MAINSTREAMING OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN: INTEGRATION INTO POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

In the context of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which encompasses the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), mainstreaming means the landing of the Agenda at the national and local levels and its integration into development plans and budgets. This review paper casts light on approaches adopted in the Mediterranean countries to incorporate the SDGs into their national development policies, plans and strategies. It draws upon a comprehensive analysis of the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) on the implementation of the SDGs submitted by Mediterranean countries from 2016 to 2019. Mediterranean countries have taken concrete measures to map existing policies against each of the SDG-targets in order to identify policy gaps and to mainstream the 2030 Agenda into their legal and policy frameworks. They used different policy instruments and planning frameworks to take up the 2030 Agenda such as national development plans and strategies (e.g. Albania, Algeria, Croatia, Montenegro, Italy, Slovenia, Turkey), vision documents (e.g. Egypt, Malta, Slovenia, Tunisia) and action plans (e.g. Algeria, France, Spain). A few Mediterranean countries (e.g. Cyprus, Greece, Israel, Lebanon and Morocco) did not adopt any integrated policy instrument and opted for the implementation of the SDGs through existing national policies and strategies. The harmonization of national development plans and strategies with the SDGs is a continuous process and needs to be implemented across sectors. The analysis of the VNRs shows that little attention was dedicated to address trade-offs through policy integration. The achievement of the SDGs implies new modes of policy making as well as a better cross-sectoral coordination and harmonisation of policies in Mediterranean countries. Sharing lessons learned and mutual policy learning among Mediterranean countries could help ensuring a step forward from the formal description of legislation in the VNRs.

Keywords: *SDGs, 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Mediterranean basin, integrated policy, policy mainstreaming, policy coordination.*

INTRODUCTION

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted at the United Nations' Sustainable Development Summit of September 2015 with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at its core (United Nations, 2015). The 2030 Agenda sets out ambitious goals and provides a universal framework for action (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2018; UNDG, 2016; United Nations, 2015). The concept of sustainable development has taken on a richer, wider meaning within the 2030 Agenda by adding to its three core elements (viz. environmental protection, social inclusion, economic growth) five critical dimensions that are at the heart of the Agenda (viz. 5Ps: people, prosperity, planet, partnership and peace). Furthermore, the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs embody the following core principles: universality, leaving no one behind, interconnectedness and indivisibility, inclusiveness and multi-stakeholder partnerships (United Nations, 2015). Therefore, "*the scope and ambition of the Agenda and SDGs require their inclusion in the instruments that define government action, including the national development plans and budgets*" (p. 16) (UN-DESA, 2016). Achieving the SDGs is essentially a political process (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2018) and will require coherent policies and sustained long-term investments (OECD, 2018, 2019; OECD & SDSN, 2019). Indeed, the effective and efficient implementation of the 2030 Agenda requires an integrated approach to sustainable development. In this context, the United Nations System identified three elements for a coherent and effective support to the implementation of the Agenda under the acronym MAPS (Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support) (UNDG, 2016): *Mainstreaming* refers to the landing of the 2030 Agenda at the national and local levels, integrating it into national sustainable development plans and into budget allocations; *Acceleration* means a better targeting of resources at priority areas while paying attention to synergies and trade-offs across sectors; and *Policy Support* is about making sure that skills and expertise are made available in a cost-effective and timely way. This clearly shows that the mainstreaming process is crucial for the achievement of the SDGs. Therefore, this review paper sheds light on approaches adopted in the Mediterranean countries to incorporate the SDGs into their national development plans, policies and strategies. It also addresses policy coordination and harmonisation processes as well as approaches pursued to tap into the co-benefits of some SDGs and policy actions while minimizing trade-offs. Furthermore, the paper explores the interconnections between policy coherence, on the one side, and governance and coordination mechanisms, on the other side.

METHODS

The methodology used in the present review is similar to that adopted by El Bilali et al. (2019) in their analysis of the institutional and governance arrangements adopted in Mediterranean countries for the implementation of the SDGs. The review covers all 21 Northern, Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries considered in the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (UNEP/MAP, 2005, 2016) viz. Albania, Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia,

Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Lebanon, Libya, Malta, Montenegro, Morocco, Palestine, Slovenia, Spain, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey. The paper is based on a desk review of the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of Mediterranean countries (Table 1) and the syntheses of the VNRs submitted in 2016 (UN-DESA, 2016), 2017 (UN-DESA, 2018a), 2018 (UN-DESA, 2018b) and 2019 (UN-DESA, 2019). Insights from the VNRs were complemented with data collected from different academic and expert sources such as the SDG Index and Dashboards (OECD & SDSN, 2019; Sachs et al., 2018, 2019; Sustainable Development Goals Center for Africa & Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2018) and scholarly literature (e.g. Allen et al., 2018).

