2020

Implementing the SDGs during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Role of governments and Supreme Audit Institutions

Digest prepared by the Department of International and Regional Cooperation

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1. 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

1.1. Key documents and monitoring mechanisms

The concept of sustainable development, defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), has become a guiding principle on the international agenda. Sustainable development has three fundamental objectives: economic and social progress and environmental protection.

This concept was in line with the eight Millennium Development Goals 2015 (MDGs), which were proclaimed in 2000 under the Millennium Declaration. Key MDG achievements worldwide include:

- More than 1 billion people have been raised out of extreme poverty.
- Child mortality has dropped by more than half (since 1990).
- The number of out-of-school children has dropped by more than a half (since 1990).
- HIV/AIDS infections have fallen by almost 40% (since 2000).

Building on the success of the Millennium Declaration, the parties agreed to establish a working group at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in 2012 to develop a set of sustainable development goals.

As a result of this work, on 25 September 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted the resolution "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" (hereinafter the 2030 Agenda), establishing 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Major differences between the MDGs and the SDGs include:

- All countries are engaged in achieving the SDGs while the MDGs focused on developing countries with funding from rich nations.
- Greater focus on sociocultural aspects, as well as on inclusiveness of

measures implemented by countries.

- The growing role of NGOs and civil society in achieving the SDGs.
- Wide discussion at the expert level, including members of the public, in the lead-up to adoption of the 2030 Agenda.

For each of the 17 SDGs in the social, economic and environmental areas, the 2030 Agenda sets targets and indicators to be achieved by 2030. In total, 169 targets have been set. Each UN member state is expected to adapt the global list of targets and indicators to national development plans, considering its national and regional contexts.

Progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals depends largely on effective monitoring, analysis and control of this process. Mandated by the UN General Assembly, the UN Statistical Commission has developed a system of 231 indicators to monitor 169 SDG targets.

One of the central topics for discussion in the expert community became identification of linkages between the various goals, targets and indicators under

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the 2030 Agenda. The [Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators](#) (IAEG-SDG) was established under the Statistical Commission to study these issues and share best practices in monitoring indicators. Various tools are also being developed by a number of NGOs that are not part of UN agencies in order to visualise the above linkages. One notable example in the form of an [interactive scheme](#) was presented by the Japan Institute for Global Environmental Strategies.

The UN General Assembly [encourages](#) member states to conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels. Such voluntary national reviews (VNRs) should draw on contributions from indigenous peoples, civil society, the private sector and other stakeholders, in line with national circumstances, policies and priorities.

In 2019, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs issued the [Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary Reviews](#), which provides guidance for preparing VNRs in accordance with the UN Secretary-General's guidelines and builds on the three years of experience in presenting VNRs at the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). 111 VNRs were presented at the HLPF since 2016, and a further 51 in 2019.

A VNR is a tool enabling countries to plan national policies and revise national development goals.

The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs has identified the [following aspects](#) to be borne in mind when a work plan (road map) is drawn up for a VNR:

- Preparing the work plan (road map) and distributing it to stakeholders.
- Creating a coordination structure. It is desirable for the process of drafting the review to be led by the government, but this could be by a body specifically created by or directly accountable to the government.
- Accumulating resources. Assessing the estimated costs of compiling the review and identifying funding sources.
- Determining the VNR content.

- Developing a preliminary structure and defining the scope of the report.
- Creating a stakeholder engagement plan.
- Providing access to reliable and up-to-date information.
- Using existing national platforms and processes that could contribute to the writing and analysis of the VNR, including:

    — national frameworks such as national development plans and sustainable development strategies;

    — reports submitted to international bodies;

    — SDG reports prepared at the national level together with the UN Country Team (UNCT) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP), if available or applicable;

    — approving the work schedule for preparing the VNR.

From 7 to 16 July 2020, ECOSOC held a regular session of High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2020, mostly online. The session featured 47 VNRs, including, for the first time, an overview of SDG implementation in the Russian Federation.

1.2. Cross-country SDG progress comparison

The VNR mechanism not only allows countries to self-assess progress in achieving SDGs by a number of criteria, but also to conduct a comparative analysis by country and region.

To date, no country has fully achieved the optimal indicators for all the SDGs. A special Sustainable Development Goals Index (SDG Index) has been created to measure achievement of the SDGs.

The indicators are broken down into major groups:

- indicators of social aspects of sustainable development;
- indicators of economic aspects of sustainable development;
- indicators of environmental aspects of sustainable development (including characteristics of water, land, atmosphere, other natural resources and

waste);

- indicators of institutional aspects of sustainable development (programming and policy planning, scientific developments, international legal instruments, information support, strengthening the role of major groups).

The SDG Index measurement scale has 100 points for each of the 17 SDGs, where 100 is full achievement of the goal and 0 is lack of achievement. The final figure reflects the country's average level of progress on all the Goals.

The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) and the Bertelsmann Stiftung publish annual reports based on the SDG Index.

