This paper describes Colombia’s process of localising the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It outlines the main steps taken in Colombia to mainstream and implement the Agenda as well as to follow up and communicate progress towards achieving the goals. The paper is based on official documents and interviews with selected national government representatives involved in these processes. It is intended to facilitate experience-sharing among governments and other actors seeking practical and successful ways to set up structures for the implementation of the SDGs.
Introduction

Colombia is a strong advocate and champion implementer of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The country was active in the process of developing and adopting the Agenda and has been a pioneer in localising and implementing it. Its engagement with the Agenda coincides with a number of significant processes for the country. After a five-year accession process, Colombia was formally admitted to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in May 2018. The country hopes to be a strong co-operation provider via South-South co-operation, especially on the 2030 Agenda implementation successes. Furthermore, Colombia’s peace agreement adopted in 2016 have significantly influenced the country’s progress in peace and development in recent years and affects its 2030 Agenda priorities.

Colombia’s role in shaping the 2030 Agenda

The Colombian Foreign Ministry played an important role in regional and international dialogues leading up to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda. During preparations for the 2012 Summit in Rio de Janeiro (Rio+20), the Economic, Social and Environmental Affairs Department of the Foreign Ministry and the Colombian Mission to the United Nations in New York began to raise significant concerns about the outcomes of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the various options for building a post-2015 development agenda. Some of the key points raised by Colombia included:

• the concern over unsustainable consumption and production patterns, the effects of climate change and its impact on developing countries in particular;
• the need to integrate the economic and environmental dimensions of development, without which the social goals would be unattainable or unsustainable over the long term; and
• in light of the above, the need to set sustainable development goals capable of rallying and building consensus with other sectors of society, to broaden the scope for transforming the current model of economic development.

The case made by Colombia in 2011 was met with initial hesitation. It was thought that starting to talk about a new development agenda four years before the end of the MDG process might detract from the goals set for 2015 in the final stretch. It could also undermine co-operation flows, complicate the climate change talks and divert attention from social issues that had not yet been resolved.

Despite the hesitation of others, Colombia pressed ahead with its advocacy work. Through an intense diplomatic campaign based on technical arguments, Colombia aimed at generating a content proposal that would serve as the basis for Rio+20. Through dialogue, it managed to bring together different positions and to gather a critical mass of countries behind this proposal that gave rise to the commitment to start building the 2030 Agenda. Following the Rio+20 agreement, Colombia formed part of the Open Working Group set up to convene experts on various thematic areas and to plot a route towards defining the global goals and targets. At national level, the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched a work programme with different national government entities to coordinate negotiations on the goals and targets with the various sectors of society. The active participation of the ministry and the entities in the local discussions gave rise to the first technical inputs presented by Colombia within the framework of the negotiations in New York. In addition, thanks to the support of the United Nations and civil society organisations, a series of consultations were held across the country to ensure that the concerns of different sectors of Colombian society were taken to the negotiations.

Lessons learned from the process leading up to the SDGs:

• The importance of dialogue and the collective formulation of a proposal – embracing the views of many and diverse actors meant that Colombia’s proposal stood a better chance of garnering support at the international level.
• The importance of training and knowledge-sharing within the country – raising the political and technical awareness among various institutions, ministries and non-governmental actors, gave space for discussion and learning based on the range of views and different degrees of understanding of what sustainable development means and the significance of a new development agenda.
• The need to establish an internal coordination mechanism for the implementation phase, which paved the way for systemic change capable of transforming the current development model and building a new vision for the country.

Creating the national SDG governance structure

Drawing on conclusions from the international negotiation process, seven months before the SDGs were approved at the UN, Colombia had already established the national High-Level Inter-Institutional Commission for the Preparation and Effective Implementation of the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the SDGs (hereinafter, the SDG Commission). Colombia became the first country to have a mechanism bringing together the main national government institutions in order to facilitate coordination and enable the drafting of a roadmap toward achieving the SDGs. Leadership was thus transferred from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the National Planning Department (DNP – Departamento Nacional de Planeación). A taskforce was formed and put in charge of creating the policy framework and mechanisms for the implementation, monitoring, follow-up and assessment of the SDGs and their respective targets.
The SDG Commission comprises the above mentioned government entities. The DNP acts as the SDG Commission’s Chair and Technical Secretariat, placing it in charge of convening meetings and providing technical support to the other members of the SDG Commission. Working groups were formed to enhance and accelerate the implementation process, with individual SDG Commission members taking the lead for different groups. The SDG Commission was also designed to reach beyond the bodies comprising it and is free to open spaces for the participation of actors from civil society, the private sector, academia, the media and the international community.

