored by donors in this field have often been based on unrealistic expectations and timelines and have often failed to take into account the complexity of local social and political contexts. They further highlight the importance of establishing clear and credible systems of accountability as a precondition for the success of participatory management projects, and of establishing robust monitoring and evaluation systems.

Participatory planning and budgeting at the local level

42.   Participatory mechanisms at the local level have witnessed rapid development around the world over the past two decades. The best known among those has been participatory budgeting, pioneered in 1989 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and thereafter in many Brazilian municipalities. Compared to the original experiment in Brazil, many of the later versions of the tool are purely consultative and are not endowed with decision-making powers on the allocation of resources at the municipal level. Many other institutional mechanisms have emerged, including different forms of participatory planning and public hearings. Even within each category, there are a great variety of designs, decision-making powers and modalities for participation; the relative roles of individual citizens versus organized civil society or other organized groups in these mechanisms also vary considerably.

43.   Participatory budgeting has been the most studied of such types of mechanisms. There is no global mapping or repository of participatory budgeting initiatives,

although partial mappings and case study repositories are publicly available. According to experts, since 2013, participatory budgeting has been implemented by more than 2,500 local governments in Latin America alone. Between 2000 and 2010, European experiments increased from just a few to more than 200.

44.   Much has been written about the effects of participatory budgeting in Brazil. Participatory budgeting in its initial version was found: (a) to have had a positive impact on the allocation of resources to people living in poverty; (b) to have avoided ownership by powerful social groups or components of civil society; and (c) to have lowered the level of patronage in local resource allocation. It was credited with bringing public administration closer to citizens' preferences. Other success factors include a strong political will on the part of municipal authorities, clear technical criteria for resource allocation, the adoption of the experiment in broader local public administration reform and the political impetus to enhance social justice.

45.   Outside of Brazil, limited systematic evidence seems to exist on the impact of participatory budgeting. A recent rapid assessment of evidence on participatory budgeting in developing countries performed by the Department for International Development of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland found consistent evidence of the positive impact on budget allocation, service delivery and public involvement. The evidence regarding the impacts of participatory budgeting on the efficiency of public financial management systems, accountability and anti-corruption was mixed, with both positive and negative impacts reported.

C. Accountability

46.   In general, accountability denotes the obligation of an individual or organization to account for its activities and accept responsibility for them. As a relational concept, accountability covers many varieties. The present note only considers accountability of the public sector and only four varieties thereof: accountability of Governments through formal oversight mechanisms; accountability in public service; social accountability; and accountability of partnerships.

Accountability of Governments through formal oversight mechanisms

47.   Modern forms of Government include formal oversight mechanisms. Two mechanisms that are almost universal are parliaments and supreme audit institutions. Both mechanisms, through different processes, exert an oversight function over the executive branch of Government, including with respect to core government functions, such as budgeting.

48.   The constitutional mandates conferred to parliaments in terms of oversight vary, as does the political space in which parliaments conduct their debates and the processes they use for doing so. For example, out of a sample of 115 countries, the Open Budget Survey 2017 found only 29 countries in which the legislature (in full or by committee) had debated and approved key policy recommendations prior to the tabling of the budget. Legislatures are able to provide limited oversight in the budget process, with slightly more influence over the budget formulation and approval stages than during the budget implementation and audit stages. A survey undertaken in 2017 by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) found that half of the parliaments in the sample had systems in place to monitor compliance with international human rights treaties.

49.   Among the key challenges to effective parliamentary oversight are the lack of resources and staff to conduct independent analysis of the questions under consideration; information gaps between Governments and parliaments; insufficient time to review the budget and other issues; the lack of willingness on the part of

Governments to engage with parliamentary oversight; and conflicting incentives for majority members of parliaments to challenge the Government.