Country cross-section showing SDG achievement level in 2019:

1. Denmark (85.2)
2. Sweden (85.0)
3. Finland (82.8)
4. France (81.5)
5. Austria (81.1)
6. Germany (81.1)
7. Czech Republic (80.7)
8. Norway (80.7)
9. Netherlands (80.4)
10. Estonia (80.2)
23. Belarus (77.4)
35. United States (74.5)
41. Ukraine (72.8)
55. Russian Federation (70.9)
56. Cuba (70.8)
57. Brazil (70.6)
78. Mexico (68.5)
161. Chad (42.8)
162. Central African Republic (39.1)

This information is also presented in the form of the [SDG dashboard for 2019](#).

Map of SDG Index countries

The list is led by the developed European nations. [Russia](#) ranks 55th. [Next](#) come Cuba (56) and Brazil (57), one step ahead are Argentina (53) and Vietnam (54). It is worth noting that, when calculating the SDG Index for Russia, the experts marked Goal 1 "Eradicating Poverty" as having been achieved, giving it a score of 100. Goal 4 "Quality of Education" is approaching the same level. The lowest score was given to Goal 14 "Life below water".

At the same time, the top countries on the list are still quite far from implementing the SDGs and there is no reason to believe that they will be achieved by 2030. According to experts, [there has not been enough progress](#) in achieving the most problematic Goal 12 "Responsible Consumption and Production" and Goal 13 "Climate Action".

Russia is currently somewhat behind in its transition to sustainable development, although the country had a chance to become one of the world leaders in this process, having adopted the [Concept of Sustainable Development](#) back in 1996. Given the rapid progress of other countries and the extensive international

experience in this area, Russia, [experts say](#), needs to develop a national strategy for sustainable development as soon as possible, integrating into it the 2030 Agenda and incorporating the SDGs into key strategic development documents.

African countries are among the worst performing. Yet, according to a new study by the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), African nations are among those [taking the lead](#) when it comes to the pace of implementing SDG mechanisms.

This conclusion might seem illogical in light of Africa's reputation as a crisis region facing serious governance challenges. Yet, it is worth thinking back to the early stage of SDG development in 2014. African governments then played a key role in the adoption of Goal 16 "Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions." Unlike a number of developed UN member states that suggested reducing the reference to peace and good governance merely to the preamble to the resolution "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", African countries made [a strong case](#) for addressing this topic in a separate Goal.

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2. SDG implementation in the context of COVID-19: missed opportunities or new momentum?

2.1. COVID-19 impact on the 2030 Agenda measured by international organisations

The United Nations sees the pandemic as an unprecedented wake-up call that lays bare deep inequalities and exposes precisely the failures addressed in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement.

On the other hand, the UN argues that the current crisis makes it impossible to observe traditional social norms and implement business-as-usual policies, and could prompt bold steps that will steer the world back on track towards achieving the SDGs. The Sustainable Development Goals are vital for implementation of recovery programmes that will lead to greener, more inclusive economies, and stronger societies more resilient to development challenges.

For the most part, international organisations and experts agree that the spread of the coronavirus infection and related economic problems have had a negative impact on sustainable development indicators with regard to all the SDGs.

According to the UN Environment Programme experts, the pandemic has demonstrated that the gains made in addressing poverty, hunger, good health and well-being might face serious setbacks unless the global community takes the same resolute action in implementing the SDGs as it is currently taking to counter the spread of the infection.

In an article on how COVID-19 is modifying the 2030 Agenda, Canada's International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) points out that an unprecedented global shock has magnified the impact of inequality, hitting poorer countries the hardest. Even in developed countries, frontline workers in the service economy are among those most exposed to the virus and the least able to

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absorb its financial impact.

And the hardest hit will be the poor in developing countries, where already-struggling workers will not have the benefit of social safety nets and stimulus packages. The UN has called on the G7 and G20 nations to help these countries immediately in financing flattening of the pandemic curve. In the longer run, additional efforts will be needed to foster sustainable economic systems, including conditions for fair trade and investment.

The pandemic has also highlighted the feedback: the progress in implementing the 2030 Agenda has had an impact on the level of negative effects from COVID-19. For example, the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities says in its report that the impact of COVID-19 in Asia Pacific is tremendous owing to the concentration of economic activities, demographics, urbanisation and difficult progress on the SDGs.

At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has also posed many indirect obstacles to sustainable development. In times of crisis, the need for quality and timely data to support decision-making is greater than ever. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic poses severe challenges to the collection and production of economic and financial statistics, including with regard to the 2030 Agenda and assessment of progress towards achieving the SDGs.

A noticeable indirect effect is also that the spread of the infection and the need to control it have largely diverted the governments' organisational resources, thereby hindering coordination of the 2030 Agenda process.

For its part, the World Bank reports that 2020 was expected to be a big year in the fight against climate change. This year was when countries were to step up their climate ambitions, with expectations running high that the 26th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 26), which was scheduled for November in Glasgow, could have outcomes as consequential as COP21's Paris Agreement in 2015. However, the global climate meeting has now been postponed to 2021 as countries respond to the immediate health and financial crises posed by the

coronavirus pandemic.

For the same reasons, the UN Ocean Conference, previously scheduled for June 2020, has now been rescheduled, as well as the 15th Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity, that is now planned for 2021.