Lesson learned from setting up the SDG governance mechanisms:

- The body coordinating SDG implementation needs to be anchored at the highest political level.
- Clear mandates and responsibilities should be defined for the various government entities participating in coordination.
- The flexibility to incorporate new members within the SDG Commission throughout the implementation phase is useful for ensuring stakeholder engagement.

The main achievements of the SDG Commission and the DNP in this process are reflected in the policy document, ‘Strategy for the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Colombia’. Adopted in March 2018 by the National Council for Social and Economic Policy (CONPES – Consejo Nacional de Política Económica y Social), the strategy sets out the national targets for 2030 and the strategies for achieving them. It is based on four policy guidelines:
1. monitoring and reporting,
2. strengthening statistical capacities,
3. creating territorial strategies, and
4. building partnerships and promoting dialogue with non-governmental actors.

In addition, the SDGs have constituted a tool for integrating and ensuring coherence between the country’s various development agendas. One of the main activities of the Technical Secretariat of the SDG Commission was to examine the degree of alignment between the country’s priority agendas and the SDGs. The results were as follows:

- The National Development Plan incorporates 92 SDG targets.
- Accession to the OECD contributes to 87 SDG targets.
- 86 SDG targets are linked to the Green Growth Strategy (described below).
- The Peace Agreement is aligned with 68 SDG targets.

**SDG inclusion in territorial development plans**

DNP is not only tasked with including the SDGs in the National Development Plan and other national frameworks but also with ensuring the harmonisation of the goals at the two levels of territorial administration: departmental (regional) and municipal (local) authorities. A couple of months after the 2030 Agenda was formally approved, new governors and mayors were elected in Colombia. DNP made visits to the various departments—departamentos—and municipalities to share information about the new agenda and the role of local governments in its implementation. In accordance with Colombian law, the country’s subnational governments have joint responsibility for 110 of the 169 SDG targets. The DNP developed an online toolkit to lend technical support to the new local governments when formulating their respective Territorial Development Plans (TDPs) in 2016. The kit contains methodologies, tools and guidelines in four modules, covering:
1. **Planning**: How to diagnose the positive and negative factors affecting development in their respective areas and formulation of the goals, indicators and targets expected to be reached during their term in office.

2. **Financial management**: How to plan and programme the budget cycle, ensuring that sufficient resources are allocated for the implementation of the policies.

3. **Monitoring and assessment**: How to prepare, design and implement a review system.

4. **Focus on ethnic communities**: How to strengthen the autonomy of ethnic communities with the aim to improve their well-being.

In addition, a DNP regional advisor was available during the formulation of the TDPs to provide assistance and resolve any concerns raised by the municipalities and departments.

Once TDPs for the 2016–2019 period had been completed and approved by the respective collegial bodies, an analysis was made of how and to what extent the SDGs had been included in the plans. A sample of 63 TDPs (32 Departmental Development Plans and 31 Capital City Development Plans) was taken and the level of SDG inclusion graded as ‘no’, ‘general’, ‘medium’ or ‘high’. The strategic areas of each TDP were identified, establishing the links between their programmes, goals or expected outcomes with each of the 110 SDG targets applicable at local level, to identify the extent to which the SDG targets had been included in the strategies set out in each TDP.

Out of the 63 plans, the general level of SDG inclusion was found to be ‘general’ in 24 of the plans. In 30 cases, the SDGs were associated with the main strategic areas of the plans. In 15 cases, the regional or municipal governments achieved a high level of SDG inclusion, having directly linked the SDGs with the programmes, sub-programmes or specific targets set out in their development plans.

In response to non-standardised target setting and measuring approaches of local government bodies, the DNP created two key tools to assist the territorial authorities in the monitoring and assessment process. The first is the Information System for Assessing Performance⁶, which monitors the coverage and fulfilment of the TDPs at product level, and Terridata, a data visualisation tool which establishes standardised and comparable indicators measuring the results in terms of well-being development at territorial level (murder rates, education levels, economic income etc)⁷. This will provide public servants with access to more and better data to assist with the design of public policies with a localised approach.

**Lessons learned from subregional processes:**
- Mechanisms to gather and use robust and reliable information and data are important in order to create subregional diagnoses and tracking that promotes citizen participation. This will allow citizens to monitor and oversee the results in the levels of development where they live and promote principles of legitimacy and transparency.
- Subregional toolkits are useful for ensuring the localisation of the SDGs and the scope of responsibilities, capacities and resources of each municipality, which is also necessary to enable prioritisation of investments with an achievable local SDG strategy.
- The promotion of a collective vision of sustainable development at the local level, especially between neighbouring municipalities, is essential to enable joint goals and actions to be established, and to improve cost effectiveness in the management of public services that impact highly on the SDGs.

