



Metagovernance for Sustainability: A Framework for Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals

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Metagovernance or the *governing of governing* is a means by which a society attempts to establish some degree of coordinated governance. The goal is to achieve the best possible outcome from the viewpoint of those responsible for the performance of public sector organizations. The intention is to establish values in such a way that they become accepted *norms*. The fact that norms can be established at any level and can then be used to form the governance process as a whole means that metagovernance is part of both the input and the output of the governing system. General knowledge of the importance of the term metagovernance is relatively limited. Therefore, the recent publication by Louis Meuleman *Metagovernance for Sustainability* can be a significant contribution to a better general understanding of this concept.

Louis Meuleman is a governance policy advisor, manager and trainer on public administration reform, sustainability governance and metagovernance. He is a member and vice-chair of the UN Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA). He works at the European Commission, DG Environment as the coordinator for the European Semester and Environmental Implementation Review. He is visiting professor at the Public Governance Institute of the University of Leuven (Belgium), senior fellow at the Center for Governance and Sustainability of the University of Massachusetts Boston (USA) and research associate at the Public Administration and Policy Group of Wageningen University & Research (Netherlands).

The book consists of three parts. The first part provides explanations of governance and its purpose. In the *Introduction*, the author discusses why sustainable governance often does not reach the desired goals. In achieving the anticipated outcomes, particularly for sustainable development, metagovernance can be of valuable help, indeed, of decisive importance. Three governance styles and their hybrids are explained in the chapter 2. These are the hierarchical, network and market styles of governance. The hierarchical style of governance is based on enforcement by means of legitimate authority. It can be achieved by vertical integration, as employment relations or detailed contractual models, providing decision-making authority in particular areas. On the other hand, the network style of governance consists of the interrelationship of many different stakeholders from the government at various levels, from political and interest groups, NGOs, societal institutions, private and business organizations. Finally, market-style governance is motivated by market and business ideas and prefers to use market-based instruments. It focuses on the principles of efficiency, competition, development and empowerment. It treats government organizations as business units. North-Western European countries are more prone to use network and market styles of governance, while traditionally centralist (France) or legalistic (Germany, Austria) are more inclined to the hierarchical style. Various styles are optimal in different circumstances, for example, in the response to natural catastrophes, hierarchical styles of governance serve better. However, to ensure long-term sustainable economic development, there is an obvious need for metagovernance, as a way to

enhance the effectiveness of governance, by combining ideas from hierarchical, network and market styles of governance, adjusted to a specific situation. Succinctly, metagovernance is a means to achieve sustainable development.

Chapter 3 deals with the problem of governance failures resulting from inefficient management of the governance framework. This concept partially overlaps with political failures, but should also be analysed separately. These two types of failures influence each other and can be impacted by the other factors of a government framework. In resolving failures there is a need to take into account *meta-causes* such as the capacity of policy stakeholders and better designed policy processes and institutions. The blueprint approach (copying successful practice from one to another situation without adequate revision and adjustment) is a good predictor of failure, as it does not take into account the local circumstances and environment with its values, traditions and history.

Chapter 4 presents the concept of metagovernance as the *art* of combining different available approaches into a feasible way to achieve desired results. In this process, the application of metagovernance enables much faster progress, primarily because it takes into consideration national, subnational and local specificities. However, in such a process there is also a need for the timely prevention and mitigation of adverse effects of government failures.

In the second part of the book, detailed characteristics of governance are described. It begins with chapter 5, which investigates fifty ways in which the three governance styles differ from each other. Hierarchical, network and market styles of governance have diverse operational characteristics in different ways of dealing with policy and law making and their implementation. Within each governance style, a set of operational characteristics has a significant level of internal consistency. In that way there is well-filled governance toolbox that is available for metagovernance. It enables “metagovernance to use, reject, combine and replace or switch parts of specific governance frameworks, taking into account conflicts and indicators of governance failure” (p. 154).

