The Italian constitution and legislation embrace the requirements of autonomy and decentralization, paving the way for effective inter-governmental coordination mechanisms for SDG planning and implementation across the country. Subnational engagement, horizontal integration and stakeholder participation in the context of the National Sustainable Development Strategy are formally enshrined in the national law, which recommends and allows regional and local authorities, policy departments and societal actors at all levels to take part in the design, implementation and revision of the strategy according to their specific institutional mandates and competencies.

Vertical integration for SDG localization in Italy has been grounded on the creation of a “community of intentions” (a network of people, civil servants, and experts, based on collaboration, debate and dialogue, operating within the individual administrations involved) among all regions, autonomous provinces and metropolitan cities, which conceived the support provided by MiTE (funding for planning processes and pilot actions, round-tables and capacity-building activities) and other actors (e.g., AICCRE) as a crucial triggering and motivating factor to mainstream and localize the SDGs in their territories.

Horizontal integration is enhanced by the newly released National Action Plan for Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development, which aims at strengthening the system of institutional relations, vertical and horizontal, as well as multi-actor participation, by also launching a new path for integrated decision-making processes.

Stakeholder engagement on the 2030 Agenda is ensured by the combination of formal mechanisms – e.g., the National Forum for Sustainable Development as for its domestic implementation, the National Council on Development Cooperation as for its external implementation, local fora (at regional and metropolitan level) as for its localization – along with dedicated initiatives (e.g., the Partecipa open-source platform; Venice City Solutions 2030), proving to be powerful multi-stakeholder tools for dialogue with civil society organizations and other societal stakeholders.
INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

According to the Constitution, Italy is a unitary country, one and indivisible, which recognizes and promotes local autonomies and adapts the principles and methods of its legislation to the requirements of autonomy and decentralization. In its Articles 114 to 133, the Constitution lays down the fundamental elements of local and regional self-government, counting three administrative government layers at subnational level – regions, provinces and metropolitan cities, and municipalities – acting as autonomous entities with their own statutes, powers and functions. The 20 regions and the 2 autonomous provinces have had significant legislative and administrative powers since the 2001 Constitutional reform, which gave them exclusive legislative power with respect to any matter not expressly reserved to the State, including healthcare, transport, social services and housing, economic development, environmental protection, etc. Italian Regions are broken down into 107 provinces. Following Law 56/2014, provincial tasks were transferred to regions, municipalities or new-in-termunicipal bodies, depending on each region. 14 Metropolitan cities were also devolved some of the provinces’ former responsibilities, such as territorial planning and coordination and supervision of municipalities’ functions that are part of the metropolitan area. Furthermore, Italy encompasses 7,904 municipalities, whose responsibilities involve mainly service provision, and competences in urban management (town planning, environment), local road networks, culture and recreation, and social welfare, as well as deconcentrated administrative competences about registries, elections, military service, and statistics.

VERTICAL INTEGRATION

Regarding political commitment and institutional arrangements, the Presidency of the Council of Ministries oversees and coordinates the implementation of the National Sustainable Development Strategy (NSDS) with support from the Ministry of Ecological Transition (MiTE) for domestic aspects and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI) for the external dimension. Subnational engagement in the context of the strategy is enshrined in the national law: the Italian legislative framework recommends that regional and local authorities take part in the implementation of the strategy according to their specific institutional mandates and competencies and provides for their engagement in the formulation of the NSDS and its revisions. The institutional arrangement formally involves also the State-Regions Conference, which endorsed the NSDS in 2017 with the aim of promoting synergies between national, regional and local policies. In addition, the law assigns it a role in the three-year review of the NSDS.

MiTE is playing a crucial role in promoting the NSDS at local level through a series of collaboration, coordination and capacity building activities. This process gradually and incrementally achieved the creation of a “community of intentions” among all regions, autonomous provinces and metropolitan cities, which conceived the support provided by MiTE as a crucial triggering and motivating factor to mainstream and localize the SDGs in their territories.