**Mainstreaming the SDGs in thematic strategies**

**Green Growth strategy**

In addition to the peace agenda, Colombia is working towards a structural change, adopting complementary strategies built on the guiding principle of sustainable development. With this aim in mind, it has identified the development of a green growth strategy as a key objective. This intention was reaffirmed through its participation in the OECD’s Green Growth Declaration, as part of the accession process, and through its inclusion in the 2014–2018 National Development Plan.

A Green Growth taskforce was created at the end of 2015 with the duty to generate inputs and public policy guidelines to steer the country’s economic development towards green growth by 2030, in a comprehensive, integrated and coordinated manner. This expert group conducted diagnostic and prospective studies to identify the options for incorporating the green growth approach into economic development planning.

It worked with a view to:
1. promote economic competitiveness,
2. protect and ensure the sustainable use of natural capital and ecosystem services,
3. promote economic growth that is resilient to disasters and climate change, and
4. ensure social inclusion and wellbeing.

A noteworthy aspect of the taskforce, and one of the successes of its roadmap, is the support provided by a consultant specifically appointed to coordinate between the taskforce’s technical group and the SDG Commission Technical Secretariat. This work focused on alignment between the targets set under the two initiatives. The green growth policy⁸, approved in July 2018, is considered to be a strategic tool for the task of meeting the set national targets for 2030 and targets of the 2030 Agenda itself.

Roadmap for international co-operation
The alignment of the country’s development agendas has also led to a transformation of international cooperation in Colombia. The Presidential International Cooperation Agency (APC – Agencia Presidencial de Cooperación Internacional de Colombia) has established a cooperation roadmap aligned with the 2030 Agenda and the current context in the country, based on three action pathways
1. peacebuilding,
2. rural development, and
3. environmental conservation and sustainability.

In addition, the creation of thematic funds was secured for the post-conflict context, to focus international support more effectively on the implementation of the peace agreement. This has led to a rethink of the mechanisms for coordination between the funding arrangements and the implementation measures. This new architecture makes it easier for other actors within the country to take part in this agenda.

A change in co-operation approaches has been seen in recent years, with a higher level of requirements in terms of outcomes, results and measuring impact relative to the resources allocated to the various development projects. Furthermore, Colombia’s application to join the OECD and its experience in certain development processes mean that the country could become a cooperation provider, exchanging successful experiences in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda through South-South and triangular cooperation.

Strategy for technology and innovation
Achieving the SDGs is the responsibility of every sector of society. The contribution of science, technology and innovation (STI) is essential for social mobilisation in order to ensure that the whole of society takes ownership of SDG achievement. The Administrative Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (Colciencias) has played a significant role in giving visibility to and promoting linkages between Colombia’s science and technology agenda and the 2030 Agenda, especially since it became part of the SDG Commission in November 2017.

Colciencias has designed a strategy, the 2030 Green Paper, with a transformative approach, seeking to generate new thinking about the forms and practices of public policies on science, technology and innovation and how they can be complemented by the SDGs. Drafted after consultations with researchers, public policymakers, the public and experts, the paper serves as a policy proposal for how national science and innovation initiatives could contribute to meeting sustainable development challenges. The proposal follows five principles set out to guide the approach to transformation: Directionality, Participation, Learning and experimentation, Inter-disciplinarity and Foresight. The main actions of the proposal include:
1. identifying existing capacities for addressing problems linked to the 2030 Agenda,
2. strengthening the conceptual foundations of transformative policy through analysis, debate and research about the current innovation frameworks and approaches, and
3. boosting the transformative elements in the projects of eight departments of Colombia.

As regards to financing, the use of public funds is not entirely designed to work with the concept of experimentation, given the uncertainty of results. When it comes to local financing, the General System of Royalties has a fund for science, technology and innovation, which uses the STI Strategic Plans and Agreements to duly organise the resources in each department, with the support of the Departmental Councils of STI (CODECTI – Consejos Departamentales de Ciencia, Tecnología e Innovación). This funding and local support mechanism facilitates attention to the SDG needs in the regions with exclusive resources for that purpose.

Learning and innovation is crucial for SDG implementation and, yet, requires some level of risk and ‘experimentation’. Therefore new ways of thinking need to be developed to meet the requirements of accountability for public funds while also allowing enough space for innovation. Engagement with international networks, such as the Transformative Innovation Policy Consortium, may be useful for conceptual development and information sharing.

