

Policy brief – May 2021

# Pathways for consensus-building: multi-stakeholder advisory bodies for sustainable development


Global Forum for



National SDG  
Advisory Bodies

## Table of contents

- 3..... Abstract
- 4..... Summary
- 5..... Pathways for MSP-advisory bodies
- 5..... What is the value added of MSP-advisory bodies for national SDG implementation?
- 7..... What routes can be taken to establish an MSP-advisory body?
- 9..... About the Global Forum for National SDG Advisory Bodies

 This is an interactive PDF. Click on the page you'd like to go to.

# Abstract

Multi-stakeholder bodies provide forums for consensus-building on controversial issues. In this function, they aim to identify practical, inclusive and socially acceptable solutions that will set the course for sustainable development. Integrating multi-stakeholder platform advisory councils or similar bodies (MSP-advisory bodies) into institutional structures has the potential to advance national roadmaps by providing a compass by which to navigate complex issues of structural change.

This policy brief highlights the benefits of MSP-advisory bodies for governments and showcases routes for establishing them. It is based on empirical insights from eight MSP-advisory bodies around the world and therefore sources from a rich collection of good practices. Incorporating MSP-advisory bodies as strong knowledge partners into institutional architectures to implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has proven to be a successful path for equipping national governments with a valuable shortcut to accelerating sustainable development policymaking.



# Summary

Accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development requires instituting formal arrangements for multi-stakeholder engagement that will increase acceptance of transformational pathways. Insights from eight case studies<sup>1</sup> of national MSP-advisory bodies around the world highlight key factors in the pathways of establishment and maintenance of MSP-advisory bodies for sustainable development.

Multi-stakeholder bodies played an important role in advancing the sustainable development agenda before the 2030 Agenda was adopted. It is evident that countries are increasingly establishing institutionalised mechanisms aimed specifically at long-term, inclusive multi-stakeholder engagement on the SDGs. Such mechanisms can support consultation on the development of national priorities, drafting of national strategic plans, monitoring of progress and reporting on progress.

The core function of MSP-advisory bodies is to convene representatives from different stakeholder groups and provide constructive advice on controversial issues related to sustainable development that transcends while also including these multiple views. This is the unique value added for governments in the long run as it links together private sector interests and public demands in one institutionalised body with a common view that is wider and more embracing than any single perspective. These bodies are crucial for dealing with competing interests and identifying pathways forward for how to best harness synergies and mitigate trade-offs.

Beyond this core mandate, some MSP-advisory bodies play an active role in specific policy processes, such as the development of national sustainable development strategies, the compilation of Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) or the nationalisation of indicators. These roles add credibility to the agenda and often make implementation more efficient. Other bodies, which have the standing and resources to do so, have expanded this mandate even further by promoting civil society networks or embarking on public engagement. However, their overarching goals are to find common ground and make a collective impact on sustainable development by means of elevating the contributions of diverse stakeholders and managing difficult negotiation and consensus-building processes on controversial subjects. In doing so, they also promote a whole-of-society approach to implementing the 2030 Agenda.

There are diverse pathways for establishing MSP-advisory bodies, and there is no specific recipe or blueprint for how they should be established, where they should be positioned or how they should be composed. Success is context-dependent and should be based on a thorough assessment of the institutional and political landscape.

The report<sup>2</sup> upon which this policy brief is based showcases specific examples from eight case studies to demonstrate the diverse approaches that can be taken to establish and maintain an MSP-advisory body in very different political and institutional contexts.

**1** The cases include MSP-advisory bodies from Belgium, Georgia, Kosovo, Mexico, Namibia, Portugal, Romania and Senegal.

**2** This policy brief is based on the report: Global Forum, 2021: Pathways for National Sustainable Development Advisory Bodies. Please see the full report for further details on method and research design. [PDF](#)

*Routes for MSP-advisory bodies are context-dependent*

## Pathways for MSP- advisory bodies

In September 2019, multi-stakeholder partnerships at global, national and local levels were highlighted by the Secretary-General of the United Nations in a call for “accelerated action” to achieve the SDGs.<sup>3</sup> The recently published UNDESA SDG Partnership Guidebook argues that acceleration requires an adaptation of existing multi-stakeholder partnerships and mechanisms in “new and transformational ways”.<sup>4</sup> Multi-stakeholder bodies played an important role in promoting sustainable development before the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was introduced, and for this reason the Global Forum study considers the establishment of national sustainable development bodies prior to 2015 and their transformation for the 2030 Agenda as well as MSP-advisory bodies established more recently with the explicit purpose of promoting the SDGs.