50. The scope and depth of the oversight exerted by supreme audit institutions is variable across the world. Many such institutions conduct performance audits, but many others are limited to conducting compliance and financial audits. Over the past decade, there has been a clear trend to professionalize those institutions, but this is not the case in all countries. Limited resources are a constraint for supreme audit institutions in many countries, as are capacity issues. Regional and international organizations linked to the International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions have provided support in this area, including on the topic of auditing the preparedness of Governments for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals and auditing that implementation. The Open Budget Survey 2017 shows that, globally, such institutions enjoy a fairly high degree of independence. Notwithstanding that finding, in many countries, the lack of independence of such institutions remains an issue of concern.

51. There have been a few global studies on the effectiveness of the oversight functions of parliaments and supreme audit institutions. The latter have been found, in a small number of observational studies, to be effective in curbing corruption. A small body of consistent evidence indicates that the use of specialized audits, such as forensic or performance audits, is effective in detecting and reducing corruption when combined with punitive sanctions. One indicator of effectiveness is the degree to which Governments take up and follow up on recommendations included in audits and coming out of parliamentary debates. This has been an issue in developed and developing countries alike. In a recent survey, IPU found that only about half of parliaments surveyed had established systems for tracking the recommendations they had made to Governments, and fewer than one third of parliaments had undertaken a review of the performance of their oversight role in the past five years. An essential limitation to effectiveness is the lack of publicity of the work of oversight bodies. Many supreme audit institutions do not have the mandate to publish their audit reports. The existing data also point to the potential for more effective collaboration between parliaments and such institutions.

52. Oversight mechanisms can use engagement with civil society and individual citizens to make their work more effective. Social audits have combined participation with audits so as to allow auditors to collect information directly from citizens as service users. Civil society can also serve as a powerful means to publicize and echo recommendations made in audits. Such forms of engagement of supreme audit institutions have increased over the years, although not in all countries. No recent global mapping of such initiatives seems to exist. The results have been variable across countries, with many case studies showing how social audits have exposed the corrupt practices of public officials and have helped to improve the delivery of public services.

Accountability in public service

53. Accountability in public service has typically been understood mostly as upward accountability, i.e. to political leaders. In recent decades, the public service reforms undertaken under the banner of new public management have emphasized the use of mechanisms inspired by the private sector, such as performance frameworks, performance-based pay and the use of various reporting processes in order to enhance performance and accountability. They have also introduced forms of downward accountability, i.e. to citizens (who are seen as users), for example in the form of citizens' charters for public services, systems that allow the public to track the status of specific government interaction processes, and complaint mechanisms. E-government has played a role in that trend through, inter alia, the provision of

information linked to administrative processes and electronic interface mechanisms between citizens and public administration.

54. There does not seem to be any global monitoring initiative that covers all sides of accountability in public service. Much has been written about the impact of the public sector reforms undertaken in the past three decades. There seems to be a consensus that accountability through internal control and reporting mechanisms has increased, as have outside control mechanisms (including auditing systems, ombudspersons and systems to check compliance with international and national law). At the same time, in many countries, the multiplication of regulatory and other agencies that are independent from ministries has complexified accountability lines. The impact of those trends on public service performance has been debated.

Social accountability

55. Social accountability is defined as citizen-led action geared to demanding direct (outside of formal electoral systems) accountability from public officials and service providers for the delivery of public services. Social accountability initiatives usually involve citizen participation in one form (e.g., public hearings), combined with access to information. The approach gained popularity after the publication by the World Bank of its *World Development Report 2004*, which argued in favour of the "short road" to accountability, meaning channels for direct accountability between users and providers of services, as opposed to the "long route" of accountability of providers via elected politicians and public officials.

56. Social accountability initiatives have made use of a variety of tools that involve some type of citizen feedback on services received, as well as on the use of public funds that should reach them. They include: (a) citizen report cards, which measure people's satisfaction with public services; (b) community scorecards, which combine the use of report cards by service users with self-assessments by providers and follow-up actions based on the results; (c) public expenditure tracking surveys; (d) community monitoring, by which communities monitor the activities of public agencies; (e) social audits and public hearings; and (f) complaint and grievance redress mechanisms. Citizen-based accountability strategies are being used increasingly in efforts to improve public services. There is, however, no global map of such initiatives.

