Coherent Policy, Planning, and Performance for Delivering the SDGs

Posted by David Fellows[1]

This is an extraordinarily important time for coherent policy, planning, and performance – the "3 Ps" – for delivering the SDGs and other core public policy objectives.

The SDGs present an extensive range of essential service improvements that are applicable across the world. The threat posed by climate change has become a major international issue with immensely ambitious remedial targets and huge spending requirements. Governments are also under pressure to introduce gender responsive budgeting and digitalize their public finances, reforms that offer huge benefits but also challenges and costs in the short to medium-term. At the same time, the

Covid-19 pandemic has devastated many economies and produced huge fiscal burdens, increasing the challenge of delivering the SDGs and better environmental outcomes.

A coherent delivery framework

It is important that governments take decisions within a strategic framework that represents an appropriate timeframe and deals clearly with policy goals, service responses, resources deployed, and outcomes achieved. The various elements of this framework include:

1. A vision having a 10-year perspective expressed in terms of outcomes.
2. Objectives set with a 3-5 year delivery time frame, consistent with achieving the vision.
3. Delivery targets for each of the next 3-5 years in terms of service outputs relevant to the performance outcomes.
4. 3-5 year budgets for agencies or programs that reflect the delivery outcomes and performance targets that each budget represents.
5. Annual accounts that set out executive responsibilities, annual performance outcome and delivery targets and the actual performance achieved.
6. Training and recruitment plans that enable public agencies to operate the systems and deliver the services that have been approved.

Delivering change

Successful reform is an elusive concept. Any initiative worth

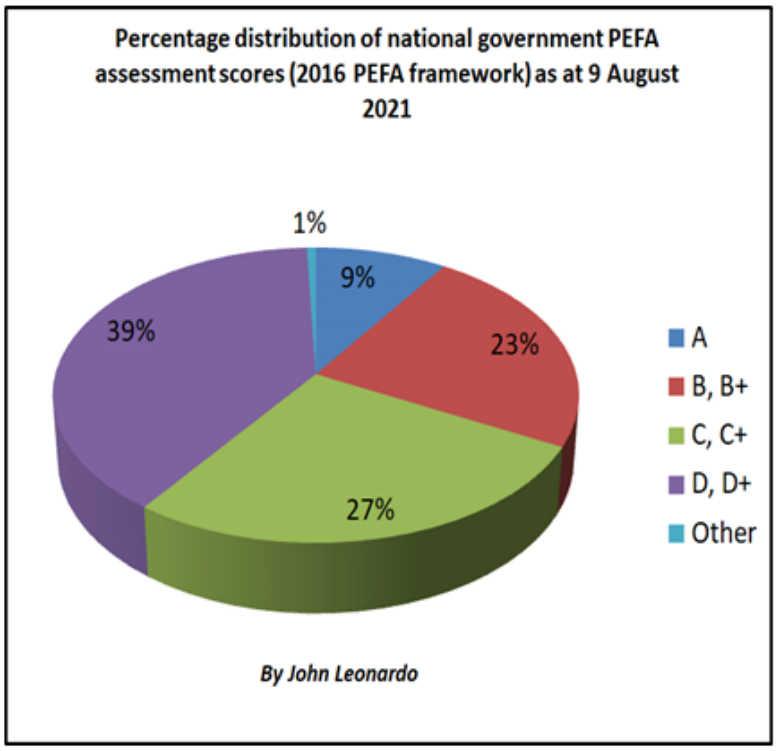
doing must have a benefits realisation plan specifying the steps necessary to ensure that progress is being made and that the end results are achieved.

Services and changes to service provision should be protected by risk management strategies that seek to mitigate internal or external events and shocks that may otherwise hamper delivery or destroy valuable assets.

Review and accountability

The various elements of the framework must be consistent with each other. When major new commitments are proposed, or it becomes obvious that major targets are no longer achievable then a review of the framework should be undertaken. In addition, there should be an annual review of the framework as part of the annual budget preparation process, perhaps as part of a wider spending review. Policies, plans, performance, and the results of review processes should be made public. There is no aspect of the planning and delivery process that cannot benefit from public scrutiny and comment. It is the responsibility of all public institutions in a democratic country to make themselves open and responsive to such a dialogue.

The PFM challenge for developing countries



A = High level of performance that meets international practice
B = Sound performance in line with many elements of good international practice
C = Basic level of performance
D = Less than basic level of performance or insufficient information to score

The chart relates to 58 countries: 52 developing countries and 6 countries in transition

The relatively poor condition of PFM in developing countries shown in the chart suggests the difficulties that developing countries face in planning, managing, and maintaining their existing budget systems. The SDGs and other global pressures to increase spending represent additional challenges for PFM systems to face. Multilateral decisions on the SDGs and climate change must therefore take account of the consequences for developing nations given the likely dependence of successful outcomes on their cooperation.

