

Sustainable Development and Effective Governance: Institutional Condition for Implementing Goals

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how public institutions and governance arrangements affect the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Ten years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the global evidence shows real improvements in several areas, but overall progress remains too slow for the 2030 deadline. The article asks a practical question: what institutional conditions are needed to turn SDG commitments into policies, budgets, public services, and measurable results? It uses a structured narrative review of United Nations, World Bank, OECD, and peer-reviewed literature. The analysis is organised around six connected conditions: institutional capacity; transparency and accountability; public participation; policy coordination; financing and implementation; and monitoring and evaluation. A short comparative discussion uses published international assessments rather than original fieldwork. The article does not claim that a high governance score automatically produces better SDG outcomes. Instead, it argues that weak capacity, poor coordination, limited accountability, inadequate financing systems, and weak learning mechanisms can make implementation slower and less consistent. The discussion therefore treats governance as a practical set of institutional functions rather than as a single country ranking. The article concludes that SDG implementation requires stronger everyday administrative systems, better links between planning and budgeting, meaningful participation, and monitoring arrangements that help governments correct policies when they are not working.

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Introduction

The United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015 and described its 17 Goals as an integrated and indivisible agenda for people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership (United Nations, 2015). The ambition was different from the earlier Millennium Development Goals because the SDGs are universal, cover economic, social, and environmental concerns, and include a specific goal on peace, justice, and institutions. SDG 16 is therefore important, but governance is not limited to SDG 16. Health systems, tax administrations, environmental regulators, statistical offices, schools, municipalities, and courts all affect whether other Goals can be implemented in practice.

Ten years into the Agenda, the official picture is mixed. The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025 records substantial gains in areas such as education, maternal and child health, electricity access, and digital connectivity, but it also concludes that progress is not fast enough to achieve the Goals by 2030. Of the targets for which global trend data were available, 35 per cent were on track or making moderate progress, while 48 per cent showed insufficient progress and 18 per cent had regressed from the 2015 baseline (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA], 2025). The Sustainable Development Report 2025 reaches a similar broad conclusion, although its methodology is different (Sachs et al., 2025). These findings suggest that the problem is not simply a lack of goals or international commitments. It is also a problem of implementation.

This article approaches that problem from an institutional perspective. The question is not whether governance is generally “good” or “bad,” but which public functions are needed to carry the SDGs from international commitments into national and local action. The 2025 Sustainable Development Report notes that 190 of the 193 UN Member States had participated in the Voluntary National Review process by 2025 (Sachs et al., 2025). This shows strong engagement with the Agenda, but reporting is not the same as implementation. A country may prepare a detailed review and still have weak coordination, limited fiscal space, poor data, or insufficient administrative capacity.

The article follows a standard research structure. It first explains the research problem, gap, questions, and objectives. It then reviews governance and sustainable development literature before explaining the methodology. The main analysis considers six institutional conditions: capacity; transparency and accountability; participation; policy coordination; financing and implementation; and monitoring and evaluation. A comparative section uses published international assessments to illustrate differences across countries and regions. The discussion brings these findings together, followed by recommendations and a conclusion.

Research Problem and Gap

The central research problem is the gap between the broad commitments of the 2030 Agenda and the institutional capacity needed to implement them. The SDGs require governments to coordinate policies across ministries, levels of government, and time periods. They also require reliable statistics, functioning public services, financial resources, accountability mechanisms, and opportunities for citizens to participate. Many governments have adopted national SDG strategies and created coordination arrangements, but the existence of a strategy does not show that implementation capacity is strong. Financing is also a major constraint. The United Nations and OECD continue to identify a large gap between the resources available for sustainable development and the investment needed to meet the 2030 Agenda (United Nations, 2024; OECD, 2025a).

There is already extensive research on individual SDGs and a separate literature on governance and institutions. The more specific gap addressed here lies between these two bodies of work. Sector-focused studies can treat institutions as background conditions, while general governance studies do not always connect their arguments to particular SDG implementation problems. Research on

“governance through goals” has begun to connect the two areas by examining how global goals influence national policy and institutions (Biermann et al., 2017; Kanie & Biermann, 2017). This article builds on that literature but keeps the analysis practical: it asks which institutional functions repeatedly appear in official and academic discussions and how those functions relate to different parts of the SDG agenda.