Concerning planning, since 2018, Italy decided to take the opportunity to include in the implementation and revision process of the NSDS – due by law – a strengthened and constructive dialogue on Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development involving all relevant central, sub-national administrations, civil society and other stakeholders. As part of the NSDS, the Italian regions are required by law to adopt their own regional strategies for sustainable development, to be coherent with the national one. Also, they have to guarantee the integrated monitoring of the objectives of the NSDS, which implies to contribute to its annual reporting. Moreover, all Italian regions, autonomous provinces, and metropolitan cities have been enabled – through funded collaboration agreements – and technically supported – through permanent capacity-building and peer-to-peer mechanisms – to design their own strategies for sustainable development. As a result of these initiatives to build capacity and maintain constant working relations with the MiTE, such multilevel planning mechanisms has been able to enhance vertical alignment and policy coherence for sustainable development, aligning regional/metropolitan plans and targets with national objectives organised around the five Ps of the 2030 Agenda, especially in the most advanced regions and metropolitan cities. So far, 12 regional strategies for sustainable development have been approved (8 are under definition/approval), and similarly 2 metropolitan strategies for sustainable development have been approved (12 are under definition/approval).

As far as implementation, at national level, the Ministry of Economy and Finance is responsible for the elaboration of the official economic policy documents – i.e., the National Reform Program and the Economics and Finance Document. MiTE and MEF are increasingly collaborating to link the former documents pertaining to the economic programming with the implementation of the NSDS. In terms of financing, the MiTE assigned national funds to the collaboration agreements supporting both the design of regional and metropolitan strategies for sustainable development and the implementation of pilot actions. These funds, despite the limited amounts, signalled a formal commitment by the national government to implement the NSDS at local level, along with endorsing regional and metropolitan efforts. In terms of capacities, MiTE played a crucial role in promoting the NSDS at local level through activities and workshops for capacity-building and by establishing a permanent
platform for dialogue and exchange on policy coherence and SDG implementation among all regions, autonomous provinces and metropolitan cities. This is contributing to mainstreaming the SDGs and the NSDS into regional and local policies and budgets, and it is paving the way to enhance linkages between the EU Cohesion Funds objectives and projects and the NSDS.

Concerning review and reporting, Italy has invested considerable efforts in building statistical frameworks for evaluating sustainability and well-being. The National Institute of Statistics provides relevant indicators and improves their coverage and significance in identifying trends in SDG achievement. A detailed analysis of SDG indicators is published annually and the NSDS Annual Report is compiled every year by the MiTE.

Significant results have been achieved also in terms of SDG analysis at sub-national level. In particular, since 2020 the Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development (AISviS) publishes a yearly Territorial Report, which offers a detailed analysis of Italy’s Regions, provinces and metropolitan cities, contributing to the territorialisation of the 2030 Agenda in Italy. Similarly, AICCRE replicated and created the first Italian SDG portal for local indicators by over 100 municipalities in Italy at the end of 2020 and it released the first Italian VSR, together with Eni Enrico Mattei Foundation. The 2022 VNR was planned as a collective year-long process involving main actors at national, regional and local levels. Within this process, the MiTE strongly engaged with regions and metropolitan cities stimulating the release of 12 VLRs. However, it not adequately integrated provinces and municipalities and the VSR process was only partially considered, thus leaving a relevant gap open in the multilevel governance approach.

HORIZONTAL INTEGRATION

As far as political commitment and institutional arrangements for horizontal integration, in 2021, the newly established Inter-ministerial Committee for Ecological Transition (MiTE) has been mandated to approve the NSDS revisions and oversee its implementation. As the CITE is chaired by the Prime Minister, and steered by the Minister for Ecological Transition, it illustrates the government’s high-level commitment to the path to sustainable development. The Inter-ministerial Committee for Economic Programming and Sustainable Development, which is in charge for assessing sustainability of public investment, is also placed within the Presidency of the Council of Ministries. The same approach was quite successfully reflected in several regions and metropolitan cities, also because collaboration agreements promoted by MiTE pushed to create an inter-departmental coordination body. This allowed to commit the highest political leaders and most policy departments to SDG localization, linking their mandates (and performance evaluation) to the SDGs and going well beyond an environment-centred understanding of sustainable development. Indeed, as compared to national bodies, LRGs – including at foremost municipalities – appear to be naturally more inclined to an integrated approach to SDG localization, as the SDGs are even more strictly interrelated at the very local level. Several sub-national administrations have established sustainable development steering committees for drafting and implementing their strategies.

