

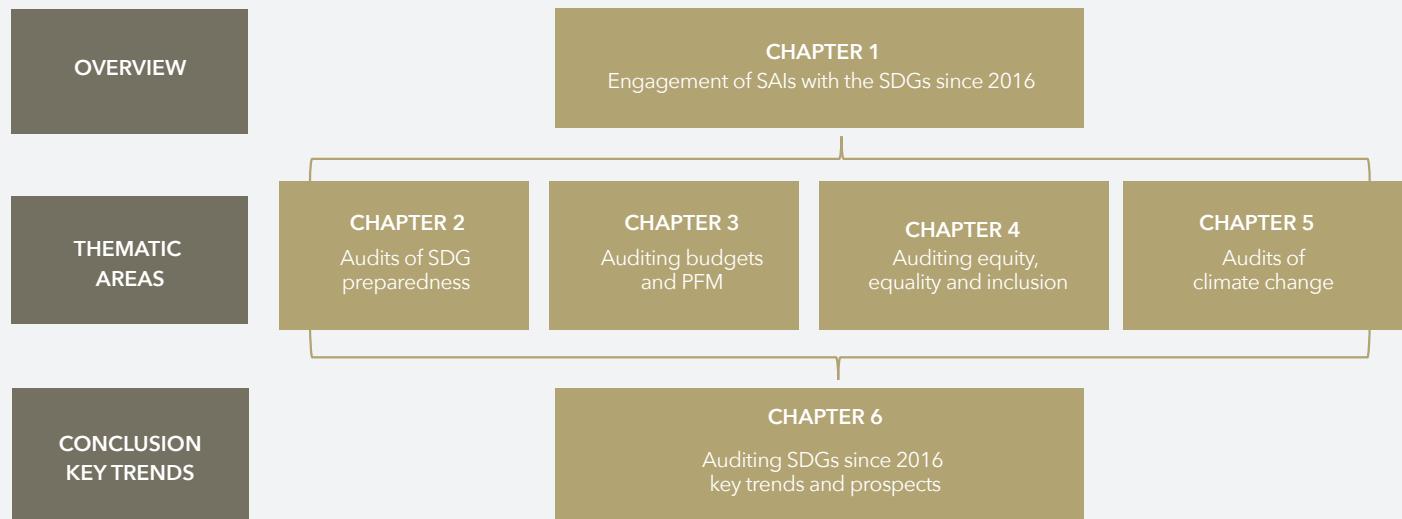
Executive Summary

The World Public Sector Report 2025 focuses on the crucial role that supreme audit institutions (SAIs) play in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Given their mandates and central role in national accountability systems, SAIs are uniquely positioned to provide Governments with evidence-based insights and recommendations to accelerate the implementation of the SDGs. Through their audits, SAIs often produce critical information on the effectiveness of policies and programmes related to the SDGs - insights that may otherwise be unavailable to Governments. By framing this information in ways that are accessible and actionable, SAIs can also enable increased public

engagement in SDG implementation and ultimately enhance greater accountability of Governments for their actions to implement the SDGs.

The Report aims to present a global overview of SAIs' contribution to SDG implementation, follow-up and review, both in general and in specific SDG areas. The four thematic chapters of the Report (chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5) focus on four thematic areas and follow a similar structure (see Figure ES.1). They consider developments in audit practice since 2015 and examine the challenges that SAIs have faced in conducting SDG-related audits in these areas. They synthesize common audit findings and recommendations, and illustrate impacts these audits have made.

FIGURE ES.1 | Structure of the World Public Sector Report 2025



Source: author's elaboration.

Supreme audit institutions and the Sustainable Development Goals

Since 2015, the International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions (INTOSAI) and SAIs have actively positioned themselves on the international sustainable development agenda and identified their contribution to SDG implementation, follow-up and review as a strategic priority. Auditing internationally agreed development goals was, with a few exceptions, new to SAIs when the 2030 Agenda was adopted. The rapid development of SAI expertise on the SDGs has been driven by INTOSAI's sustained commitment to the 2030 Agenda, articulated at the strategic level and operationalized through capacity-building initiatives, all supported by extensive knowledge exchange opportunities.