A second issue is how governance should be measured. The World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) provide a useful broad comparison across countries, but they are composite, perception-based measures and should not be treated as a complete diagnosis of institutional performance. The current WGI materials emphasise that the indicators are useful for broad comparisons but are too general, by themselves, to design country-specific reforms (World Bank, 2026). The article therefore uses governance indicators as contextual evidence rather than as proof that governance quality causes particular SDG outcomes.

Research Questions

Four questions guide the review. First, how do governance and sustainable development theories explain the relationship between institutions and SDG implementation? Second, which institutional conditions—capacity, transparency and accountability, participation, coordination, financing, and monitoring—appear most consistently in the relevant literature and official guidance? Third, how do these institutional conditions affect different Goals rather than producing one general “governance effect”? Fourth, what practical policy directions can be identified from recent international evidence without treating one country model as universally transferable?

Objectives

The article has five objectives. It aims to (a) place the SDGs within the wider literature on governance and sustainable development; (b) organise the institutional discussion around a manageable set of public functions; (c) connect selected SDGs with recurring governance bottlenecks; (d) use sources that can be independently checked; and (e) develop practical recommendations that are consistent with established UN and OECD guidance. The article is a desk-based review. It is not a country case study, an original survey, or a statistical test of causation.

Literature Review

Governance Theory

For the purposes of this article, governance is understood as the institutions and processes through which public authority is exercised and policies are formulated and implemented. This is consistent with the broad approach used by the World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators, which cover six dimensions: voice and accountability, political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption (World Bank, 2026). These dimensions are useful because they provide a common vocabulary, but they do not capture every institutional condition needed for SDG implementation.

The governance literature has long shown that development requires more than elections or formal political institutions. Governments also need administrative capacity, predictable rules, competent public officials, and institutions that can carry policies through to implementation. This point is especially important for the SDGs because many Goals depend on routine public administration. A government may adopt a health, climate, education, or social protection policy, but the result will depend on procurement, staffing, budgeting, regulation, data, and local delivery. OECD work on public governance similarly emphasises leadership, capabilities, coordination, and monitoring as part of effective implementation (OECD, 2019a, 2020).

A useful distinction for this study is between governance as a quality of the political system and governance as a set of public management functions. The first includes participation, rights, accountability, and limits on arbitrary power. The second includes planning units, budget processes, audit systems, administrative skills, data systems, and inter-ministerial coordination. The SDGs require both. A technically capable administration may still exclude people from decision-making, while an open administration may struggle to deliver policies if its organisational systems are weak. The Principles of Effective Governance for Sustainable Development developed through the UN Committee of Experts on Public Administration bring these concerns together under effectiveness, accountability, and inclusiveness (ECOSOC, 2018).

One difficulty in the governance literature is that the word “institutions” can become too broad. If institutions are used to explain almost every development outcome, the concept becomes difficult to examine carefully. This article therefore uses a narrower meaning: public rules and organisations that help turn policy commitments into repeated administrative action. This focus does not suggest that governments are the only actors in sustainable development. Businesses, civil society, households, and international organisations also matter. The narrower definition simply keeps the analysis focused on public implementation.

Sustainable Development Theory

The widely used Brundtland definition describes sustainable development as development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987). The definition is important for this article because it already implies a need to balance economic, social, and environmental interests over time. Sustainable development cannot be managed effectively when these areas are treated as completely separate policy fields.

The SDGs made sustainable development more operational by setting 17 Goals and 169 targets within a common global framework. Biermann et al. (2017) describe this approach as governance through goals. The SDGs are different from a traditional treaty-based regime. They are politically important and supported by a reporting and review system, but they do not create a central enforcement mechanism comparable to a court or a trade dispute system. States retain substantial discretion in how they implement the Goals. This flexibility can support national ownership, but it also creates a risk that countries adopt the language of the SDGs without making corresponding institutional changes.