57. Among the often assumed benefits of social accountability initiatives are: (a) an increase in satisfaction with public services and an increase in the accountability of public service providers; (b) a reduction in corruption; and (c) an increase in citizen engagement in public matters. However, research over the past two decades has shown that such benefits cannot be taken for granted. To some extent, there is evidence that social accountability initiatives have been effective in terms of immediate goals, such as raising citizens' awareness of their rights and exposing corruption. For example, public expenditure tracking surveys and community monitoring have been found to be useful for exposing resource wastage in the countries in which they have been used. On the other hand, the evidence in terms of impact on the accessibility and quality of services and on improved outcomes for citizens is mixed and varied across locations. The extent to which social accountability mechanisms are able to address corruption in a structural way is also limited; in order for corruption to decrease structurally, there must be follow-up on the findings of social accountability initiatives through formal accountability mechanisms, such as investigations into corruption and sanctions.

58. The latest thinking suggests that broad strategic approaches that cover various aspects of transparency, accountability and participation may overcome the limitations of narrow, localized successes in this area. In particular, experts underline

the importance of combining social accountability initiatives with citizen empowerment (including legal empowerment); the existence of organized civil society to help citizens mobilize and make them aware of their rights; the importance of having champions of accountability reforms in Government; and the importance of a dynamic press that can publicize the findings of social accountability projects.

Accountability of multi-stakeholder partnerships and public-private partnerships

59.   Multi-stakeholder partnerships at the sectoral level have been increasingly prominent in recent decades. During that time, there has also been a greater focus on the role that philanthropy and philanthropy-based partnerships can play for sustainable development through financial and non-financial means. Partnerships are motivated by diverse factors and objectives, with varying governance structures and distinct operational challenges. High hopes have been placed on such partnerships in the context of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Several countries have put forward frameworks for multi-stakeholder partnerships in relation to the Goals.

60.   Evidence of the effectiveness and impact of multi-stakeholder partnerships has accumulated in recent years. Some such partnerships have been heralded as successes, especially those that operate in the health sector. However, there have been concerns that such partnerships can sometimes be at odds with integration and policy coherence at the national level, similar to what can happen with development aid. More generally, given the prominence of multi-stakeholder partnerships in the context of the 2030 Agenda, there have been calls for the definition of clear principles under which such partnerships should operate. This reflects the widely held view that there is a need to define more clearly the governance arrangements for those partnerships, including in terms of transparency and accountability.

61.   Accountability of public-private partnerships has been a subject of attention for several decades. The major areas of concern have included the quality and affordability of the services that they provide to citizens; their costs to taxpayers and the nature of the risk-sharing that is embedded in them; and their social and environmental impact. This is the case for traditional public-private partnerships in water provision, electricity provision or infrastructure, and even more so for partnerships linked with the exploitation of natural resources, such as logging and mining concessions. The Economic Commission for Europe has developed a set of principles for public-private partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals.

IV. Conclusion

62.   Based on the review of evidence conducted for the present note, monitoring developments in the institutional aspects of the Sustainable Development Goals over the next 12 years, as the 2030 Agenda is implemented, will likely remain a challenge. More work is needed to provide a comprehensive, global review of developments in this area. In the coming years, work in the Committee and beyond could aim to shed light on additional aspects of institutions that support the implementation of the Goals, including by reviewing developments in other institutional dimensions and by exploring how institutional principles are put into practice in different areas of the Goals.