This enabling framework fostered multiple initiatives that have resulted in a wealth of audit reports covering a wide range of sectors and SDG targets. SDG-relevant work is done by SAIs from both developed and developing countries. SAIs from developing countries have adopted the SDGs as a guide for their work more often than SAIs from developed countries. The range of SDGs that have been covered has increased over time. In 2023, 43 percent of 166 surveyed SAIs reported that they had undertaken performance audits on the implementation of SDGs, and 22 percent reported having conducted audits for the purpose of informing country reporting against SDG targets.

Many SAIs produce information that is directly relevant to SDG follow-up and review, even though they may not frame their work in these terms. At the national level, SAIs have done this by assessing the level of preparedness of Governments to implement the SDGs; assessing the performance of national action on key sustainable development policies and programmes linked with the SDGs; and, increasingly, assessing government performance on national SDG targets. Beyond national borders, the SAI community has increasingly provided original insights at the regional and international levels, in particular through coordinated audits and other global initiatives that produce consolidated pictures of the status of progress in key SDG areas.

In the context of this work, SAIs have developed innovative tools and methodologies, which are not only relevant for other SAIs, but also for other institutions and stakeholders concerned with SDG evaluation. For many SAIs, working on the SDGs has also brought to the fore dimensions of the 2030 Agenda such as "leaving no one behind", which had not been the traditional focus of their work. In addition, SAIs have increased their engagement with stakeholders (including government entities, civil society, communities and academia) to strengthen their audits and their dissemination.

As a result of these efforts, SAIs have increasingly been in a position to identify institutional constraints to effective SDG implementation. Many audits have had tangible impacts, leading Governments to adjust their institutional mechanisms. SAIs have also gradually increased their contribution to national SDG follow-up and review. In some cases, they have collaborated with government entities responsible for coordinating SDG implementation and established partnerships with National Statistical Offices. However, only a limited number of SAIs actively participate in voluntary national review processes.

All these actions have contributed to the strengthening of national SDG implementation as well as follow-up and review systems- providing Governments with rich and rigorous analyses and recommendations to accelerate SDG implementation and ultimately enhancing the capacity of parliaments and other national actors to provide effective oversight on sustainable development.

Notwithstanding this, the increasing volume of insights produced by SAIs on SDG implementation often remains underutilized and has the potential to more directly inform national and international action on sustainable development. Bridging this gap requires increased communication between SAIs and other stakeholders. In particular, SAIs can benefit from proactively investing in the dissemination of audit findings to ensure that they are clearly conveyed to stakeholders. In addition, establishing systematic processes for monitoring and following up on audit recommendations is essential to achieving meaningful and lasting impact.

SDG preparedness audits as a stepping stone to auditing implementation

In 2016, the INTOSAI Development Initiative (IDI) launched a worldwide capacity development programme to support SAIs to conduct performance audits of government preparedness to implement the SDGs. In parallel, audits of SDG preparedness were also conducted by individual SAIs and coordinated audits involving a number of SAIs from different regions. The Report documents this global effort as well as its results and impacts.

The SDG preparedness audits produced important insights into institutional arrangements, means of implementation and monitoring and evaluation systems for the SDGs, which complemented those produced by government entities and other stakeholders. In response to the audits, many governments quickly established or adjusted policies and institutional arrangements, improving their SDG readiness. In 2019, 65 percent of the SAIs participating in IDI's 'Auditing SDGs' initiative reported that their governments had accepted the recommendations made, with a variety

of actions being initiated in the follow-up to the audits. In some countries, SDG preparedness audits demonstrably influenced national planning and alignment with the SDGs; the adoption of new laws, regulations, policies; the establishment of steering bodies or other institutional coordination mechanisms; and improvements to national monitoring and review bodies, mechanisms and processes, among other areas.

The SDG preparedness audits put a spotlight on the 2030 Agenda and provided SAIs with an opportunity to play a visible role in national SDG monitoring systems. At the same time, conducting preparedness audits allowed SAIs to internally raise awareness of the SDGs and of underlying economic, social and environmental subject matters. These audits also helped SAIs gain familiarity with new concepts and approaches, enhance competencies and skills, adopt new methodologies and tools, and adjust their internal processes.

In many countries, SAI leadership showed strong and unequivocal commitment to advancing SDG auditing, recognizing audits of preparedness as the foundation for auditing the implementation of SDGs. Many SAIs found significant value in conducting preparedness audits and later integrated related elements into their audit work. In 2019, more than 80 percent of SAIs that participated in the IDI's 'Auditing SDGs' initiative indicated that they were planning to include audits of SDG implementation in their annual audit plans. Using the SDG preparedness audits as a stepping stone towards auditing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, SAIs and their regional and international organizations developed new methodologies and models, such as the INTOSAI Development Initiative's SDGs Audit Model (ISAM), which are now actively used by SAIs.