The integration of economic, social, and environmental objectives is another central feature of sustainable development. This is why policy coherence and coordination are so important. A finance ministry, environment ministry, agriculture ministry, and social protection agency may each have reasonable objectives but still produce policies that conflict with one another. OECD work on policy coherence for sustainable development addresses this problem by emphasising strategic vision, institutional mechanisms, and tools for considering cross-sectoral, cross-level, long-term, and transboundary effects (OECD, 2019b, 2024).

SDG 16 has a special position because peace, justice, and inclusive institutions are both objectives in their own right and conditions that can support other Goals. Recent reporting shows increased attention to SDG 16 in national reviews, but better reporting does not necessarily mean better institutions. The important issue is whether changes in laws, administrative procedures, public services, justice systems, and accountability arrangements can be observed in practice. This distinction between reporting and implementation is important throughout the article.

Methodology

This article uses a structured narrative review. No original interviews, surveys, experiments, or administrative datasets were collected. The main sources are official United Nations publications, World Bank materials, OECD publications, and selected peer-reviewed or scholarly works that could be independently located through publisher or institutional sources. Sources were included when they directly addressed governance, public administration, financing, policy coherence, monitoring, or SDG implementation. Particular attention was given to sources published or updated close to the 2025–2026 period so that the discussion would not rely only on older assessments.

The six institutional conditions used in the analysis are not presented as a new theory. They are an organising framework developed from recurring themes in the UN Principles of Effective Governance, SDG 16, OECD work on policy coherence and public governance, and the governance-through-goals literature. The purpose is to make the discussion easier to follow and to connect general governance concepts with practical implementation problems.

The methodology has important limits. A narrative review depends on the quality and assumptions of the reports and studies it brings together. Governance indicators also contain measurement uncertainty, and their values can change when source data or methodology are revised. The World Bank's 2025 methodology revision, for example, recalculated historical estimates to maintain consistency after changes to source screening, indicator mapping, and aggregation (World Bank, 2026). Financing-gap estimates are also sensitive to assumptions and should be read as estimates rather than exact accounting identities. Finally, a global desk review cannot capture the institutional differences within individual countries, especially at the local-government level.

Institutional Capacity

Institutional capacity is sometimes less visible than new policies or international declarations, but it is central to implementation. The UN Principles of Effective Governance identify competence as part of effectiveness, while OECD research emphasises the need for public services to have the skills and organisational systems required for integrated SDG implementation (ECOSOC, 2018; OECD, 2021). Capacity includes staff skills, organisational routines, information systems, financial management, procurement, and the ability to maintain programmes over time.

Capacity is therefore more than the number of civil servants. It also concerns whether institutions can retain skilled staff, maintain records, prepare budgets, manage contracts, coordinate with other agencies, and use evidence when making decisions. In many SDG areas, implementation depends on professionals who work far from the centre of government: teachers, nurses, inspectors, local planners, statisticians, and procurement officials. If these systems are weak, a national SDG strategy can remain largely a policy document.

Recent SDG reporting provides examples of progress in areas such as electricity access, disease prevention, education, and health. These gains cannot be attributed to institutional capacity alone, but long-term programmes generally require stable administrative arrangements, trained staff, reliable financing, and data. The lesson is therefore not that “capacity causes development” in a simple way. It is that implementation is difficult to sustain when the public institutions responsible for delivery are fragile.

Capacity also varies within and between countries. A middle-income country may have a strong central finance ministry but weak local environmental enforcement. A low-income country may have capable project teams funded by donors but weaker permanent civil-service systems. These differences matter because a single national governance score can hide the institutional bottleneck that is most relevant to a particular SDG. For implementation research, identifying the actual bottleneck is more useful than simply labelling a country as having good or poor governance.

Transparency and Accountability

Transparency and accountability are closely connected to the implementation of the SDGs. The UN Principles of Effective Governance place integrity, transparency, independent oversight, and accountability within the broader framework of effective public institutions (ECOSOC, 2018). If budgets, contracts, performance data, and administrative decisions are difficult to access, legislatures, audit bodies, courts, civil society, and citizens have fewer opportunities to identify problems and demand explanations.