On the other hand, already in the early stages of the pandemic, it was suggested that a decline in economic activity and forced isolation was having a positive impact on the global environment.[1]

In this respect, head of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) Inger Andersen cautioned that some visible, positive impacts—whether through improved air quality or reduced greenhouse gas emissions—are merely temporary, because they come on the back of a tragic economic slowdown and human distress.

Indeed, the Scripps Institute of Oceanography has highlighted that fossil fuel use would have to decline by about 10% around the world and would need to be sustained for a year to show up clearly in carbon dioxide levels.

In addition, the pandemic is also triggering a significant increase in medical and other hazardous waste, which does not fit into the concept of an environmentally friendly pandemic.

In this regard, the UN Environment Programme supports member states and frontline UN partners in providing technical expertise on management of chemicals and hazardous waste generated by healthcare systems.

According to estimates by the UN Environment Programme, more useful from the perspective of sustainable development was the forced change in entrenched behaviours that can increase readiness for the fundamental changes required to

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[1] For more information, see the digest "Industrial and Environmental Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic".

achieve the SDGs.

The UN believes that any positive environmental impact in the wake of the pandemic must translate into changing our production and consumption habits towards cleaner and greener ones because only long-term systemic shifts will change the trajectory of CO_2 levels in the atmosphere. So, the crisis recovery phase presents a convenient opportunity to establish such trends through investment in renewable energy, smart buildings and green public transport.

So, employers, both public and private, and individuals have now tested alternative ways of working, studying and consuming on a scale that can durably leap-frog some transitions to more responsible consumption and production.

2.2. 2030 Agenda in post-pandemic recovery plans

Calls for green recovery plans are being made worldwide, with international organisations (International Monetary Fund, World Bank) echoing concerns voiced by experts, along with leading economists, major global companies and investors.

Even so, the current situation, in the logic of Francis Fukuyama's article "The Pandemic and Political Order," may allow competent political leaders who are successfully coping with the consequences of the pandemic to use the margin of legitimacy and people's greater readiness for change to take more decisive action under the 2030 Agenda.

A publication by the Oxford Smith School of Enterprise and the Environment examines whether the fiscal recovery packages might accelerate or hold back progress on climate change.

Researchers say it is the scale of green technology investment programmes that may be the least costly way to revitalise the economies affected by the virus and make significant progress in combating climate change. The publication not only fits the logic of common statements by experts and organisations but also evaluates such proposals in light of the new data.

The authors analysed more than 700 fiscal stimulus policies implemented by different countries in the period following the 2008 financial crisis and interviewed 231 representatives of national central banks, finance ministries and G20 experts, asking them to assess each policy archetype according to four core metrics: speed of implementation, long-run economic multiplier, climate impact potential and overall desirability.

The results showed that green projects compared to traditional support options tend to create more jobs, generate higher profits and save more costs in the short and long term.

The research identifies five areas with the highest potential for both economic and climate effects: creation of a clean physical infrastructure, energy efficiency in buildings, investment in education and training, investment in natural capital, and clean research and development.

In low- and middle-income countries, however, the latter appear less important, while investment in support for agriculture and rural areas is more valuable. The analysis showed that the least effective support measure was bailing out airlines without attaching additional conditions on them complying with increased environmental requirements.

For its part, Canada's International Institute for Sustainable Development has analysed the economic stimulus packages adopted in Europe and Asia, and has identified four areas of opportunity in terms of SDG progress, including buildings, mobility, nature restoration and clean energy. While not calling for traditional and common climate change targets to be abandoned, experts suggest that these areas deserve more attention in the context of their long-term effectiveness. In particular, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and the European Union are implementing energy efficiency programmes for public buildings and low-income households. Public investment in this area ranges from USD 7 to USD 750 per capita in expectation of greater benefits from lower energy consumption and creation of thousands of new jobs.

The transport sector has been among those worst hit by the pandemic, while also being the main source of greenhouse gas emissions. In the context of economic recovery, governments are planning significant investments in this area: France has announced a EUR 8 billion programme for recycling old vehicles and subsidising electric cars, Iceland and China are investing in developing the infrastructure for electric charging stations for cars, and the EU is eyeing plans to remove VAT on environmentally friendly transport.

In terms of environmental restoration, the EU Biodiversity Strategy provides for an investment of USD 500 per capita, a similar programme in New Zealand–USD 140 per capita. The same is being done in Iceland and Pakistan, where governments are creating jobs for local people by hiring them to plant trees, clean water bodies, develop organic agriculture and restore wildlife habitats.

And, of course, many countries are now considering investing in development of clean energy. For example, Australia, Norway and Portugal rely on hydrogen fuel, Denmark and Germany support wind energy, and the EU is ready to spend EUR 40 billion on completely abandoning coal energy, retraining workers and decarbonising business.

In an effort to become the first climate-neutral continent by 2050, as part of the European Green Deal, the EU countries are considering adopting a European Climate Law with a view to translating political statements into legal commitments and investment incentives.

The initiative to integrate sustainable development commitments into post-pandemic recovery programmes comes not only from political leadership but also from business itself.