The contribution of SAIs to sound public financial management and stronger budgets to deliver on the SDGs

SAIs provide critical insights on public finance, debt management and budget reliability, which are essential for strengthening public financial management (PFM) and ensuring accountability in the mobilization and effective use of public resources for SDG implementation. Public finance audits not only help assess the performance of national fiscal systems, including in relation to SDG implementation, but also contribute to enhancing their effectiveness in support of sustainable development.

There is significant untapped potential to strengthen the role of public finance audits in supporting the follow-up and review of the SDGs. Fully leveraging this potential requires raising awareness among a broad range of stakeholders about the contributions of SAIs in auditing public finance for sustainable development is essential. Documenting and

disseminating SAI experiences, and clearly communicating audit findings and their implications, are essential steps towards building broader understanding and support for the work of SAIs in this area.

Expanding the use of performance audit methodologies - or integrating them with financial and compliance audits - can significantly enhance the public value of the work of SAIs. As SAIs continue to develop their performance audit capacities, it is important that these competencies be applied to fiscal oversight, public finance audits and budget evaluations to ensure relevance and impact. Furthermore, in addition to conducting comprehensive systemic audits, SAIs can also add value by conducting focused audits on specific risks at the project, programme or entity levels. This approach allows for more agile fiscal oversight, addressing emerging issues.

Additionally, more systematic and structured engagement with stakeholders - both nationally and internationally - around budget oversight and evaluation can amplify the influence of audit work. Such engagement not only supports SAIs in strengthening their institutional capacities, but also ensures that audit insights inform public financial management and SDG processes at the national level and global financing for development dialogues. Showcasing how audit recommendations can drive improvements in public debt management, budget formulation and execution, and the overall use of public resources is essential to demonstrating their value in advancing sustainable development, both at the aggregate and sectoral levels.

Finally, there is also a growing opportunity to better integrate public finance audits with performance audits in specific sectors, particularly in policy areas aligned with national priorities and the SDGs. Audits focused on climate change, the environment, gender equality, and other cross-cutting themes can serve as entry points for such integration, enhancing the coherence and relevance of public finance auditing. The development of targeted guidance, training and capacity-building initiatives, along with a stronger focus on public financial management within ongoing SDG auditing efforts would represent important steps in strengthening SAIs' contributions in this domain.

Advancing equity, equality and inclusion through external audits

Supreme audit institutions have a vital role in advancing the operationalization by Governments of the "leave no one behind" (LNOB) principle of the 2030 Agenda. External audits foster inclusiveness in how public resources are used by examining the degree to which Governments know and are serving their citizens. They also support accountability for Governments' varied commitments to equity, equality and inclusion, including to human rights.

Consideration of the LNOB principle is becoming more prominent in the work of SAIs, which have been supported by IDI since 2016 through sustained efforts to raise awareness of the principle and provide guidance and training to SAIs on how to address it. Audits have addressed the identification and reach of populations left behind from universal services and specific gaps experienced by disadvantaged social groups, and have also mainstreamed an LNOB perspective across audit topics. However, few audits addressing LNOB-related issues have been SDG-focused and whole-of-government. The LNOB principle is also reflected in SAIs' strategic plans, strategies, human resource management, roles and structures, and engagement with non-governmental stakeholders. Nonetheless, there is scope for greater institutionalization of the principle and its integration into audit practice.

Audit reports addressing various aspects of the LNOB principle point to challenges related to: implementation, such as lacking or delayed action; monitoring, evaluation and oversight, including the absence of systematic monitoring, poor data availability and management, and lack of oversight; planning, such as lacking or poorly-aligned plans and inadequate use of information and data; as well as public financial management, including underutilization or misallocation of funds, weak resource planning, and underfunding. Other important challenges relate to staff capacity in Government, institutional coordination, laws and policies, engagement with social groups and communities, and outreach and awareness-raising. Broadly, challenges in these areas reveal insufficient responsiveness to the needs and views of those left behind.