SDG 16 provides direct links to accountable institutions, access to information, and the reduction of corruption. The UNDP's 2025 reporting on SDG 16 also shows an improvement in the availability of data: by the 2025 reporting cycle, 56 per cent of countries had reported data on at least one SDG 16 target since 2015, compared with 40 per cent in 2023 (UNDP, 2025). This is useful progress, but better data should not be confused with better accountability. Data become meaningful when institutions use them to investigate problems, allocate resources, and correct policies.

Accountability has both external and internal dimensions. External accountability can involve elections, courts, legislatures, media, civil society, and supreme audit institutions. Internal accountability concerns whether managers and officials are responsible for results and whether failures lead to learning or correction. For SDG implementation, both dimensions matter. At the same time, oversight needs to be credible without creating an environment in which officials avoid useful experimentation simply because every policy error is treated as misconduct. The balance between control and learning is therefore an important institutional issue.

Public Participation

The principle of "leaving no one behind" gives public participation a substantive role in the 2030 Agenda. The UN governance principles include participation, non-discrimination, subsidiarity, and intergenerational equity as elements of inclusive governance (ECOSOC, 2018). Participation matters because national averages can hide unequal outcomes. Women, persons with disabilities, rural communities, displaced people, and people working in informal economies may experience public policies very differently from the average citizen.

Participation can, however, become largely symbolic. A single consultation meeting during preparation of a Voluntary National Review is not the same as giving stakeholders a meaningful opportunity to influence policy, budgets, or implementation. More useful questions are whether public comments change policy drafts, whether local governments have a real role, whether affected communities receive information in accessible forms, and whether people have channels for complaints when services fail. Digital participation can help, but it can also exclude people where connectivity, language, or digital skills are limited.

There is also a practical tension between participation and speed. Consultation can take time, while climate, biodiversity, and social protection decisions often involve urgent choices. The answer is not to remove participation, but to design it early and clearly so that consultation occurs before major decisions are locked in. OECD work on the green transition frames this in terms of commitment, capabilities, and consensus, with stakeholder engagement forming part of effective governance rather than being an afterthought (OECD, 2025b).

Policy Coordination

Policy coordination is at the centre of the argument developed in this article. The SDGs are designed as an integrated agenda, while governments are usually organised into ministries and agencies with separate mandates, budgets, and performance systems. This creates a structural coordination problem. OECD research on policy coherence for sustainable development emphasises the need for political

commitment, institutional mechanisms, and tools that allow governments to consider interactions across sectors and levels of government (OECD, 2019b, 2024).

Coordination failures are often easy to identify. Agricultural subsidies can conflict with water or biodiversity objectives. Energy policies can improve access while increasing long-term emissions. Social programmes may expand without a sustainable financing plan. Tax, trade, infrastructure, or industrial policies can also affect health and environmental objectives. These conflicts are not always the result of administrative mistakes. Different ministries represent different interests, constituencies, and political priorities. Policy coherence is therefore a political and institutional problem, not only a technical one.

Governments use different mechanisms to address these problems, including centre-of-government units, inter-ministerial committees, sustainable development councils, policy-coherence tools, and links between SDG planning and national budgets. Such structures can help, but their formal existence is not enough. The important question is whether the coordinating body has access to information and enough authority to identify contradictions and influence decisions. A committee that can only call meetings may have limited effect on policy outcomes.