63.   The limited review presented herein demonstrates several points. First, in spite of the multitude of national-level indicators and indices that have developed around all dimensions of governance, no comprehensive information system exists that would show trends in simple, readily understandable forms for all institutional dimensions and all countries. Institutional developments in relation to some dimensions are well covered for some groups of countries, but this is not the rule. As

a result, it is not possible to ascertain basic facts, such as the global state of participation and citizen engagement, or whether Governments on the whole are more or less accountable than a decade ago. Second, in all of the dimensions covered here, more evidence is available on the process side of the performance of initiatives than on their outcomes and broader impact.

64.   In spite of those limitations, some robust conclusions can be drawn. First, in a long-term perspective, there has been a steady wave of international and national legal instruments and other initiatives that have framed institutional developments in relation to all the institutional principles considered in the present note. Second, rapid changes in information technologies are modifying the parameters that define the space in which policies and institutions related to the institutional principles under examination herein develop. Drastically reduced costs of producing and disseminating information have made it possible to develop the open government data movement. The Internet has enabled almost universal adoption of e-government practices, including channels for e-participation. By making existing information easier to record, store and find, the Internet has altered the balance of power between Governments that hold the information and citizens or organizations that request it. The wave of access-to-information laws, the adoption of new norms and standards for financial transparency, the development of open government data and the development of new channels for direct citizen participation are undeniable and, initially, this can be seen as a sign of progress.

65.   Yet, when focusing on outcomes and impacts of the observed changes, it remains difficult to construct a clear global picture in terms of "progress". The impact of transparency, accountability and participation initiatives has been shown to vary widely. There is often a wide gap between the assumed benefits of such initiatives and their actual impact. For all the principles reviewed herein, experts point to a lack of clarity on causal links and a lack of clear models of institutional change. In other words, the assumptions that link specific actions or processes to expected outcomes are often not made explicit and are not tested. This often results in high expectations that do not materialize.

66.   Moreover, the broader political and institutional environments and prevailing social norms in which such causal links operate vary widely across jurisdictions. Experts all underline the importance of context and the lack of replicability of institutional instruments. In all, the question of the effectiveness of institutional arrangements that seek to promote accountability, transparency and inclusive decision-making remains a vexed one. Recent literature has pointed to the importance of using broad strategies that combine multiple instruments, as opposed to individual institutional mechanisms.

67.   In the coming years, the steps below may facilitate the understanding of institutional developments in relation to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

68.   First, the progress made in national institutions towards achieving the Goals can only be defined and measured meaningfully with reference to the local context. Understanding such developments at the national level requires taking into account the history and institutional setting of each country. Goal 16 and the Sustainable Development Goals more generally provide a convenient framework for looking at institutions in a holistic manner. In particular, the Goals and their targets provide a map for identifying the sources of information across all sectors that are relevant to assessing progress on institutional dimensions. In any given country, various established institutional processes are at work in areas of relevance to Goal 16 (e.g., justice system or public sector reforms) and have developed monitoring systems that track changes, outcomes and, sometimes, impacts (e.g., monitoring done by

government agencies, reporting under various international treaties, audit reports). Finding appropriate ways to assemble the information generated by such processes would make reviews relevant to national circumstances and support the implementation of, and monitoring of progress towards, the Goals. Many countries have started in that direction. Ongoing efforts could be reviewed and, as relevant, encouraged and supported by the United Nations system.

69.   Second, it will remain a challenge to assess how changes at the national level in a particular institutional dimension (e.g., transparency) can be aggregated in order to gain a view of the progress made on those dimensions at a higher geographical level, beyond the view provided by the set of internationally agreed indicators.

70.   Third, in order to better understand which institutional arrangements could work in different contexts, further effort is required to map the landscape of metareviews of initiatives relating to transparency, accountability and participation, by systematically combing through the existing academic and practitioner literature. Such mappings could provide useful information to Governments on the institutional options available for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. It is also important to encourage further reviews and assessments of the available evidence in areas that have been less explored, as well as regular updates, since those fields are developing rapidly. In doing so, it would be important to compare the lessons that emerge from studies that focus on countries at different levels of development.

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