For instance, over 200 British companies have urged the UK government to align economic recovery with the net zero climate goal. The open letter proposes that taxpayer support should only go to firms committed to decarbonisation, while the general path of development should be towards a clean, fair recovery that creates quality employment and builds a more sustainable, inclusive and resilient UK

economy.

Such statements and trends have become possible in part because the pandemic has forced businesses to operate in a fundamentally new way, which, in the opinion of the companies themselves, can be used to promote further qualitative changes.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) also recommends nations mandate commitments to reduce carbon emissions when they provide financial lifelines to carbon-intensive companies, adding that record-low oil prices make this an opportune time to phase out subsidies.

Along these lines, the Canadian government rejected a letter by oil and gas companies asking that environmental standards be lowered as part of the COVID response. Instead, the government announced a CAD 1.7 billion (USD 1.24 billion) coronavirus package with links to methane reduction and cleaning up contaminated oil and gas wells.

As concrete tools, the IMF proposes that state guarantees be used to mobilise private finance for green investment. Moreover, financial firms must disclose climate risks in their lending portfolios (investments in environmentally harmful companies), and the industry must find better ways of pricing in this risk.

The Paris Agreement requires each country to submit new or updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) every five years, outlining their emission reduction commitments and other efforts to combat climate change. In the current situation, NDCs can be used for integrating sustainable development principles and economic stimuli.

To assist countries in this process, the World Bank offers a sustainability checklist giving more detailed information on all the key criteria that governments may need to assess when planning their economic recovery interventions. These include, among other things, the geographical distribution of stimulus activities, their impact on addressing social inclusion and contribution to improving skills

and productivity. Particular emphasis is also placed on the need to ensure additional institutional or policy changes for successful implementation of each proposed measure.

The World Bank notes that building a bridge between NDCs and sustainable recovery will require significant coordination, both between the ministries of each government and externally, including with international institutions. Different stakeholders can advance this effort in different ways. For instance:

- Governments could set up a coordination mechanism involving ministries to oversee NDCs and sustainable recovery, manage the project consideration process and keep an updated list of projects.
- The climate finance community could explore and establish ways to make grant support available for project preparation with a focus on converting NDC commitments into actionable projects that could be included into economy stimulating programmes.
- Financial and lending institutions could take the updated list of obligations as government priorities and support them through financial and technical assistance.

Another mechanism for promoting sustainable development as part of the economic recovery could be issue of so-called special green, social or sustainable covered bonds and of appropriate loan proposals preparation by financial institutions that meet certain environmental criteria and help achieve specific targets.

Such a scheme, for example, was used by France's SFIL Group, which placed special social bonds to support public health facilities.

The World Bank itself issued similar bonds in April 2020, raising USD 1.15 billion. The funds were used to finance a range of sustainable development projects and programmes in member countries, including health.

This issue is part of the World Bank's effort to raise awareness about the

institution's health programme, particularly how the World Bank is working with member countries to support their efforts to prevent, detect and respond to the rapid spread of COVID-19.

Another example is a USD 4.25 billion bond issue by the Inter-American Development Bank, which aims to promote SDG 3 in the area of health and well-being.

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3. Role of Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs) in implementing the SDGs

3.1. INTOSAI strategic documents on the role of SAIs in implementing the SDGs

The role of SAIs in achieving the SDGs is reflected in key documents for the global audit community – the INTOSAI Strategic Plan for 2017–2022 and the INTOSAI Moscow Declaration of 2019.

Strategic Goal 4 of the Plan is to maximise the value of INTOSAI as an international organisation. The aim is to promote economical, efficient and effective working practices, timely decision-making and effective governance practices.

The Strategic Plan also calls for SAIs to help their respective governments improve performance, enhance transparency, ensure accountability, maintain credibility, fight corruption, promote public trust and foster efficient and effective receipt and use of public resources to the benefit of their people. In so doing, INTOSAI contributes to implementation of SDG 16 "Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions", particularly Target 16.6: "Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels".

Crosscutting Priority 2 of the Strategic Plan is a kind of roadmap for INTOSAI and its members to support implementation of the SDGs and to assist in the follow-up and analysis of their achievements and related national sustainable development initiatives. INTOSAI's efforts are centred on assisting SAIs in four broad categories where SAIs can expect to make valuable contributions to the implementation of the SDGs on a number of issues, such as improved government accounting and auditing:

> 1. Assessing the preparedness of national governments to implement, monitor and report on the progress of the SDGs and, subsequently, to audit

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their performance and the reliability of the data they produce;

2. Conducting performance audits that examine the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of key government programmes contributing to specific aspects of the SDGs;

3. Assessing and supporting implementation of SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals);

4. Being models of transparency and accountability in their own operations, including auditing and reporting.

The Plan also outlines the areas where SAIs, subject to their individual mandates and available resources, could facilitate follow-up to and review of the SDGs:

- Promote improvements in public financial management systems through, for example, better government accounting and auditing practices.

- Review national transparency, risk management, anti-fraud protections and internal control processes to contribute to corruption prevention efforts consistent with the United Nations Convention against Corruption.