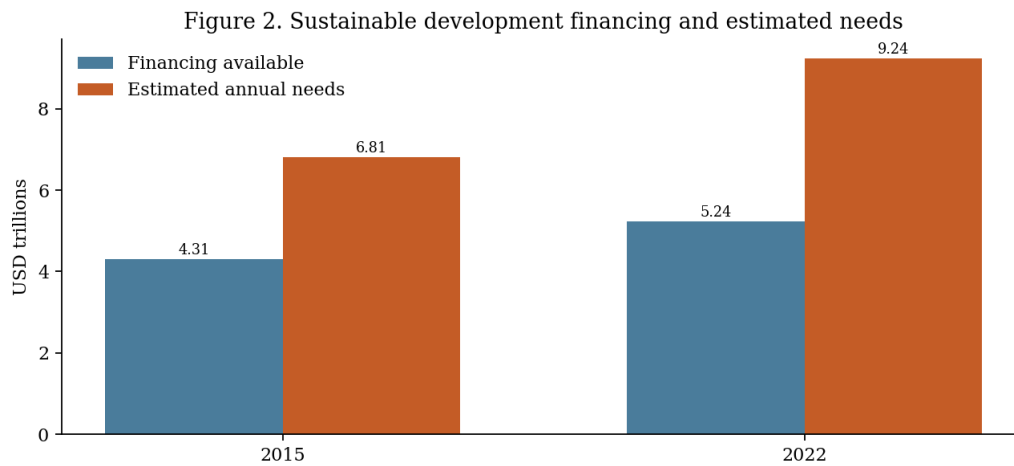
Coordination is also vertical. Many SDG-related services are delivered by municipalities or other subnational authorities. The principle of subsidiarity suggests that functions should be performed at the level best placed to deliver them, but local governments often have uneven fiscal and administrative capacity. National dashboards can therefore give an incomplete picture if they do not account for local implementation conditions. Water, housing, local climate adaptation, social care, and basic services are examples where national commitments depend heavily on local institutions.

Financing and Implementation

A national strategy without a realistic budget is difficult to implement. The 2024 Financing for Sustainable Development Report and the OECD's 2025 financing outlook both show that the resources available for sustainable development remain below estimated needs. OECD estimates put available financing for developing countries at USD 5.24 trillion in 2022, compared with estimated annual needs of USD 9.24 trillion, leaving an annual gap of about USD 4 trillion (OECD, 2025a). The OECD also projects that, under its assumptions, the gap could rise to about USD 6.4 trillion by 2030.

These figures should not be read as a single invoice that every government must somehow pay. They are estimates based on assumptions about investment needs and financing flows. Their importance is the direction of the evidence: financing needs are increasing faster than available resources. The problem is especially serious where debt service, weak tax administration, limited investment capacity, or restricted access to concessional finance reduce the fiscal space available for SDG-related spending.

Financing quality also matters. Public procurement, project appraisal, investment management, budget alignment, and audit systems influence whether available resources produce durable services. Budget tagging can help governments identify spending related to the SDGs, but tagging alone does not change priorities. It becomes useful when it is linked to project selection, performance information, and oversight. Similarly, additional external finance will have limited effect if institutions cannot design projects, manage contracts, maintain assets, or report results.



Source: OECD (2025), Global Outlook on Financing for Sustainable Development 2025. Figures refer to developing-country financing flows and estimated annual needs.

Figure 2. Financing available and estimated annual needs, 2015 and 2022 (OECD, 2025a).

Figure 2 is therefore best read as an indication of scale rather than as a precise calculation of what each country lacks. It combines broad financing categories and estimated needs, which do not mean that all resources are interchangeable. The governance lesson is more modest: financing systems and institutional quality are connected. Weak tax administration, poor investment management, limited project preparation, and leakage can reduce the development impact of available resources.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The SDGs depend on measurement because governments need to know whether policies are working. Global follow-up is supported by national statistical systems, the UN indicator framework, Voluntary National Reviews, and independent comparative assessments such as the Sustainable Development Report. Each source serves a different purpose. The UN provides the official global stocktake, while independent indices make cross-country comparison easier but also depend on their own methodological choices (UN DESA, 2025; Sachs et al., 2025).

Monitoring should serve several purposes. It should inform ministers and public managers about implementation, allow legislatures and citizens to examine results, support donors and local governments, and help policymakers adjust programmes. When monitoring is designed mainly for international reporting, governments may produce polished reports without creating strong domestic learning systems. The distinction matters because a Voluntary National Review is a reporting mechanism, not a substitute for routine evaluation and accountability.