The experiences, successes and challenges of MSP-advisory bodies that were established prior to the 2030 Agenda (such as Belgium, Namibia and Portugal) differ from those that are newly established or in the process of being established (such as Georgia, Kosovo, Mexico, Romania and Senegal), given the institutional, legal and political contexts in which they were established. The latter are currently defining their modus operandi, governance mechanisms and selection procedures, while the former are seeking to strengthen long-term partnership relationships. For this reason, this policy brief highlights favourable conditions that have

contributed to success for the different types of bodies, while also identifying cross-cutting factors that are relevant in installing and maintaining legitimacy, with an eye to replicating and/or adapting these pathways elsewhere.

## What is the value added of MSP- advisory bodies for national SDG implementation?

**Build consensus on controversial topics and incorporate academic, societal and private sector perspectives.**

Among members, there should be a shared commitment to fact-finding and evidence-supported arguments, and a willingness to compromise in order to reach consensus on opinions. Together these should form the common guiding ethic of the body’s processes. Internal processes and working approaches should include specification of the mandate and various routes and methodologies for consensus-building, e.g. through strengthening the functioning and mechanisms for dialogue and consensus-building within working groups. This also requires the creation of formal and informal feedback mechanisms within MSP-advisory bodies to promote transparency and accountability and an investment in leadership and facilitation skills to ensure effective mediation of diverse interests. When it is not possible to achieve consensus, there should be options to include text that contains differing positions rather than weakening or simplifying the advice provided.

<sup>3</sup> Jensen, Lois, ed. “Report of the Secretary-General on SDG Progress 2019 Special Edition.” United Nations, 2019. [↘ PDF](#)

<sup>4</sup> Stibbe, Darian, Prescott, Dave. “The SDG Partnership Guidebook: a practical guide to building high-impact multi-stakeholder partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals”. The Partnering Initiative and UNDESA, 2020, p. 9. [↘ PDF](#)

*Core function:  
build consensus on  
controversial topics*

**Constructive, formal and trustful relationships between the MSP-advisory body and government.** Enacting institutionalised exchange and feedback mechanisms between both entities is needed to guarantee policy relevance of recommendations and to maintain motivation for honorary engagement on the part of MSP-advisory bodies. This goes along with the creation of a conducive institutional ecosystem for MSP-advisory bodies (e.g. whole-of-government approach). Institutionalised MSP-advisory bodies will guarantee long-term motivation for successful delivery. Sufficiently resourcing and institutionally locating MSP-advisory bodies for maximum reach, influence and impact is important. The MSP-advisory bodies should be embedded in a robust legal framework with clear inter-institutional mechanisms that bridge different arms and levels of government. This will ensure horizontal and vertical policy coherence as well as adequate follow-up.

**Connect the MSP-advisory body's official mandate to national sustainable development policy processes** or documents such as national sustainable development strategies or VNRs. This will serve to facilitate a more active role in established processes, while creating clear pathways of influence and enhancing legitimacy. Aim for reciprocal exchange and feedback loops about recommendations, advice and policy processes.

**Enhance social acceptance of transformation and social change by promoting inclusivity, diversity and participation in the MSP-advisory body.** This requires transparent and comprehensible selection procedures

and providing non-state actors with opportunities to assume leadership and decision-making roles within the body, as well as reflecting discussions within the body back into their respective stakeholder groups. Pay careful attention to inclusivity, diversity and the “leave no one behind” (LNOB) principle in these selection processes and working modalities. Policy relevance is key to promoting motivation, belonging and commitment to the MSP-advisory body, founded in a common belief in the mandate, role and value added of the body. In short, the intentional culture of inclusivity must go beyond just the stated formalities.