Table 1. Voluntary National Reviews of Mediterranean countries considered in the paper.

Mediterranean Country*	VNR submitted in year(s)	Reference
Albania	2018	Council of Ministers - Republic of Albania (2018)
Algeria	2019	Anonymous (2019a)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2019	Anonymous (2019d)
Croatia	2019	Government of the Republic of Croatia (2019)
Cyprus	2017	Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Cyprus (2017)
Egypt**	2016	Anonymous (2016a)
	2018	Ministry of Planning Monitoring and Administrative Reform - Egypt (2018)
France	2016	Anonymous (2016b)
Greece	2018	General Secretariat of the Government – Greece (2018)
Israel	2019	Anonymous (2019b)
Italy	2017	Italian Ministry for the Environment, Land and Sea (2017)
Lebanon	2018	Anonymous (2018a)
Malta	2018	Anonymous (2018b)
Montenegro	2016	Ministry of Sustainable Development and Tourism – Montenegro (2016)
Morocco	2016	Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation – Morocco (2016)
Palestine	2018	State of Palestine (2018)
Slovenia	2017	Anonymous (2017)
Spain	2018	Gobierno de España (2018)
Tunisia	2019	République Tunisienne (2019)
Turkey**	2016	Ministry of Development – Turkey (2016)
	2019	Anonymous (2019c)

*No VNRs submitted by Libya and Syria, due to conflicts in both countries.
**Countries that submitted twice their VNR.
Source: Authors' compilation based on data from UN-DESA (2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The alignment of the national development plans with the 2030 Agenda was pursued through different actions such as declaring the Agenda as a reference document for the public policy to ensure a 'whole-of-government' approach (Anonymous, 2018c; UN-DESA, 2018a) or that sustainable development is the central organizing principle of the government (UN-DESA, 2018a, 2019). Nevertheless, the harmonization of national development plans and strategies with the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda is a continuous process and needs to be implemented across sectors (Anonymous, 2018c; UN-DESA, 2019). In this context, countries have taken concrete steps to *map existing policies*, strategies and programmes against each of the SDG-targets to identify policy gaps that require further attention in legislation (Anonymous, 2018c; UN-DESA, 2018a). Indeed, some Mediterranean countries (e.g. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Spain, Tunisia) assessed the alignment of their national policies with the SDGs through the Rapid Integrated Assessment tool developed in the framework of the United Nations' MAPS (UN-DESA, 2019). Allen et al. (2018) put that France, Italy and Slovenia undertook mapping of the policies and took concrete steps for their alignment with the 2030 Agenda. Other Mediterranean countries (e.g. Greece, Israel, Tunisia, Turkey) showcased increased involvement of *parliaments* to ensure the alignment of the national legislation to the Agenda by filling legislative gaps (either by amending existing legislation or promulgating new legislative frameworks) and to advance the implementation of the SDGs (UN-DESA, 2018b, 2019). Furthermore, the process of localisation and contextualisation of the 2030 Agenda entailed sometimes the *prioritisation of the SDGs* depending on the country context, development status and national priorities (Anonymous, 2018c; UN-DESA, 2019). Indeed, some countries have prioritized the SDGs (and/or SDG-targets) that are relevant in the process of accelerating their national development priorities (UN-DESA, 2019).

World countries have used a variety of planning frameworks and policy instruments to take up the 2030 Agenda at the national level such as national development plans, vision documents, plans of action and SDG roadmaps (Anonymous, 2018c; UN-DESA, 2018a). Countries whose national plans predate the SDGs have analysed how existing policies can advance the 2030 Agenda and/or mandated line ministries to spell out how they are contributing to the achievement of the SDGs (UN-DESA, 2018b). In this respect, many countries noted in their VNRs that their existing policy and planning frameworks were flexible enough to accommodate the SDGs (Anonymous, 2018c). An overview on policy instruments and planning frameworks used in Mediterranean countries to mainstream the SDGs is provided in Table 2.