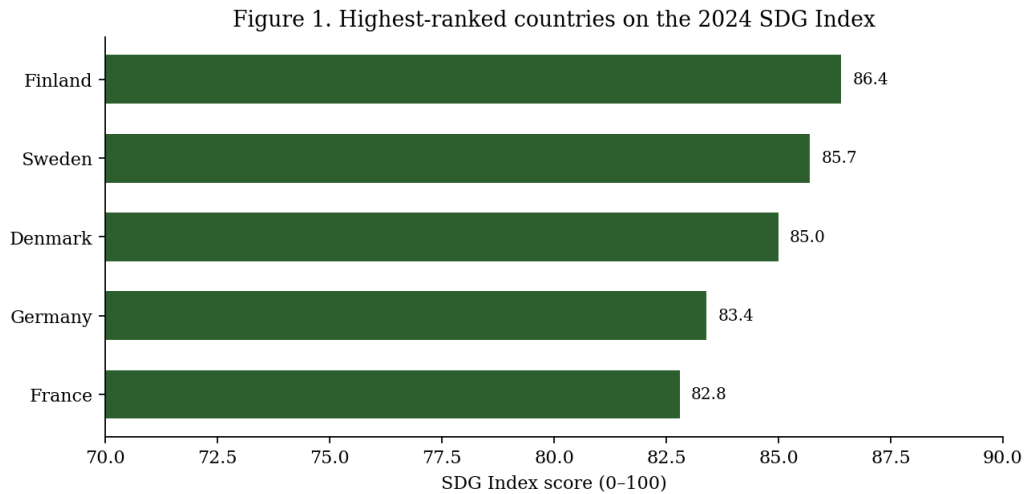
Evaluation is different from simply counting indicators. An indicator may show that learning outcomes are not improving, but it does not explain whether the problem is teacher training, curriculum, household poverty, school management, or another factor. Evaluation helps identify why a programme is or is not working. The UN governance principles therefore emphasise evidence-based policymaking and tools such as strategic foresight and regulatory impact analysis (ECOSOC, 2018). These tools require resources, but repeated implementation of ineffective programmes can cost more.

Comparative International Experience

This is not a full comparative study. No original country-level fieldwork was conducted. Instead, the article uses published international assessments to identify broad patterns and to illustrate why governance conditions should not be reduced to a single country ranking.

European countries, particularly Nordic countries, continue to perform strongly on the Sustainable Development Report's composite SDG Index. In the 2024 report, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Germany,

and France were the five highest-ranked countries. The 2025 report again placed Finland first and noted the strong presence of European countries near the top of the index (Sachs et al., 2024, 2025). These results are useful for comparison, but they should not be interpreted as proof that a particular governance model causes better SDG performance.



Source: Sachs, Lafortune, & Fuller (2024), Sustainable Development Report 2024.

Figure 1. Five highest country scores on the 2024 SDG Index (Sachs et al., 2024).

Regional progress can look different from a ranking of current performance. The Sustainable Development Report 2025 found that East and South Asia had made the fastest average progress since 2015. It also reported China at rank 49 and India at rank 99 in the 2025 SDG Index (Sachs et al., 2025). This distinction between starting position, current performance, and rate of improvement is important. A country can improve quickly while still facing major challenges, while a high-ranked country can have strong overall performance and still struggle with particular Goals.

Countries affected by conflict, severe fiscal constraints, climate shocks, or weak administrative systems face additional implementation difficulties. UN DESA identifies conflict, climate change, inequality, and inadequate financing among the major obstacles to SDG progress (UN DESA, 2025). OECD financing analysis also highlights the growing pressure created by debt and the unequal availability of fiscal resources (OECD, 2025a). In such settings, the institutional challenge is often broader than creating an SDG coordination unit. Governments may be struggling to maintain basic public administration at the same time as they are expected to implement a complex global agenda.

A further comparative lesson concerns the Voluntary National Review process. By 2025, 190 of the 193 UN Member States had participated in the VNR process (Sachs et al., 2025). This shows substantial procedural convergence. It does not show that implementation quality is converging. Two countries can submit similarly structured VNRs while having very different levels of procurement integrity, local government capacity, justice delivery, or statistical quality. Comparative research should therefore treat reporting activity and implementation outcomes as related but distinct variables.

Selected SDGs and Typical Governance Challenges

Table 1 is intended as an analytical aid rather than a performance measure. It links selected SDGs with recurring institutional problems identified in UN and OECD guidance. The purpose is to show why “governance” should not be treated as something relevant only to SDG 16. The same institutional functions—capacity, coordination, accountability, finance, participation, and monitoring—appear across different Goals.