Regarding planning, Italy recognizes policy coherence for sustainable development (PCSD) as a fundamental tool for achieving the principles of integration and transversality of the SDGs. In this regard, the National Action Plan for Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (NAP PCSD) was elaborated as main result of the project “Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development: mainstreaming SDGs in the Italian Decision Making” launched by MiTE in 2020 with the support of the European Commission and the OECD. The mechanisms and tools proposed by the NAP PCSD represent coherence tools aiming at strengthening the system of institutional relations, vertical and horizontal, as well as multi-actor participation, by also launching a new path for integrated decision-making processes, addressing all its phases and promoting true circularity within the processes. For instance, the NAP PCSD proposes the development of a Sustainability Dashboard, combining a core set of statistical indicators – which has been set during the revision process of the NSDS – and performance indicators, cutting across the Italian policy formulation and evaluation system, in relation also to the EU Cohesion policy and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, among others.

The institutions at central level that are formally entrusted with the implementation of sustainable development policies include:

- Ministry for the Economy and Finance;
- Ministry for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation;
- Interministerial Committee for Economic Planning and Sustainable Development;
- Department for European Policies;
- Department for Cohesion Policies;
- Ministry of Ecological Transition.

Similarly, the permanent platform between the Ministry of Ecological Transition and LRGs adopts an integrated approach, taking into account all different sustainable development dimensions and policy sectors. This is reflected, for instance, in the collaboration agreements with each region, autonomous province and metropolitan city, which included (and funded) pilot actions supposed to have an inter-sectoral effect and impact on multiple dimensions of
sustainable development. Similarly, the capacity-building activities (both by MiTE and by the Italian Association of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions) strongly pushed towards an integrated implementation of the SDGs at the local level. AICCRE is supporting LRGs to localize the SDGs through training (e.g., a National School on the 2030 Agenda for LRGs), platforms for exchange (e.g., Venice City Solutions 2030), and the AICCRE Local4Action HUB, among others. For instance, it has organized training sessions on the SDGs involving more than 100 mayors, thus contributing to involve municipalities that are yet to be supported on SDG localization by national institutions.

The 2022 VNR process is a joint effort of MiTE and MAECI for review and reporting, conceived as a collective path involving the main institutional and societal actors leading the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Italy. Such path is built on the work carried out starting from the 2017 VNR. At the same time, the 12 VLRs and reporting tools prepared by regions, autonomous provinces and metropolitan cities and attached to the 2022 VNR provide information on their own inter-departmental / inter-sectoral coordination bodies.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Since 2019, the National Forum for Sustainable Development (NFSD) has proven a powerful multi-stakeholder institutional arrangement for dialogue with civil society organizations and other societal stakeholders. It is an open-membership forum ensuring stakeholders’ and experts’ active participation in decision-making processes on sustainable development in Italy. About 200 CSOs and other stakeholders are represented in the NFSD and the possibility to enrol remains open. The NFSD plays a key role in the NSDS implementation and in the three-year revision process.

The Forum is autonomously managed by its member organisations, who animate 6 Working Groups (respectively on Sustainability culture, People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, Youth). Finally, the NFSD links with the territorial fora to contribute to the definition and implementation of a strategic vision shared at different levels of government, paving the way also for collaboration practices involving all different institutions, civil society and non-State actors. At local level, stakeholder engagement has been even stronger, as local actors in Italy (such as NGOs, research centres and entrepreneurs) are used to advocate and participate in policy-making processes. Moreover, almost all regions, autonomous provinces and metropolitan cities included actions for active territorial stakeholder engagement in their collaboration agreement with MiTE.