Conclusion

The immense pressures on governments worldwide to fulfil the global obligations and pressures described above often require concerted action. If governments are to succeed without making over-extended commitments, wasting time and money on impractical solutions, they must make decisions within the rigours of a fully operational policy, planning, and performance framework. Multilateral agreements, economic,

social and technological considerations will all feed into framework construction but the integrity of the framework is key.

Framework development will inevitably present hard choices but that is a strength of the process. It should also provide a coherent basis for democratic accountability if, as a result, drastic life changes are required, freedoms are curtailed, and personal costs are increased.

This article was first published by the International Monetary Fund's Public Financial Management Blog on 20 September 2021.

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Using Digital Technology to Improve Sustainable

Development Goal (SDG) Delivery

by David Fellows and Glyn Evans[1]

The SDGs

The United Nation's SDGs present an array of complex social, engineering, medical, scientific and managerial challenges for member states set in different contexts and mostly requiring very significant investment, organisational capacity and community involvement. Nations have made commitments to this agenda and it is accepted as guiding the key purposes of international development work worldwide. It is a hugely ambitious enterprise yet we suggest that current development work could be more successful.

The need for a powerful learning system

At a general level perhaps the greatest challenge is the creation of a learning system that is powerful enough to develop and distribute relevant knowledge and an understanding of how that knowledge can be best applied in the very different circumstances that exist across the world. As SDG performance criteria are finalised and adopted a report by ESCAP makes it clear just how difficult it is going to be to make a real difference.

We are not suggesting a great deal of organisation to create this necessary learning system. We propose a loose system of networking between experts based on digital communication. This would enable advice to be made available to community-based projects with greater levels of expertise being made available to the development of major programmes and projects. It would also facilitate feedback on project progress and performance. The use of digital technology would also improve the public information base and support public engagement.

Learning system features

The basis of this networking would be a digital communication system that would be largely self-driven by those in the field and a support network that will evolve around them. Key aspects of this digital communication system are illustrated below.

At national and local level:

- *Provide* feedback on progress made at local level within the country
- *Request the public to identify key factors to be taken into account when designing SDG initiatives*
- *Seek feedback on the regulations required to support SDG initiatives*
- *Engage in shared learning (perhaps amongst scattered populations) between ordinary people who are trying to cope with SDG challenges on limited resources*

At regional level:

- *Undertake shared research programmes*
- *Share experiences of adapting recognised approaches to particular circumstances*
- *Improve monitoring techniques*
- *Share monitoring and advisory services*
- *Encourage the development of problem-solving support networks*
- *Undertake peer reviews of projects and governance*

arrangements

At international level:

- *Build worldwide expertise to address fundamental scientific, engineering, economic, social and implimentation challenges*
- *Identify and promote successful strategies and initiatives*
- *Recognise issues for which effective solutions remain elusive*
- *Create networks capable of addressing significant and urgent challenges*
- *Develop modeling tools to help design solutions*

Supporting technology would include:

- *Websites including chat rooms, website messaging, on-line data monitoring and*
  online questionnaires
- *Video-conferencing for expert dialogue and advisory sessions*
- *Cloud-stored databases and shared document development*
- *Email for public interactions(newsletters), dispatch of documents,*
  technical & administrative correspondence and technical update circulars
- *Learning management systems to support training programmes that*
  develop skills and expertise
- *Application software to assist the gathering of performance data*
  including the collection of data from administrative

sources (ESCAP Report ibid: page x)

- *Text messaging and social media for public dialogue*
- *Massive open online courses to raise general awareness*

In general such a system would require relatively unsophisticated technology dependent only on fairly low level digital communication. Expert dialogue would tend to benefit from good connectivity at reasonable bandwidth to support video conferencing although this is not absolutely essential. Proprietary software is readily available for most of these applications although bespoke monitoring, modelling and assessment tools could be created as the approach gained traction.

Examples from around the world

Our blog 'An International eCollaboration Route to Public Service Reform'
(also published by the Australian National University's DEVPOLICYBLOG in July 2017) considers the diverse power of digital communication technologies. Examples of this technology used in ways relevant to this proposition are, as follows:

1. An example of 'Shared Learning' is set out in the UNESCO publication Digital Services for Education in Africa. UNICEF has reported that in Vietnam 40% of children in rural areas used the internet for educational purposes, rising to 62% in urban areas.

2. Communities of practice have already been established in

Canada for green climate purposes

3. Social media has been used by PFMConnect for the past three years to raise public awareness on public financial management and governance topics reaching significant numbers of people in more than 50 countries.

Conclusion

This is not a system requiring heavy oversight and regulation. We seek cultural change to the way programmes and projects are developed. A more inclusive approach at expert and community level could be usefully supported by major development agencies and could become a requirement on contractors. For instance, these proposals could help the Green Climate Fund which appears to be heavily engaged in process issues at the expense of shared innovation.

Is it time to experiment with change?

End note

We should be pleased to discuss the ideas in this piece with those who believe that they may have relevance to their situation.

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