- Audit the capacity of national statistical and vital records systems.

- Assess the validity of the chosen national targets and performance measures.

- Evaluate the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the key government programmes for achieving a national sustainable development goal in a specific topical area (education, infrastructure, public health, etc.) and where there is more to be done to meet that goal.

- Report on the nation's overall progress in meeting the SDGs.

The Moscow Declaration adopted at the 23rd INTOSAI Congress in September 2019 also lays down a number of provisions emphasising the role of the INTOSAI community in implementing the SDGs.

One of the main priorities of the SAIs, which is reflected in several provisions of the document, is to ensure independent external oversight over the implementation of nationally agreed goals, including the ones related to the SDGs.

This includes, in particular, the need for SAIs to promote more efficient, transparent and informative accountability for results considering the challenging and complex nature of the government actions required for achieving national priorities and the SDGs. This provision is fully consistent with the mechanisms for monitoring implementation of the SDGs, providing a set of specific and methodologically sound indicators serving to measure clearly the progress countries have made in achieving a particular goal.

The call to develop a strategic approach to public audit and enhance its value by expanding the practice of providing audit-based advice on important and strategic public governance issues reinforces the already established practice of audit and advisory activities by SAIs. Such work done by SAIs also contributes to implementation of both SDG 16 "Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions" and SDG 17 "Partnerships for the Goals."

In line with the principle of a whole-of-government approach to auditing, SAIs may focus particularly on activities at different levels of government and their alignment with the key indicators (municipal, regional and national indicators related to the SDGs).

In so doing, SAIs recommend using new ways to address inclusion, which is a central feature of the 2030 Agenda with its principle of leaving no one behind, along with other development strategies and programmes in socially relevant areas associated with the SDGs (environment, education, health, gender equality, etc.).

3.2. SDG activities within the INTOSAI community

SDG audit problems were high on the agenda of the 23rd and 24th joint UN/INTOSAI Symposia held in 2015 and 2017, respectively.

The agenda for the 23rd Symposium was devoted to the role of SAIs in achieving the SDGs. The event focused on developing INTOSAI recommendations and standards for executive bodies with a view to adopt the best strategy for achieving the SDGs, providing for national oversight and implementing control mechanisms. Among other things, the need was stressed for the SAIs to remain independent for them to be able to assess objectively performance by public institutions in accordance with their mandates. At the same time, the role of SAIs was highlighted in securing funding for the SDGs in the face of limited public resources.

The 24th Symposium specified the areas in which SAIs can contribute to the implementation of the SDGs. In particular, Supreme Audit Institutions can assess the preparedness of national systems for establishing mechanisms for monitoring and reporting on SDG implementation while also auditing these activities. In addition, SAIs are responsible for auditing economic sectors related to the implementation of the SDGs and related government support measures.

The UN/INTOSAI Symposia have, to a large extent, inspired the INTOSAI community in preparing the organisation's Strategic Plan and the Moscow Declaration, providing the guidelines for INTOSAI's SDG agenda.

Regular discussions of SDG audits are also held by some bodies and organisations within the INTOSAI framework. For example, in 2019, the INTOSAI Development Initiative (IDI) and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs held a meeting dedicated to auditing government preparedness and actual implementation of the SDGs. It turned out that, despite the institutional prerequisites for achieving the SDGs, there was still a lack of coherence between different levels of government and institutions, including in terms of budget spending. So, it was decided to accelerate the development of SDG audit guidelines at both the strategic and operational levels.

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3.3. Contribution by INTOSAI bodies and regional organisations to SDG audits

IDI is a leader in promoting the SDG agenda among SAIs, and it is also a methodological ideologist of the 2030 Agenda within the INTOSAI community. In particular, IDI actively promotes the methodology of dividing SDG audit activities into two stages: audit of government preparedness for SDG implementation and audit of actual SDG implementation. With IDI's methodological support, preparedness audits have been conducted by Supreme Audit Institutions in more than 70 countries.

IDI's extensive practical experience has enabled it to release its SDG Audit Model (ISAM), which is a detailed and comprehensive compilation of SDG audit guidelines and practical advice for SAIs. It covers all phases of an audit activity, from planning to communication with stakeholders on the audit findings and implementation of recommendations made by the SAI.

ISAM is one of the first methodologically sound documents of its kind to address SDG implementation audit issues. The model provides guidance for SAIs on conducting SDG audits in accordance with INTOSAI standards, along with explanations on how its recommendations can help in implementing the SDGs and ensure inclusiveness of government policies.

The ISAM model not only helps in auditing government preparedness for implementing the SDGs but allows progress made in achieving them to be monitored as well. It also provides an opportunity to assess the coherence and alignment of national goals with the SDGs, using a whole-of-government approach that shifts the focus from government performance indicators to the results they are seeking in implementing national goals consistent with the SDGs.

INTOSAI also has a permanent Working Group on SDGs and Key Sustainable Development Indicators, chaired by the Accounts Chamber of the Russian Federation. Based on a decision of the 23rd INTOSAI Congress held in Moscow in 2019, this group replaced the INTOSAI Working Group on Key Sustainable

Development Indicators.