**Sub-national engagement of MSP-advisory bodies to foster societal dialogue and advocacy for sustainable development.** MSP-advisory bodies play a role in collating the diverse inputs of sub-national entities; providing opportunities for sub-national authorities to participate in council or working group meetings as observers or voting members; and collaborating with local authorities to develop innovative solutions to local problems. They also play a role in enhancing state capacities through the promotion of local and regional networks to strengthen public engagement and thereby accelerate implementation of sustainable development.

**Budget for the operational and administrative aspects of the MSP-advisory body and provision of capacity development to the secretariat and leadership.** A well-resourced and relatively independent secretariat is necessary in order to enhance operations and ensure effectiveness in the long run. It is important that

*Whole-of-society-approach:  
inclusivity  
+ diversity  
+ participation*

resources are allocated for capacity development within MSP-advisory body secretariats and by chairpersons, specifically in relation to convening and facilitation skills, so that they are better equipped to promote consensus-building. Providing these bodies with the resources needed to fulfil their mandate is fundamental to a long-term advisory function

**Invest in institutional learning across like-minded MSP-advisory bodies at the regional and global level** by participating in regional networks or linking cooperation processes for the purposes of information sharing, capacity development, and innovative problem-solving on cross-border issues.

## What routes can be taken to establish an MSP-advisory body?

**Harness existing institutions, processes and stakeholder structures.** Since time is of the essence when it comes to the “acceleration” of sustainable development, utilizing existing entities and building on existing stakeholder structures is the most efficient route. If possible, build upon a history and culture of negotiation and consensus-building practices associated with dialogue on controversial subjects and create opportunities for institutional linking of various stakeholders. Governments should aim to connect such an MSP-advisory body with existing

coordination mechanisms within government that include different members and levels of government.

**Position the MSP-advisory body close to or within national institutions responsible for overseeing sustainable development policymaking.** This will ensure that it is aligned with the institution that has a coordination mandate. It will increase the MSP-advisory body's engagement in national sustainable development strategies and will enhance its ability to provide coherent and integrated policy advice to all ministries. However, this positioning (and its implications for the independence of any advice formulated) must be carefully considered, taking the various national institutional and political contexts into account.

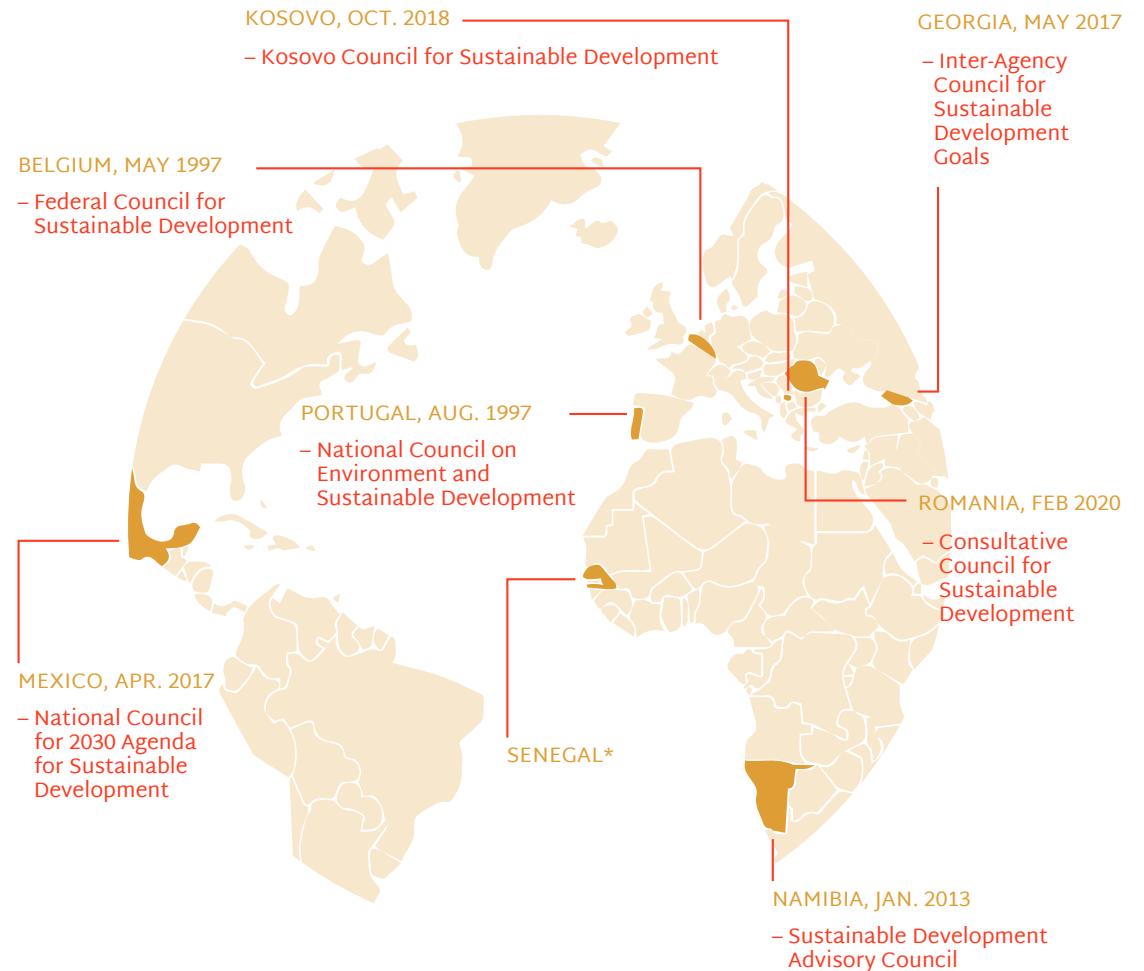
**Obtain recognition from the executive branch and/or parliament** and promote ownership and shared responsibility with a whole-of-government approach in mind. Not only will this ensure policy coherence, but it will also create a conducive ecosystem that will support the legislative, institutional and budgetary changes that are required to establish the MSP-advisory body and maintain it in the long run.