Table 1. *Selected Sustainable Development Goals and related governance challenges (author's synthesis of UN and OECD themes cited in the text).*

Goal	Why institutions matter	Typical governance challenge	Relevant institutional focus
SDG 1 No poverty	Social protection and targeting depend on registries, local administration and fiscal space.	Fragmented programmes; weak coverage of informal workers; leakages.	Capacity; budget integrity; leaving no one behind
SDG 3 Good health	Health outcomes rely on workforce, procurement of supplies, and regulation.	Uneven subnational capacity; weak data on quality, not only access.	Competence; monitoring; coordination with finance
SDG 4 Quality education	Learning depends on teachers, inspection and long budget commitments.	Input-heavy reporting; weak evaluation of learning outcomes.	Sound policymaking; evaluation capacity
SDG 6 Clean water	Utilities and regulators must maintain infrastructure and water quality.	Split mandates across ministries; underfunded local operators.	Coordination; subsidiarity; investment management
SDG 13 Climate action	Mitigation and adaptation cut across energy, transport, finance and local government.	Short political cycles; policy incoherence with subsidies; weak local adaptation capacity.	Policy coherence; centre-of-government coordination
SDG 15 Life on land	Biodiversity rules need enforcement and land-use control.	Enforcement gaps; conflicting agricultural and infrastructure plans.	Regulatory quality; intergenerational equity
SDG 16 Institutions	Peace, justice and inclusion are both outcomes and enabling conditions.	Incomplete data; closed civic space in some settings; slow justice systems.	Accountability; participation; rule of law
SDG 17 Partnerships	Means of implementation include finance, data and policy space.	Financing gap; uneven statistical capacity; fragmented donor projects.	Domestic resource mobilisation; monitoring systems

Discussion

Taken together, the evidence supports three cautious conclusions. First, the global implementation gap is real. UN monitoring and independent SDG assessments use different methods, but both show that progress is uneven and insufficient for the 2030 deadline (UN DESA, 2025; Sachs et al., 2025). Second, institutional conditions repeatedly appear in discussions of why implementation succeeds or stalls. Capacity, coordination, accountability, financing, and data systems are not separate from sectoral policy; they shape whether sectoral policies can be delivered. Third, the international community already has a substantial governance vocabulary, particularly through the UN Principles of Effective Governance and OECD work on policy coherence. The challenge is less about inventing another framework and more about using existing tools effectively in national and local settings.

The comparative evidence also warns against a simple “better governance means better SDG performance” conclusion. Nordic countries perform strongly on the composite SDG Index, but the same countries face environmental spillovers and challenges in areas such as climate and biodiversity (Sachs et al., 2025). East and South Asian countries have made rapid progress from different starting points. Conflict-affected and highly indebted countries face constraints that cannot be solved by copying institutional arrangements from wealthier states. Governance reforms therefore need to be adapted to institutional capacity, fiscal conditions, political structures, and local needs.

SDG 16 deserves separate attention because it combines institutional quality with substantive goals concerning peace, justice, and inclusion. The increased use of SDG 16 reporting in VNRs is useful, but reporting can become a routine exercise unless it is connected to domestic accountability. For example, information about access to justice is more meaningful when it is used to address delays, legal

barriers, or unequal access to remedies. Similarly, procurement data matter when audit and oversight bodies can act on them. Institutional reporting should therefore be connected to institutional response.

Financing cuts across the entire discussion. An annual investment gap of roughly USD 4 trillion cannot be solved through administrative reform alone, and additional money will not automatically produce results if public institutions cannot plan and manage it effectively. Financing and governance should therefore be treated as complementary parts of implementation rather than competing explanations (United Nations, 2024; OECD, 2025a).

The idea of “governance through goals” remains useful because the SDGs created a common global language and a review process without creating a central enforcement system. That design gives countries flexibility, but it also makes domestic institutions especially important. Researchers should therefore look beyond international declarations and examine how SDG commitments are reflected in laws, budgets, administrative procedures, and public services. For governments, the practical lesson is that adopting SDG terminology is only an early step; implementation requires changes in ordinary administrative routines.