Albania states in its VNR that the implementation of the 2030 Agenda takes part in the context of the National Strategy for Development and Integration (NSDI) and the European integration process. The NSDI is the main policy document outlining the development vision for Albania as a middle-income economy on the path towards its integration in the EU. The VNR of the country highlights that the NSDI

is fully aligned with the 2030 Agenda as all components of NSDI are directly related to the achievement of SDG-targets (Council of Ministers - Republic of Albania, 2018). *Algeria* refers to the integration of the principles of sustainable development in its new constitution (adopted in 2016) as well as its ratification of different international agreements and conventions. Furthermore, SDGs were integrated in different national strategies mainly the National Strategy on Environment and Sustainable Development (SNEDD 2019–2035) and its Action plan (PNAEDD 2019–2022) (Anonymous, 2019a). *Bosnia* considers EU accession and implementation of the Agenda 2030 as complementary and mutually reinforcing processes. Given the particular political system in the country, the operationalisation of the 2030 Agenda takes place at different governance levels. In particular, it is planned to integrate the SDGs in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina Development Strategy 2020–2027, the upcoming Sustainable development strategy 2030 at the Republika Srpska, and the Development Strategy 2020–2027 of Brčko District (Anonymous, 2019d). *Croatia* revealed in its VNR that work in underway to prepare its 2030 National Development Strategy (NDS), which was expected to be adopted in the first half of 2020, in order to serve as a key strategic document that will shape all future public policies and ensure their alignment with the 2030 Agenda (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2019; UN-DESA, 2019). *Egypt* reported that its 'Sustainable Development Strategy: Egypt's Vision 2030', launched in February 2016, is aligned with the 2030 Agenda both in terms of content and implementation period (UN-DESA, 2016). Furthermore, the Strategy was reflected in the Government program 2016-2018 that was approved by the parliament (Anonymous, 2016a; UN-DESA, 2016). In addition, several ministries have incorporated the SDGs in their medium- and long-term strategies such as the National Strategy for Science and Technology for Sustainable Development 2030, and the Egypt's Education Transformation Program 2030 (Ministry of Planning Monitoring and Administrative Reform - Egypt, 2018; UN-DESA, 2018b). *France* highlights in its VNR the linkages between SDGs and the Paris Climate Agreement. It also underlines how sectoral policies (e.g. energy, employment) contributes to sustainable development as well as its contribution to international cooperation for sustainable development. Furthermore, the country expressed its intent to develop a National Action Plan for the SDGs (Anonymous, 2016b).

In *Italy*, the National Sustainable Development Strategy 2017–2030 (NSDS) is aligned with the 2030 Agenda. The NSDS updates the former Environmental Action Strategy for Sustainable Development and represents a step towards a holistic policy framework that encompasses, besides environment, also social and economic dimensions (Italian Ministry for the Environment Land and Sea, 2017). *Lebanon* highlights in its VNR that sectoral strategies and plans (e.g. National Social Development Strategy; Vision for Stabilization, Growth and Employment) incorporate some of the SDGs but they need to be adapted to the level of SDG-targets (Anonymous, 2018a). In *Malta*, the Sustainable Development Act (2012) establishes a coordinating mechanism for sustainable development policy.

Moreover, the country has been working on the development of a national Vision 2050 that offers guidelines towards long-term sustainable development and a framework for the mainstreaming of the SDGs across all levels of Government. The Vision will be implemented through a national strategy and action plan (Anonymous, 2018b). In *Palestine*, SDGs were integrated in the National Policy Agenda 2017–2022 (NPA), which addresses 75 out of the 169 targets, as well as in different cross-sectorial strategies (State of Palestine, 2018). *Slovenia*'s Development Strategy 2030, which is in line with on the guidelines of Slovenia's Vision 2050, represents the development framework for implementing the 2030 Agenda. The Strategy focuses on ensuring a high quality of life for all through a balanced economic, social, and environmental development (Anonymous, 2017). *Spain* created a High-Level Group (HLG) for inter-ministerial coordination where ministries, Autonomous Communities and local governments are represented (Gobierno de España, 2018). Moreover, it approved in 2018 an Action Plan for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda that promotes public policies' alignment with the SDGs and identifies transformative measures as well as policy levers. The Action plan also establishes budgeting for the SDGs and compulsory SDG impact reports in legislative activity (Gobierno de España, 2018; OECD & SDSN, 2019). One of the main outcomes of the Action Plan is expected to be the adoption of a 2020–2030 Sustainable Development Strategy (Gobierno de España, 2018).*Tunisia* highlighted that 84 targets are covered by the current five-year development plan (*Plan quinquennal de développement 2016–2020*). Moreover, the country launched the development of the Tunisia Vision 2030, which shows its commitment to the integration of the 2030 Agenda and the 2063 African Agenda (République Tunisienne, 2019).