The working group currently includes 27 SAIs, representing Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Brazil, Bulgaria, China, Finland, Indonesia, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Lithuania, Moldova, Morocco, Pakistan, Poland, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, Slovakia, South Africa, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, the United States and Zambia.

The group also includes Kyrgyzstan, the INTOSAI Development Initiative (IDI), OECD, AFROSAI and the German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ) as observers.

The group's tasks include:

- assisting Supreme Audit Institutions in developing common approaches to achieving national goals and Sustainable Development Goals by developing and using key sustainable development indicators, as well as promoting a strategic approach in SAI activities;
- Ensuring mutually beneficial exchange of information and experience between INTOSAI members and international organisations using key sustainable development indicators in its activities and being actively involved in implementation of the 2030 Agenda;
- supporting pilot projects for applying and monitoring key SDG indicators, as well as assessing SDG implementation;
- contributing to the attainment of national goals and implementation of the SDGs through enhanced interaction among stakeholders.

The INTOSAI community is also developing the practice of cooperative SDG audits. One such project is being implemented in cooperation between the INTOSAI Development Initiative and the Organisation of Latin American and Caribbean Supreme Audit Institutions (OLACEFS). It focuses on "sustainable public procurement using data analytics." SAIs of 14 countries are involved in the project (Argentina, Belize, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Paraguay and Peru). The goals of the joint audit

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initiative, which were outlined during a meeting in Peru in March 2020, include raising awareness of SDG implementation audits in Latin America and the Caribbean, creating a platform for sharing experience and discussing SDG-related topics, exchanging views on the results of collective activities in the area of sustainable public procurement and integrating agreed practices into national development goals.

As planned, SAIs will audit the work toward national goals in accordance with Target 12.7 of promoting sustainable public procurement practices. The INTOSAI Development Initiative will provide methodological and technical support to OLASEFS in this regard. The training course on auditing under the auspices of IDI will be launched in August 2020 and, by mid-October, the SAI will embark on their audit and analytical activities.

3.4. Overview of SDG audits carried out by SAIs

Sustainable Development Goals remain under the scrutiny of governments, which means they are also under the control of the Supreme Audit Institutions that oversee governments. Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted the focus: SAIs are now concentrating on the threats it has revealed. The SDG agenda is clearly dominated by health systems (SDG 3), the efficiency of public institutions and the emergency measures they have taken to combat the spread of the infection (including accelerated and streamlined public procurement), as well as measures for addressing the economic implications of the lockdown (SDG 16), plus the escalating problem of domestic violence (SDG 5).

As a result, most SAIs have revised their work plans for 2020 to include additional checks related to the new challenges and threats.

> *The European Court of Auditors has revised its 2020 Work Programme because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The scope, approach*

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and timing of a number of ongoing tasks have been adjusted. The ECA has added two new reviews to its work programme: on the EU's contribution to health development and on economic policy responses to the pandemic.

Another shift of focus is related to the dynamics of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: SAIs are gradually switching from auditing government preparedness for implementing the SDGs to auditing the actual progress made toward these goals.

Auditor General of Finland Tytti Yli-Viikari reported in her article that the project to audit preparedness to implement the SDGs was very successful. Today, the National Audit Office of Finland sees the long-term outlook and life of future generations as an integral part of sustainable development approaches.

| 2015–2019 SDG PREPAREDNESS AUDITS | SHIFT OF FOCUS | 2020–2030 SDG IMPLEMENTATION AUDITS |

Auditing government preparedness to implement the SDGs to 2030

In auditing government preparedness, SAIs assess the extent to which the 2030 Agenda has been integrated into the national context, domestic legislation and institutional frameworks.

In its report "Implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Austria", the Austrian Court of Audit said that the Federal Government had established an inter-ministerial working group tasked with implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Yet, despite its central role, it was only mandated to coordinate the reporting on the implementation. Neither the working group nor any other body has been mandated to coordinate the implementation of the SDGs, to supervise or manage consistent public policy in this area, or to

provide appropriate advice to the Federal Government.

In the Netherla§nds, the authority to coordinate measures for achieving the SDGs was assigned to the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation. The Netherlands Court of Audit [found]() that this approach provides a solid basis for moving forward but requires clear coordination and evaluation of policy proposals to avoid conflict. It remains to be seen whether the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation is the most appropriate policy portfolio for coordinating the SDGs.

By way of comparison, to implement these measures, the German Federal Government has appointed a national committee reporting directly to the Chancellor.

The Supreme Audit Institutions have analysed the extent to which state strategic planning documents are aligned with the 2030 Agenda.

The SAI of Bosnia and Herzegovina has published its performance [audit]() "Preparedness of the Institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina to Respond to Commitments Made under the 2030 Agenda" and concluded that the State has yet to integrate the SDG into its strategic documents. The Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina should analyse the relationship between existing planning documents and each of the seventeen SDGs. The analysis will be an initial step in identifying weaknesses in the strategic documents.

An important aspect in preparing for the implementation of the SDGs is to create a system of interdepartmental collaboration and provide for involvement of public authorities in implementing the 2030 Agenda.