Measuring capacity: strengthening the national statistical system
In Colombia, the National Statistical System (SEN – Sistema Estadístico Nacional) is the body in charge of providing the state and society with quality official national and subnational statistics, in coordination with the entities producing them. The National
Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE – Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística) is responsible for coordinating and regulating SEN.

Following the establishment of the SDG Commission, a working group set up by DANE conducted an initial diagnosis of the availability of the information required to measure progress in SDG implementation. Work sessions were held and data collection tools were applied to the 107 bodies involved in statistical operations to identify the strengths and weaknesses in the production and dissemination of statistics, in preparation for the drafting of the 2017–2022 National Statistics Plan. Quality assessments of the statistical process, conducted by assessment committees made up of independent experts, were also used, as well as information from research, public policy documents and sectoral and territorial thematic reviews.

It was found that SEN had access to information for 54% of the global SDG indicators; for 30% the information required improvement, and for the remaining 16%, no data was available. DANE produces around 50% of the information required for measuring the progress towards the SDGs and the remaining 50% corresponds to the bodies comprising SEN.

The existing statistics gaps include the territorial statistics, the lack of georeferencing and the low level of disaggregation. These gaps deprive society of the ability to assess the scope of the economic, sociodemographic or environmental phenomena that has the greatest impact on their well-being. It also limits the government’s ability to understand the vulnerability of people and the inequalities suffered by population groups affected by exclusion, mistreatment or discrimination.

In the process of developing the National Statistics Plan, the following challenges and reasons for statistics gaps were identified:

- **Lack of focus on users’ needs**: The bodies producing the statistical information are not always aware of the users’ needs. According to DANE’s assessment of statistical operations between 2010 and 2015, 47% demonstrated difficulty identifying the users’ needs, either because they do not consult the users—because the consultation mechanisms and procedures are flawed—or because they are not interested in meeting these needs.

- **Limited use of administrative records and alternative data sources**: There is a long history in the country of impeding access to the administrative records of public bodies, as well as to the microdata and metadata comprising the databases. Of the statistical operations assessed by DANE, 20% either do not disseminate historical data or only partially publish it; and only 13% of the statistical operations in the inventory include metadata in DANE’s National Archive of Statistical Data and Metadata. In addition, primarily aiming at recording activities that fulfill respective body’s responsibilities, the administrative data collection does not always meet the requirements of statistical production.

- **Lack of coordination**: There is a lack of common knowledge and communication about projects involving statistical activities, a lack of effective communication between the information systems within bodies producing statistics, and a lack of coordination between national bodies concerning the information requirements of local bodies.

- **Legal barriers and lack of knowledge about how to overcome them**: Some bodies, involving the principle of discretion and confidentiality, refuse to provide the information required or limit the flow of information and microdata. In addition, interoperability constitutes a major challenge, given the extensive lack of knowledge about anonymisation techniques within some data-producing bodies, impeding the flow of information within government bodies.

- **Limited understanding of statistics**: According to DANE’s quality assessments, some bodies comprising SEN do not acknowledge the public nature of the statistical information they produce and, as a result, not all the members of SEN understand that one of the aims behind producing and disseminating quality information is to enable the users to use it, be it for research, public policy decisions or to assess political leaders’ management performance based on the widest possible source of objective data.

The adoption of the National Statistics Plan for 2017–2022 was a very important step in meeting these challenges, as it provides Colombia, for the first time, with a roadmap defining the supply and demand that the country has and needs to have in terms of statistical information. The plan outlines the efforts needed to fill each information gap identified in relation to the SDGs and Colombia’s accession to the OECD, through nine strategies, accompanied by each of the action plans:

1. Define the supply of statistical information that should be produced continuously.
2. Promote the dissemination of and access to statistical information.
3. Foster improvements in the quality of official statistics.
4. Identify and promote the need to take advantage of administrative records as a statistical source.
5. Promote the inclusion of a differentiated and intersectional approach to the production and dissemination of the statistics within SEN.
6. Promote innovation, learning and knowledge management processes for statistical production.
7. Implement agreements on the production of the statistics that the country requires.
8. Ensure integration between statistical information and geospatial information.

For general targets, the plan establishes that at least 50% of the statistical operations it covers should secure a favourable appraisal in the quality assessments made of their production process, and that at least 30% of the bodies within SEN should develop their statistical capacity. Emphasis is placed on internal knowledge development, through the implementation and application of dissemination and access standards by members of SEN, using a common language.