Table 2. Overview on the mainstreaming of SDGs into national development policies, plans and strategies in the Mediterranean countries.

Mediterranean Country*	Title of policy document or planning framework
Albania	National Strategy for Development and Integration 2015–2020 (NSDI)
Algeria	*Stratégie Nationale pour l'Environnement et le Développement Durable* (SNEDD 2019–2035)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Development Strategy 2020-2027 of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina
Croatia	2030 National Development Strategy (NDS) (2020)
Egypt	Sustainable Development Strategy: Egypt's Vision 2030
France	National Action Plan for the Sustainable Development Goals
Italy	National Sustainable Development Strategy 2017-2030 (NSDS)
Malta	National Vision 2050
Montenegro	National Strategy of Sustainable Development 2030 (NSSD)
Palestine	National Policy Agenda 2017–2022 (NPA)
Slovenia	Development Strategy 2030 & Slovenia's Vision 2050
Spain	Action Plan for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (2018)
Tunisia	Tunisia Vision 2030

Turkey	11th National Development Plan

* Cyprus, Greece, Israel, Lebanon and Morocco are not reported in the table since they did not mention in their VNRs any overarching, ad-hoc policy document for the implementation of the SDGs.
Source: Authors' elaboration based on VNRs of Mediterranean countries.

As a result of the focus of the institutions in *Cyprus* on tackling the economic and financial crisis, the country formulated no longer term sustainable development strategy. Therefore, Cyprus relies on a combination of national and EU policies and legislation to cover most of the SDGs such as the Action Plan for Growth and the National Reform Programme drafted in the context of Europe 2020 Strategy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Cyprus, 2017). *Montenegro* is a further Mediterranean country that did not adopt any integrated policy instrument for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In fact, the country opted for the implementation of the SDGs through the National Strategy for Sustainable Development as well as a group of existing policies and strategies (e.g. National Strategy on Climate Change until 2030, Spatial Plan of Montenegro, Program of Economic Reforms, Medium-term program of accession to the European Union) (Ministry of Sustainable Development and Tourism – Montenegro, 2016; UN-DESA, 2016). *Greece* established in 2016 an inter-ministerial co-ordination network for SDGs to support their mainstreaming as well as the integration of the sustainable development paradigm into legislation, policies and strategies (OECD & SDSN, 2019). The incorporation of the SDGs into the national framework takes place, in line with national priorities, into sectoral policies such as the new National Growth Strategy, the National Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2014–2020, and National Operational Programme for Fisheries and the Sea (OPFS) 2014-2020 (General Secretariat of the Government – Greece, 2018). In *Israel*, the parliament (Knesset) has examined ways in which SDG thinking can be incorporated in the process of preparing legislation. SDGs were mainstreamed in different strategies such as the National Climate Change Adaptation Plan, Sustainable Consumption and Production Action Plan 2015–2020, and National Green Growth Strategy (Anonymous, 2019b). Likewise, *Morocco* revealed in its VNR that many of the SDGs are already included in existing sectoral strategies (UN-DESA, 2016). *Turkey* as well has not opted for drafting a separate policy document or action plan for SDGs and chose instead to integrate them into its national development plans. It pointed out a high degree of consistency between the 10th National Development Plan 2014-2018 and the SDGs (Ministry of Development – Turkey, 2016). The SDGs are considered as one of the main inputs to the 11th National Development Plan (Anonymous, 2019c; Ministry of Development – Turkey, 2016; UN-DESA, 2016).
Policy interventions that aim at the achievement of one SDG might negatively affect another area. Therefore, some countries are using overarching, multi-dimensional concepts such as poverty or human rights to address interlinkages between the SDGs (UN-DESA, 2018b). As for *addressing trade-offs* through

