



Summary

On 25 September 2015 the United Nations General Assembly adopted ‘Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ (the 2030 Agenda) as an outcome of the UN Sustainable Development Summit. Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, development experts, statisticians and organizations have discussed the follow-up and review mechanisms for monitoring implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In MY World, a UN survey conducted prior to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, people voted for ‘an honest and responsive government’ as the fourth most important priority after education, health care and employment. These results reflect people’s aspirational expectations for the world they want through the SDGs.

This Policy Brief focuses on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and argues that accountability to citizens, in particular through democratic political processes, is a crucial enabler of the SDGs. In order for the SDG monitoring process to be accountable, it is essential that the SDG indicators include peoples’ own assessments of the availability, accessibility and quality of services.

About International IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with a mission to support sustainable democracy worldwide.

Democratic accountability in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: lessons from the OECD

Background

Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015, development experts, statisticians and various organizations have discussed the implementation, follow-up and review mechanisms for monitoring progress on the implementation of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In order for the SDG monitoring process to be accountable, it is essential that the SDG indicators include peoples’ own assessments of the availability, accessibility and quality of services provided. In particular, the intention expressed by the UN’s MY World survey (UN 2016), and by SDG 16—namely, to foster peaceful and just societies and inclusive and accountable institutions—makes it crucial to include people’s voices in monitoring progress towards the goal. To this end, SDG 16 should, where feasible, include survey-based evidence, which tends to be the best way to represent people’s lived experiences and assessments.

This Policy Brief argues that accountability to citizens, and in particular accountability through democratic political processes, is a crucial enabler of the SDGs. Further, democratic accountability can help make the SDG monitoring framework truly people-centred; particularly in relation to SDG 16.

Accountability and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Accountability can be defined as an obligation to account for one’s activities, accept responsibility for them and disclose and justify results. Accountability is a fundamental cross-cutting dimension of the SDG framework. The most explicit reference to accountability at the goal level is grounded in the language on the quality of institutions in SDG 16, which commits UN member states 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’ (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2015). Thus, governments’ accountability in their responsibilities as service providers (or regulators of service provision) is a crucial element of the SDGs.

Accountability features at the target level, as in target 16.6: ‘Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels.’ Accountability also features in paragraph 45 on national parliaments, in paragraph 47 on the primary responsibility of governments, and in paragraph 73 on accountability to citizens.

Box 1. OECD Legal Instruments

The online Compendium of OECD Legal Instruments provides texts of all legal instruments adopted within the OECD framework, including Acts, Recommendations and other agreements. The Recommendations referenced in this Policy Brief can all be found on this site.

www.legalinstruments.oecd.org/en

Box 2. Participatory democracy in the Republic of Korea

The Government of the Republic of Korea piloted its Civic Participatory Service Design Teams, composed of citizens, civil servants and experts, in 2014. The teams collaborated to design and improve public services so successfully that by 2016 over 200 teams had been formed on public health, transportation and environment. The teams are now becoming a significant part of Korean society with steadfast government support (OECD 2016a, 2016b).

Box 3. Protecting disadvantaged groups in France

France's Public Service Barometer identified the life events 'I'm an immigrant' and 'I'm disabled' as implying the most complex administrative procedures in service delivery. By testing the impact of potential improvements, French authorities have now decided to clarify necessary administrative steps and decrease processing times to simplify the administrative journeys of those facing vulnerable life events (Secretariat-General for Government Modernisation 2013).

Accountability is also present in the cluster on 'Data for monitoring and accountability' in SDG 17, in SDG 5 on gender equality, and in SDG 10 on reducing inequality within and among countries.

What is democratic accountability?

Democratic accountability refers to the many ways in which people, political parties, parliaments, media, civil society and other actors provide feedback to, reward or sanction officials in charge of setting and enacting public policy (International IDEA 2014). It is therefore a crucial enabler of human rights that provides a monitoring framework for implementation. There can be no sustainable development without respect for democracy and human rights.

The 1960 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Convention urges Member countries engaging in world trade to adopt a non-discriminatory approach that meets international obligations. Ever since, the OECD Council, made up of one representative of each Member country, uses consensus to adopt legal instruments called Acts or Recommendations (see Box 1). In December 2017, the Council marked its commitment to democratic accountability by adopting the **Recommendation of the Council on Open Government**.

How democratic accountability can make a difference

It is people-centred and participatory

In *The Road to Dignity by 2030*, the UN Secretary-General noted that 'effective governance for sustainable development demands that public institutions in all countries and at all levels are *inclusive, participatory and accountable to the people*' (UN General Assembly 2014, emphasis added).

In International IDEA's view, free and fair electoral processes; democratic political parties; popularly elected parliaments with legislative, oversight, budgetary, representative and conflict management functions; ombudsman

offices; and supreme audit institutions all contribute to comprehensive representation and human rights.

Social movements and interest groups provide further opportunities for people to participate in and influence the democratic process. The media also provides information and an arena for public debate, and acts as a watchdog.

The **OECD Recommendation of the Council on Open Government** recommends adherents 'grant all stakeholders equal and fair opportunities to be informed and consulted, and to actively engage them in all phases of the policy-cycle and service design and delivery'. The **OECD Recommendation of the Council on Regulatory Policy and Governance** (2012) notes that participation helps governments understand citizens' needs, collect information and resources, improve trust and increase transparency and accountability. Box 2 illustrates such practices in the Republic of Korea.

It can protect minorities and disadvantaged groups

Democratic accountability can facilitate the human right of all to public service on equal terms. Its mechanisms translate human rights commitments and equality goals into action through governance reform that provides public institutions with the incentives and skills to respond to the needs of disadvantaged groups.