The MiTE has constituted the NFSD as a space for dialogue and facilitates CSOs involvement in the planning process for the NSDS. In this way, the MiTE has been leading an extensive participatory process involving all relevant central, sub-national administrations, civil society and other stakeholders to co-build the revised 2022 NSDS and an Action Plan for PCSD to be attached to the former. CSOs, NGOs and private sector organizations are also involved by the National Council on Development Cooperation through specific working groups from the point of view of the external application of the 2030 Agenda 2030.

Stakeholders participating in the NFSD accompany the implementation of the NSDS in various ways. For instance, with a view to an integrated process aimed at strengthening the NFSD in its internal dimension (multistakeholder platform), a new pilot project was launched to promote the creation of a Forum working space on the PartecIPA open-source platform, in collaboration with the Department of Public Function of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. It fosters innovative forms of stakeholder engagement as practices of significant national interest in the framework of public participation for sustainable development. Moreover, the NFDS elaborated a Position Paper to provide recommendations for the implementation of the revised NSDS in the coming years. Another relevant participatory practice is Venice City Solutions 2030 – promoted by AICCRE – that represents a living laboratory dedicated to localization strategy, focused especially on advocacy, knowledge production and learning. It consists of a venue to develop and showcase innovative strategies; synthesize and capitalize other Local4Action HUBs; propose tools to enhance local action to achieve the SDGs.

Local fora have been contributing to disseminating awareness and spurring local initiatives around the 2030 Agenda, making their implementing role more visible and keeping LRGs accountable.

As far as review and reporting, engagement and participation is one of the three thematic insights of the 2022 VNR, describing the work carried out and mechanisms set into place to ensure an open participatory process in implementing the SDGs at national and local level. Through the ad hoc drafting group, composed by stakeholders within the NFSD, non-State actors involved in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda contributed to the VNR with a position paper that describes the work done and provides recommendations for the steps ahead.

Moreover, a central pillar of the 2022 VNR is “Participation and promotion of a sustainability culture”, which includes territorial fora for sustainable development as a relevant monitoring and accountability tool. These spaces for participation and dialogue are crucial for the implementation, follow up and review of the 2030 Agenda at local level, as they ensure a more comprehensive picture within the VNR/VLR processes, both in progress assessment and in designing the way forward.
This summary reports the main information on multilevel governance for SDG localization in Italy. It is part of the wider global research "Accelerating progress towards the localization of the SDGs and post-pandemic recovery through enhanced multilevel governance". The research is the building block of UN-Habitat’s effort to strengthen global knowledge and practices on multilevel governance as a key process to localizing the SDGs. The research has been led in partnership with ARCO (Action Research for CO-development) and with the support of knowledge partners: Brookings Institution, LSE Cities, Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance, United Cities Local Governments.

The analysis summarized here is mainly based on information collected through key informant interviews with the national coordination body for SDG implementation in Italy (i.e., Ministry of Ecological Transition), one of the main associations of Local and Regional Governments in the country (i.e., AICCRE - Italian Association of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions) and one local authority actively committed to SDG localization (i.e., Emilia-Romagna Region). Moreover, it provides information extrapolated from the official Voluntary National Reviews (2017 and 2022), the Voluntary Subnational Review (2022) and the 13 Voluntary Local Reviews (released in 2021-2022), as well as from relevant global reports, including the yearly UCLG report to the High-level Political Forum "Towards the localization of the SDGs", OECD/UCLG (2019), OECD (2020), OECD country profiles on PCSD, Brookings (2020, 2022), and the policy briefs on "Emergency Governance for Cities and Regions" by LSE Cities, UCLG & Metropolis (2021).

The complete research report, other country profiles and more tools are available in the online platform: "Multilevel governance - Accelerating the Localization of the Sustainable Development Goals".

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