The NITI Aayog Think Tank has been selected as the key institution for coordinating and monitoring implementation of the Agenda in

India. It is tasked with setting national objectives, distributing these objectives among ministries/departments and communicating India's commitments under the Agenda. The Indian SAI [reviewed](#) in detail the measures taken by NITI Aayog and offered its recommendations, particularly on the development of a road map in line with the SDGs. The plan is to implement the road map in stages by 2020, 2025 and 2030.

An important element of the SDG implementation mechanism at the national level is engagement of civil society and the expert community in implementing the 2030 Agenda.

Canada's SAI [concluded](#) that those responsible for the preparations for implementing the SDGs duly consult with representatives of civil society organisations, non-profit organisations, academia and some private sector companies. Stakeholder views were solicited on how to prepare for implementing the Agenda 2030. A similar approach has been taken by Switzerland and Norway.

The Supreme Audit Institutions analyse the risk management systems integrated within the executive authorities with regard to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and assess how well prepared the relevant monitoring, control and reporting mechanisms are.

The Maldives' SAI [warned](#) that the government was behind schedule in putting in place a risk management system for the implementation of the SDGs. The government has yet to develop monitoring, control and reporting processes that would facilitate strategic analysis of the progress made towards achieving the SDGs.

Indonesia needs to improve its political toolkit for ensuring accountability of non-governmental actors involved in implementing the 2030 Agenda, [according to](#) Indonesia's SAI.

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Audit of SDG implementation

In assessing the progress made by governments in implementing the SDGs, the Supreme Audit Institutions look at the 17 goals both comprehensively, considering their synergies, and individually, seeking to integrate them into each of their audits.

> *During a joint [audit project](#) "Cooperation between the Republic of Slovenia and the Russian Federation in the Field of Culture, Science and Education", the SAI of Slovenia evaluated the activities of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports from the perspective of achieving SDG 4 "Quality Education", SDG 8 "Decent Work and Economic Growth" and SDG 16 "Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions".*

The aim of the integrated assessment of the 2030 Agenda implementation is to support governments by reviewing information on how they plan, manage, monitor and evaluate the promotion of sustainable development.

> *In its performance [audit report](#) "Promoting Sustainable Development", the Audit Office of Finland concluded that agencies should systematically assess whether their activities are in line with Sustainable Development Goals. The costs of activities related to promoting sustainable development should be assessed regularly and thoroughly.*

> *In analysing the efficiency of budget allocations related to sustainable development, SAI France examined the impact of measures taken by the authorities to implement the SDGs. The SAI also [assessed](#) the ratio between public expenditure on activities that contribute to sustainable development and those that affect it adversely.*

> *SAI Portugal [audited](#) public procurement in terms of environmental*

sustainability. The Supreme Audit Institution found that inclusion of environmental criteria in tender terms can help reduce waste and emissions, enhance resource efficiency and encourage new products that meet environmental sustainability criteria.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore the importance of SDG 3 "Good Health and Well-being." Supreme Audit Institutions around the world are committed to providing quality audits of the preparedness of health systems for epidemics without hindering vital services in their efforts to combat the coronavirus.

The SAI UK has published a report on the preparedness of the health and social care system for the COVID-19 pandemic. The National Audit Office found that the health system was well served: even at the peak of the epidemic, there was no shortage of hospital beds, including intensive care units, there were enough ventilators and the shortage of test systems was addressed in a timely manner. This report, according to the SAI, demonstrates the enormous efforts made by health and social workers to respond quickly to the unprecedented challenge posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Challenges related to gender inequality and violence against women, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic, highlighted the importance of SDG 5 "Gender Equality."

The SAI USA has published the report "Domestic violence. Improved data needed to identify the prevalence of brain injuries among victims". The Government Accountability Office analysed the activities of twelve non-federal initiatives that provide education, screen for or treat brain injuries resulting from intimate partner violence.

The UK National Audit Office has audited the Department for International Development's spending on gender equality

programmes overseas. In 2018, the Department launched its 2018–2030 Strategic Vision for Gender Equality. This document is a "call to action" requiring the UK Government, its multilateral and civil society partners to take action to promote the rights of and opportunities for women and girls, bearing in mind that gender equality is fundamental to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