**Join forces with international partners** and harness the financial, technical and capacity support of international partners for the establishment of MSP-advisory bodies, particularly in relation to developing governance modalities and financing the secretariat.

*The fine balance of closeness to centre of government & independent advice*

Strike a balance between dealing with timely and societally relevant issues, while safeguarding the long-term vision in order to maintain the value added of an MSP-advisory body. This requires flexibility and adaptation to immediate demands (such as COVID-19, 'build back better' and concepts such as a 'just transition'), while also ensuring some degree of continuity. Careful attention must be paid to both up-to-date composition of the secretariat and the MSP-advisory body itself as well as the need to maintain institutional memory over time. This includes aspects such as: institutionalization of operational principles, membership selection criteria and governance mechanisms in law; monitoring and review for institutional learning; and the allocation of resources and creation of opportunities for collective long-term planning to ensure that the work of MSP-advisory bodies fits in with the strategic goals of the country, region and globally, both within the context of the 2030 Agenda and beyond.

## Case studies: eight national MSP-advisory bodies



*\*SDG Council in Senegal is still emerging*



# About the Global Forum for National SDG Advisory Bodies

The Global Forum is a network that connects the knowledge and experience of multi-stakeholder advisory commissions, councils and similar bodies for sustainable development. These bodies contribute to the national institutional architectures for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By bridging knowledge and interests of various stakeholder groups, multi-stakeholder advisory bodies foster social acceptance and cohesion within society in times of transformation. The demand for their work in facilitating negotiation outcomes cannot be underestimated.

This forum for and by national multi-stakeholder advisory bodies is as heterogeneous as the respective contexts its members are in, which vary accordingly in their institutional development, set-up, mandate and role. Constant exchange in and across working groups creates a rich marketplace of ideas, negotiation mechanisms and effective policy measures that can easily be transferred and tailored to local needs and demands elsewhere. As a demand-driven network, it constantly evolves its focus in collective processes. With its rich pool of collective knowledge, the forum effectively invites stakeholders and governments around the globe to adapt, implement and jointly accelerate the delivery of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.



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#### Authors

↳ Dr. Zosa De Sas Kropiwnicki-Gruber, Bashar Alsaedi  
↳ British Columbia Council for International Cooperation (BCCIC)

#### Editorial team

Dr. Hannah Janetschek (responsible), Felix Meyerhoff  
↳ info@nachhaltigkeitsrat.de

↳ German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE)  
c/o Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH  
Potsdamer Platz 10  
10785 Berlin, Germany

#### Design

↳ Studio Hoekstra

Global Forum for