Rejoining statistics production
To address the disconnect and overlapping efforts in the production of statistics, the plan recommends the use of information and communications technology as a key tool in ensuring more efficient management of national and local information and optimising information access and exchange processes. DNP, as part of its role to coordinate with the telecommunications sector, pressed ahead with developing a national policy on Big Data and the SDG implementation. The Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (MinTIC−Ministerio de Tecnologías de la Información y las Comunicaciones), for its part, developed guidelines for providing citizens with digital services and laid the foundations for public administrations to move towards data interoperability.10

Coordinating with the Latin American region
Colombia is also fully aware of the importance of connecting its local drive to strengthen its statistical system with regional and international processes. DANE's participation in the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs), together with regional platforms in Latin America and the Andean region, has been pivotal in strengthening and harmonising SDG monitoring and reporting. In addition, DANE takes part in platforms contributing to alliance building with international organisations such as the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data (GPSDD). This has helped the bodies operating within SEN to develop collaboration mechanisms and learning platforms for capacity building. For example, it has partnered with the United States' National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the Group on Earth Observations on the incorporation of geospatial information.

Communicating data and progress
Despite the Colombian government’s early commitment to the 2030 Agenda, a survey conducted in 2016 showed that only 11% of the Colombian people knew about the Agenda. Since then several efforts have been made to improve communication on policies and progress related to the SDGs.

Backed by the Swedish Embassy in Colombia, and in collaboration with Data Act Lab, DNP and DANE have set up an online platform for the dissemination of SDG-related data, www.ods.gov.co. Initiated in 2016, the platform was developed with the intention to give all stakeholders access to information about the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Colombia. This was also in an effort to ensure alignment with the national government's open data strategy aimed at facilitating the sharing, use and reuse of data. The platform displays Colombia’s 2030 Agenda process and tracks progress for each indicator, including baselines and national targets for 2018 and 2030. It also shows data gaps and data disaggregated for gender, age and geographic location when available. The online platform is user-friendly, providing easy access to data and the option to share and download. In addition, the technology used is open source.

Launched in March 2018, the platform is being used by a variety of stakeholders, ranging from experienced data users that run additional analysis with the data, to basic users who like to go through the more general contents such as the timeline, Colombia’s SDG process and information from different departments.

Colombia’s online SDG platform represents a step forward in terms of communicating the 2030 Agenda and progress towards reaching the targets. Nevertheless, tools and strategies still need to be developed to facilitate citizens’ understanding and use of the data. The hope and aim is to strengthen a culture of information that enables citizens to actively participate and gives them a possibility to hold the government accountable. As additional steps, a multi-stakeholder platform has been created, which includes capacity-building components, and tools for visualising stakeholders’ contributions have also been initiated.

Lessons learned related to the SDG data platform:
• A digital, online platform is the output of a long process. First it is essential to prepare the data and meta-data in a structured way and allow time for an inclusive process to set the national targets.
• It is beneficial for users if the platform displays the national targets set for 2030 alongside the data that tracks progress to date. This helps to visualise the full process of where the country is coming from and the vision and projection of where it is heading.
• A digital online tool has the potential to reach various stakeholders, from researchers to the general citizen. It is important to design the contents and data visualisations with different user profiles in mind, allowing it to be a foundation for stakeholder engagement.
• With an emphasis on user-friendliness, and the technology being open source, Colombia’s SDG platform is an important tool for other countries to learn from Colombia’s accomplishments and to get inspiration for developing their own platforms.
Final remarks
Colombia’s progress in the implementation of the SDGs provides room for optimism. As this paper displays, Colombia was a champion in the negotiations leading up to the 2030 Agenda and was early to embark on an ambitious process of setting up national and local structures for the implementation of the SDGs. The country has also continued to be active on the international scene, being one of the first countries to present its Voluntary National Review to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2016. It was also one of the few countries that have reported on its progress a second time (in 2018). At the same time, the findings and lessons learned during this period represent opportunities for improvement for the government elected in 2018. There are still many challenges ahead as Colombia continues on the road to achieving the goals it has set itself for 2030.

‘It was very important for us to have a tool so that any interested party could consult the information about what we’ve done and what national targets are set for 2030. This is the best way to do it. Now everybody within Colombia and internationally can review all the data and what the process has been.’

Adriana Castro González

Endnotes
1The paper describes Colombia’s SDG processes from the perspective of government officials and does not cover possible diverting views of other stakeholders. Furthermore, since it is based on a report produced in May 2018, it does not cover any steps taken by the government elected in the subsequent elections.
5Departements are subregional entities in Colombia.
6SIEE – Sistema de Información para la Evaluación de la Eficacia
7Terridata was developed with support from United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Bank and the Embassy of Sweden.
10Decree 1413 of 2017, which defines general guidelines for the use and operation of digital citizen services.
11Both Voluntary National Reviews are available at the UN website https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/

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