Meuleman in chapter 6 explains the broader context with various characteristics in culture, values, geographic position and tradition that influence the feasibility and achievement of desired outcomes. Various cultural, geographical and traditional factors lead to a preference for a certain government style with their related tools, which can block the implementation of other solutions. The use of circumstantial evidence and a complete respect for cultural diversity are crucial conditions in prevention of government failure. Cultural diversity should not be deemed as a burden but should be respected as an opportunity in which to find appropriate conditions for long-term sustainable economic development. Chapter 7 deals with the particular case of governance failure in which insufficient or inadequate attention does not allow exit from unfavourable *mental silos*, thus hindering the appropriate resolution of the governance problem. The author introduces a set of soft

rules that co-determined which style of government is optimal in particular circumstances. Most of such ideas have their origin in the New Public Management related to the belief (or even a mantra) that less is more. That means that the government should withdraw from many previous activities and concentrate on *steering the economy and society* instead of *rowing*. Although existence of mental silos can have positive features, like clear lines of commands, responsibility, focus on a given target, excessive capturing in mental silos without a doubt is bad and culturally insensitive. If silos have to be broken, it should be mental not institutional silos. Instead of tearing down institutional silos, it is much better to make them flexible or *to teach them how to dance*.

The third part of the book, *Metagovernance for sustainability* contains four chapters. Chapter 8 focuses on the possibility and limitations of the application of metagovernance to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Each of the seventeen SDGs requires differentiated governance contexts at all levels. Furthermore, it is not enough to use just one governance style, only hierarchical, network or market governance; there is a need to apply adequate combination of styles. The seventeen SDGs are interlinked, by design "indivisible" and while some of the connected governance challenges are common, they have their own typical challenges. Their complexity and the difference in governance contexts in the countries in which the SDGs are to be implemented cannot be addressed without a broad governance concept and the use of the full metagovernance toolbox. Although there are often criticisms that SDGs are ineffective and too general, their adoption has already motivated many countries to create new institutions for stakeholder engagement and to invite various actors to participate in the decision making process related to SDG implementation.

Chapter 9 presents a seven-step method by which to apply metagovernance with concrete examples for implementation. This method is only in a few, but crucial, aspects different from traditional policy making, institution building and reform processes. The steps start with the need to map the governance environment, primarily to assess who are the relevant actors and which roles and interest they have. The second step is evaluation of the current situation with the analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the current policy and governmental framework. The third step addresses the specific context and the possible agreements on the problem definition under the motto *define, reframe and refine the problem*. In the fourth step there is a need to formulate context-specific goals and options, assessing their benefits and costs, and finally to propose targets, indicators and time frames. The fifth step contains the design of governance framework based on a selection of elements from various governance styles. The metagovernance for governance framework based on the principles of reflexivity, resilience and flexibility while simultaneously allowing redundancy is incorporated in the sixth step. The final, seventh, step is dedicated to evaluation of the accepted governance framework.

Chapter 10 deliberates the reason why in public sector reforms and modernisation focused on the SDGs an implementation of metagovernance principles should respect policy coherence and the capacity of actors. In other words, public sector reforms should be tested before their full implementation. Promoting policy and institutional coherence for implementation of the SDGs should be among other things inclusive, well-coordinated with other national programmes and based on a range of various approaches. Developing metagovernance capacity requires focusing on skills and capabilities linked to multi-perspective thinking and on developing willingness and capacity for successful application of metagovernance.

The final chapter briefly reiterates the most important messages in the implementation of metagovernance approaches to the SDGs. The author discusses the feasibility of metagovernance, how this is important for resolving systemic challenges and achieving effective partnership. In order to be able to apply metagovernance, state and public sector organisations should have some degree of open-mindedness, awareness of the current problems, reflexive thinking, adequate flexibility and willingness to innovate.

Succinctly, this book in a very impressive and reasoned way presents the importance and complexity of metagovernance. The author is fully aware that crucial in this process is the successful and comprehensive mapping of the needs, while supporting solutions should take care of context-specific sustainability. Metagovernance presumes a seemingly contradictory method of combining bottom-up and top-down approaches in design, as well as implementation and evaluation of various policy decisions. The idea is to enable the simultaneous application of network, market and hierarchical governance methods in a particular way for a specific situation. Such an approach should allow the use of different governance systems at different levels, which may contribute to a reduction of the vagueness of political decisions, particularly those related to the concept of SDGs. The emergence of successful governance depends on managing plurality with the aim of inducing more coherence, while remaining sensitive to different social values, administrative cultures, traditions and norms in a society. In today's world there seems to be some convergence towards the use of a comprehensive approach with the desire to achieve appropriate governance frameworks that enables long-term sustainable economic development.