policy integration, the analysis of the VNRs revealed that little attention was devoted to tackling this issue. Therefore, there is a wide scope for mutual learning and sharing lessons among governments on how to identify and address trade-offs between sectoral policies as well as development policy options and objectives (UN-DESA, 2018a). Nevertheless, Turkey performed an SDG mapping to identify inter-linkages among SDGs (e.g. synergies, trade-offs, mutual interactions) and interaction level based on country's context (UN-DESA, 2019). In this respect, UN-DESA (2019) argues that many policy interventions do not identify impact scale as well as synergies/trade-offs and points out that policy coherence remains a challenge for many countries. UN-DESA (2019) adds that "*The SDGs represent challenges that require the improvement of existing and the introduction of new, innovative policies and measures*" (p. 16). Furthermore, countries recognize that the implementation of the SDGs requires effective partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders. It also implies addressing capacity constraints, which are often identified as key challenge for local administrations.

A further step in the process of SDGs mainstreaming consists in their integration into sectoral policies and investment plans to ensure adequate financing (Anonymous, 2018c; Sachs et al., 2019). As for *budget allocation*, OECD and SDSN (2019) put that "*Leveraging financing, budget processes and public procurement can help foster policy coherence beyond electoral cycles and embed the 2030 agenda in day-to-day government operations*" (p. 9). Indeed, public procurement is a key instrument that could be used by governments in the implementation of the SDGs (OECD & SDSN, 2019; Sachs et al., 2018). One way to ensure strong functional and operational linkages between the SDGs and national budgets is to use the SDGs (cf. indicators) as performance measures of budget outcomes (UN-DESA, 2019), which makes it easy to track budgetary allocation to SDGs targets as well as to monitor the different sources of funding for the SDGs. Furthermore, Sachs et al. (2019) suggest that "*performance budgeting, spending reviews, Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) are all powerful tools that must all be mobilized to achieve the goals*" (p. 7).

There are many relationships between policy coordination processes, *governance* mechanisms and budget allocation practices. Indeed, generally speaking, countries that opted for the coordination of the implementation of the SGDs by the presidency or the prime minister's office tend to have an overarching, integrated legal and policy framework that deals with sustainable development while those that opted for more 'collegial' implementation by ministries are more likely to just mainstream the SDGs in the existing sectoral policies. Indeed, as UN-DESA (2019) concludes, "*when policymakers work across ministries and sectors, according to several countries, they are better equipped to recognize and mitigate trade-offs*" (p. 18). Governance and institutional challenges faced in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (Allen et al., 2018; UN-DESA, 2016, 2018a, 2018b) as well as insufficient coordination and communication among ministries dealing with sustainable development and fragmentation of responsibilities for SDGs implementation (UN-DESA, 2016) affect the alignment of the national

policy framework to the SDGs. Moreover, it can be argued that where the ministries of finances (or economy) have a leading role in the implementation of the SDGs (UN-DESA, 2016), there is more attention to them in budget allocation.

CONCLUSIONS

Mediterranean countries have taken concrete steps to mainstream the 2030 Agenda into their legal and policy frameworks. While in most cases the policy and planning frameworks have resulted flexible enough to accommodate the SGDs, the breadth of the 2030 Agenda and the transformative change that it calls for might require a paradigm change in the alignment of the national development policy with the Agenda. Governance challenges, such as insufficient coordination among ministries and fragmentation of mandates for SDGs implementation, affect the speed and effectiveness of the integration of the SDGs into national policy and planning frameworks. Moreover, different approaches have been used to tap into the synergies and co-benefits of some policy actions. Nevertheless, the analysis of the VNRs shows that little attention was dedicated to addressing trade-offs through policy integration. Therefore, sharing lessons and mutual learning could represent a value added and a valuable instrument to advance the 2030 Agenda implementation in the Mediterranean area and ensure a step forward from the formal description of legislation and initiatives in the VNRs. Indeed, SDGs integration into national planning and budgeting systems should go hand in hand with developing skills and knowledge, and building capacity of all stakeholders involved, including policy makers and planners. Identified issues of common concern, gaps and weaknesses could become the object of analysis, training and capacity building (including institutional support) with the help of regional and international organisations that operate in the Mediterranean. Regional initiatives such as the Multi-stakeholder platform on Sustainable Food Systems – promoted by FAO, CIHEAM and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) – can result instrumental in this respect.

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