SDG 16 "Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions," which is the highest priority for the Supreme Audit Institutions, has acquired a new dimension during the pandemic related to the effectiveness of government support for the populace and economic recovery, transparency of government procurement of personal protective equipment and test systems, etc.
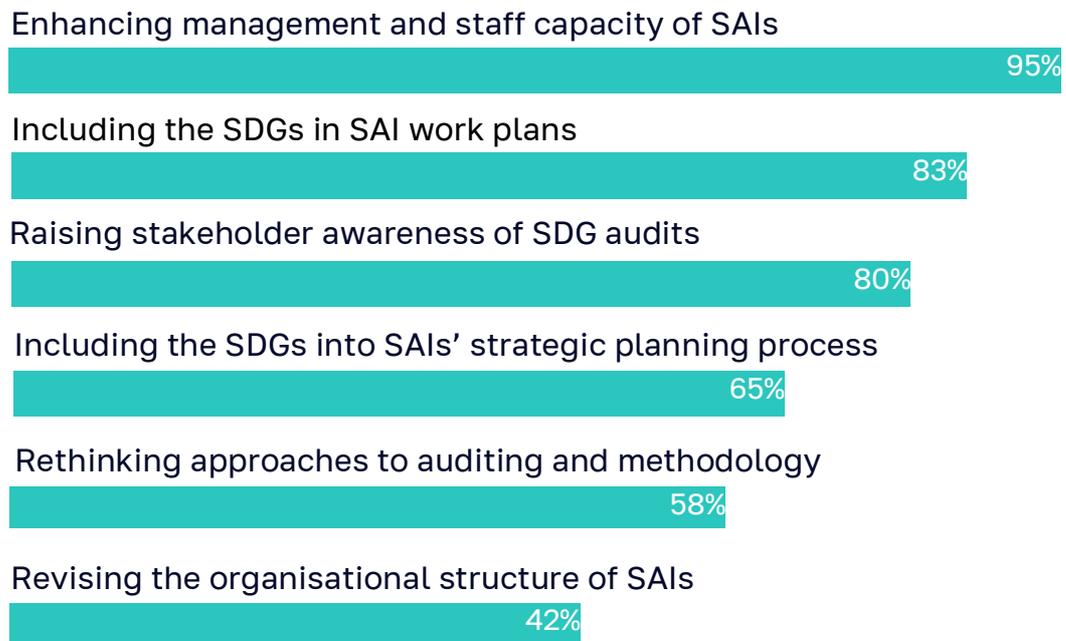
Cyprus's SAI continuously monitors all procedures of the fast-track public procurement process related to the COVID-19 pandemic and provides prompt opinions and comments. This approach produces solutions that address the key concern: protecting the life and health of the people.

In the context of COVID-19, government measures to ensure social inclusion have taken on added importance. The US Government Accountability Office has looked at issues relating to employment of people with disabilities. It pointed out that the number of persons with disabilities who have found a job has increased but there is a need to assess their retention, training reasonable accommodation efforts.

Moving from audit of preparedness to assessment of progress in implementing the SDGs, SAIs are reviewing not only their work plans but also some priorities. The highest priority for SAIs is to build management and staff capacity for auditing SDG implementation. More than 80% of SAIs plan to include SDG implementation audits in their annual plans. Raising the awareness of internal and external stakeholders about SDG audits and integration of the SDGs into the

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strategic planning process is also an important priority for SAIs. Supreme Audit Institutions are about to rethink both their audit approaches and their organisational structure.

Measures taken within SAIs to provide for transition to auditing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Enhancing management and staff capacity of SAIs

95%

Including the SDGs in SAI work plans

83%

Raising stakeholder awareness of SDG audits

80%

Including the SDGs into SAIs' strategic planning process

65%

Rethinking approaches to auditing and methodology

58%

Revising the organisational structure of SAIs

42%

Source: INTOSAI IDI

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4. Findings and forecasts

1.   The 2030 Agenda is the most ambitious and far-reaching development agenda ever agreed at the multilateral intergovernmental level. It encompasses economic, social and environmental dimensions of development and provides for comfortable, safe and prosperous living conditions to be created for generations.

2.   The spread of the coronavirus infection and subsequent economic shocks have had a direct negative impact on indicators across the full range of Sustainable Development Goals, while also creating temporary obstacles to co-ordinating the world community's collective efforts in implementing the 2030 Agenda.

3.   The observed positive environmental effects of the pandemic will be short-lived and need to be further supported by appropriate action programmes.

4.   An equally important effect of the pandemic in terms of promoting sustainable development and achieving the SDGs is that political forces and individuals have realised that there is a practical possibility of taking serious political actions and making changes that go beyond business as usual and allow achieving the ambitious Sustainable Development Goals.

5.   Numerous examples confirm that governments and international organisations are already integrating various aspects of sustainable development into their economic recovery packages and that these measures are not only supported by businesses and people but are also economically efficient in the long term.

6.   INTOSAI's SDG strategy is multi-layered and diverse. Auditing government preparedness for implementing the SDGs and monitoring their implementation occupy a prominent place in the organisation's key documents, including the Moscow Declaration adopted at the 23rd INTOSAI Congress in September 2019.

7.   With the overall conditions for achieving SDG targets deteriorating owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, SAIs are playing an increasingly important role in assessment of national government performance and determination of whether national strategic documents are consistent with sustainable development

principles.

8.   In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, SAIs are rethinking their priorities to ensure a quality audit, seeking to increase the capacity of their staff, raise stakeholder awareness, redefine audit approaches and methodologies, and even review their organisational structure. The focus of SDG audits has now shifted to prioritising SDG 3 "Good Health and Well-being," SDG 5 "Gender Equality" and SDG 16 "Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions."

9.   Stepped-up SDG activities in INTOSAI's regional institutions and special task forces, including Working Group on SDGs and Key Sustainable Development Indicators, as well as at the level of individual SAIs, set the stage for the audit community to fulfil a more robust role of in achieving sustainable development at the national and global levels.