This review cannot establish a causal relationship between governance scores and SDG outcomes. The sources used here are not designed as a causal dataset, and the WGI should not be used mechanically to explain country-level policy performance (World Bank, 2026). A future study could test particular relationships using country-year data, but that would require a different methodology. The present article is more limited: it identifies recurring institutional mechanisms and compares them with the broader evidence on SDG implementation.

The 2030 deadline should also be treated carefully. Some targets are already unlikely to be achieved on the original timetable, but this does not make institutional reform irrelevant. Systems for civil registration, social protection, renewable energy regulation, local climate adaptation, public procurement, and official statistics will remain important after 2030. The final years of the Agenda can therefore be used not only to report missed targets but also to strengthen the administrative foundations of future development policies.

Recommendations

The recommendations below are deliberately practical. They do not propose a new international compact. Instead, they identify reforms that are consistent with existing UN and OECD guidance and that can be adapted to different national settings.

First, governments should treat institutional capacity as part of SDG investment. Training, recruitment and retention of specialised staff, reliable administrative records, digital systems, and professional development are not merely administrative overheads. They are part of the infrastructure needed to deliver long-term development policies (ECOSOC, 2018; OECD, 2021).

Second, SDG commitments should be connected to the budget process. Budget tagging can be useful, but it should lead to better project selection, performance monitoring, and audit. Finance ministries should be involved in SDG coordination from the beginning rather than being asked to finance plans after they have already been prepared (OECD, 2020).

Third, policy-coherence mechanisms should have enough authority to identify and challenge contradictions between policies. Inter-ministerial committees are less useful when they simply add new initiatives. Governments need processes that can examine the interaction between subsidies, infrastructure, environmental regulation, social policy, and fiscal constraints (OECD, 2019b, 2024).

Fourth, SDG 16 data should be used for domestic decision-making rather than only for international reporting. The increase in countries reporting SDG 16 data is encouraging, but governments should also

publish information that helps citizens and oversight institutions understand justice delays, procurement complaints, access to information, and other institutional outcomes (UNDP, 2025).

Fifth, participation should begin early enough to influence policy choices. Local governments and groups that are often excluded from planning should be involved before projects and budgets are finalised. This is particularly important in areas such as water, housing, climate adaptation, and social protection, where implementation directly affects communities (ECOSOC, 2018; UN DESA, 2025).

Sixth, financing discussions should be realistic about the limits of private capital. Domestic resource mobilisation, better public investment management, concessional finance, and international cooperation need to be considered together. Private finance can support development, but it cannot replace public finance in areas where returns are mainly social and cannot be captured commercially (United Nations, 2024; OECD, 2025a).

Seventh, monitoring should be designed for learning as well as reporting. Statistical offices need professional independence, and evaluation findings should be available to decision-makers inside government. A system that produces attractive reports but does not help officials identify and correct failed programmes will have limited value for SDG implementation.

Conclusion

This article asked which institutional conditions are important for implementing the SDGs. The review supports a limited but clear answer. Sustainable development is an integration problem: economic, social, environmental, and long-term interests have to be considered together. That integration does not happen automatically. It requires capable public organisations, meaningful accountability, opportunities for participation, coordination across ministries and levels of government, financing arrangements that match policy ambitions, and monitoring systems that support learning and correction (WCED, 1987; United Nations, 2015; ECOSOC, 2018).

The evidence from the first decade of the SDGs shows both progress and continuing pressure. Improvements in health, education, electricity, and digital access are important, but conflict, climate change, inequality, debt pressures, and financing constraints continue to slow progress (UN DESA, 2025). Comparative indices also show that even countries near the top of global SDG rankings have unresolved environmental and social challenges (Sachs et al., 2024, 2025). Effective governance should therefore be understood less as a label and more as the everyday institutional ability to plan, implement, monitor, explain, and improve public action.

The article does not claim to offer a new theory of governance or a causal model. Its contribution is more modest: it brings together recent international evidence and organises it around a set of institutional functions that can be examined across different SDGs. The main implication is straightforward. The SDGs will not be achieved by institutions alone, but sustained progress is difficult when the institutions responsible for implementation are weak.

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