The **OECD Recommendation of the Council on Gender Equality in Public Life** (2016) recognizes that the inclusion of women in policy making brings about policies that reflect larger groups of people and distribute economic growth more equally and suggests that states 'protect rights for gender equality and consider complaints in an efficient, competent and impartial manner'. See Box 3 for an example from France.

It builds openness and transparency

Democratic accountability entails the public's right to obtain information on the organization, functioning and decision-making processes of public administration. Greater transparency

Box 4. Openness and transparency in Mexico

In order to allow the general public to follow up on the SDGs, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Mexican Agency for International Development Cooperation (AMEXCID) launched the website agenda2030.mx in 2017. This 15-year project will periodically add and improve data that allows users to view, explore and compare SDG-related indicators broken down in demographic variables over time (Mexican Government, President of the Republic, 2015).

www.agenda2030.mx

Box 5. Right-to-information laws in Sweden

The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting, SKL) conducts yearly assessments of the information provided to citizens through municipal government websites. By sharing the results with local authorities, SKL has contributed to improving local democracy and citizens' accessibility to public services (SKL 2016).

Box 6. Responsiveness in Japan

In 2006, Japan started inviting public comments on draft cabinet and ministerial ordinances, which were considered in a set timeframe and released on the main government portal (OECD 2016b). Five years later, 16 per cent of respondents to a nationwide survey had participated in local policymaking, and a large majority looked forward to continuing to participate in the future (Shinkai and Naito 2005). In 2016, Japan ranked second in the UN e-Participation Index (United Nations 2017).

in government budgets, procurement and spending improves oversight, policy choices and service delivery. Yet it is meaningless without the right to information and an independent and active media. Democratic accountability can bolster the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds.

The OECD supports transparency, participation and accountability as the three pillars of open government (OECD 2016a). **The OECD Recommendation of the Council on Open Government** defines open government as 'a culture of governance that promotes the principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation in support of democracy and inclusive growth'. Adherents should 'take measures, in all branches and at all levels of the government, to develop and implement open government strategies and initiatives in collaboration with stakeholders and to foster commitment from politicians, members of parliaments, senior public managers and public officials, to ensure successful implementation and prevent or overcome obstacles related to resistance to change'. Box 4 describes Mexico's open government initiative to monitor SDG implementation.

It includes answerability

Answerability measures the extent to which a government carries out its duty to explain and justify its decisions, and is linked to how claimholders articulate their demands, but also to officials' capacity and willingness to take responsibility for their actions.

In this context, democratic accountability can contribute to the promotion of people's right to participate in public affairs while providing the free flow of information necessary for governments to be held accountable by their citizens. For instance, the **OECD Recommendation of the Council on Budgetary Governance** (2015) urges Member countries to justify public expenditures to citizens by proving the standards of quality and efficiency with which public services are delivered. See Box 5 for an example from Sweden.

It includes responsiveness

This principle is about whether public officials consult with and listen to citizens or their representatives before a policy or law is approved, so that decision-making reflects their views and demands for human rights.

Democratic accountability mechanisms can help ensure people's right to participate in public affairs and exert influence over the policy-making process while fostering the implementation of principles such as the rule of law, equal access to justice, the proper management of public affairs and property, judicial integrity and transparency.

OECD Member countries are guided by the **Recommendation of the Council on Regulatory Policy and Governance** (2012), which suggests providing opportunities for the public to contribute to policy-making so that regulation 'serves the public interest and is informed by the legitimate needs of those interested in and affected by regulation'. See Box 6 for an example from Japan.

It guarantees enforceability

This principle refers to the formal or informal consequences that duty bearers—government officials being held accountable—might face, and their impact. Research by International IDEA suggests that almost all countries with low scores on service delivery have either limited or no provision for effective sanctions, and no credible incentives for politicians to be responsive. Mechanisms for democratic accountability can provide sufficient incentives and sanctions to encourage governments, elected representatives, and public officials and employees, to work in the best interests of the people.

The **OECD Recommendation on Public Procurement** (2015) highlights the need for OECD Member countries to develop a system of accountability that constructively handles complaints and imposes 'effective and enforceable sanctions'. Also, the **Recommendation on Public Integrity** (2017) calls on adherents to ensure that 'enforcement mechanisms provide appropriate responses to all suspected violations of public integrity standards'. See Box 7 for an example from Mexico.

Box 7. Enforceability in Mexico

Mexico's citizens' bill, the so-called Ley 3de3 ('3-for-3 law'), began as an online campaign asking public officials to disclose taxes, assets and conflicts of interest, and encouraged candidates running for the 2015 mid-term elections to make their financial information public. Enacted in July 2016, Ley 3de3 now supports enforceability by establishing a public 'blacklist' of corrupt officials that prevents reemployment of disqualified officials across municipal borders (Lach 2017).

International IDEA's work on democracy and development

International IDEA recognizes that democracy, while of intrinsic value in its own right, also draws its legitimacy from its capacity to meet people's expectations that it will deliver sustainable and inclusive development. However, political institutions cannot deliver on their own; rather they can ideally provide political actors with the enabling environment for them to act in the interest of all people. Political actors and their practices and actions are ultimately what matter for democracy and development.



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Conclusion

In order for the SDG monitoring process to safeguard people-centred accountability, it is essential that the SDG indicators build on people's own assessments of the availability, accessibility and quality of services provided in OECD Member countries.

Survey-based indicators have the advantage of incorporating people's lived experiences into the monitoring of the SDG targets over time to complement administratively collected indicators. Indeed, follow-up process on the SDGs should be as inclusive and people-centred as possible to mirror popular understanding of the SDGs, including the critical importance of 'honest and responsive governments'.

Hence, democratic accountability can provide the necessary framework for inclusive realization, follow-up and review of the SDGs by protecting minorities and disadvantaged groups, and building openness and transparency, answerability, responsiveness and enforceability.

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