For many SAIs, the depth and breadth of work on equity, equality and inclusion remain limited, and further guidance and opportunities for learning and exchange may be needed in order to enhance and entrench it. In general, LNOB-related audits have addressed important but discrete aspects of equity, equality and inclusion. However, there is scope for more frequent, intentional and broader attention to these issues, such as auditing them from a cross-cutting perspective and integrating consideration of multiple disadvantaged groups. Such approaches would provide novel and critical insights into implementation bottlenecks that could contribute to progress. Supportive leadership, capacity-building, and access to data, as well as international cooperation among SAIs, will underpin and enhance the prospects for audit work focused on equity, equality and inclusion.

The contribution of SAIs to enhanced accountability in climate action

In recent years, SAIs have emerged as important actors in the field of transparency and accountability in national climate action (SDG 13). Since the early 2000s, SAIs have examined

various aspects of climate governance, policy, finance and data. While some SAIs have conducted comprehensive evaluations of national climate strategies and plans, others have focused on sector-specific policies and programmes, such as the energy transition (mitigation) and climate-resilient infrastructure (adaptation). Increasingly, SAIs are undertaking forward-looking audits to inform Governments and legislatures about climate risks and long-standing systemic challenges, helping to place climate change as a long-term national priority requiring the engagement of a broad range of stakeholders.

These audits have revealed a consistent set of institutional barriers that hinder the implementation of SDG 13. Common challenges include inadequate monitoring, evaluation and reporting, often marked by non-compliance with reporting requirements and limited transparency; poor data collection and quality and fragmented data systems; weak coordination across climate policies and institutions; ineffective planning; unclear climate targets and misaligned policy instruments; and insufficient financial resources or poorly designed climate finance instruments.

Recent global initiatives within INTOSAI have played a catalytic role in advancing climate auditing. These initiatives have helped SAIs build their technical capacity, undertake climate audits, and generate actionable insights. In addition, they have contributed to raising the visibility of SAIs in national and international climate processes and to integrating climate considerations more firmly into national policy agendas.

However, despite these advances, several challenges remain. Ensuring the sustainability and quality of climate auditing remains a concern, as does the ability to translate audit evidence into meaningful policy impact. Notably, SAI findings have not yet been systematically integrated into national SDG 13 follow-up and review processes. This gap is partly due to limited recognition of SAIs' role in climate governance, political sensitivities surrounding climate change, shifting and fragmented climate policy agendas, the fragmentation of climate stakeholders, and the disconnect between SDG implementation and climate frameworks in many countries.

Looking ahead, the positioning of SAIs on the climate agenda could benefit from focusing on several critical areas. These include assessing the effectiveness of climate governance; evaluating the availability, quality and integrity of climate data and information; ensuring oversight of adaptation efforts and activities with high greenhouse gas emissions; examining the fiscal implications of climate change, including risks to public financial stability, and tracking climate-related expenditures, subsidies and tax policies that may counteract climate action. Furthermore,

SAIs can play a pivotal role in evaluating the distributional impacts of climate policies, ensuring that issues of equality and inclusion are addressed in climate action.

Beyond SDG 13, SAIs can also support the integration of climate considerations across the broader SDG framework. By leveraging their audits to identify synergies and addressing trade-offs between climate action and interventions in other policy domains—such as health, infrastructure, urban development, anti-corruption, and gender equality—SAIs can help promote more coherent and effective approaches to sustainable development.

Looking forward

Working on the SDGs has changed SAIs, both internally and in the way they position themselves in national accountability systems. Change is likely to continue in coming years, and the novel type of work undertaken by many SAIs since 2016 may keep expanding. The methods, tools and capacities that have been developed to audit the SDGs will remain fully relevant in the context of a post-2030 sustainable development agenda as well as in national contexts, where evaluating the performance of governments in pursuing national sustainable development objectives will continue to be a priority.

However, the continued ability of SAIs to conduct meaningful work on the SDGs is not a given. In this regard, key risks include a loss of traction of the SDGs and limited interest in a sustainable development framework post 2030 at the international level, shifting political priorities at the national level, and, most importantly, threats to SAI independence.

Looking forward, there is potential for greater use of the work of SAIs on SDGs by Governments and other stakeholders. In order to maximize the contribution of SAIs to sustainable development in coming years, national governments, SAIs, and the international community may want to consider the following recommendations.

For Governments:

1. Governments should ensure that SAIs have the necessary independence, mandate, and resources to fulfil their oversight role effectively and be in a position to audit complex and cross-cutting issues that are characteristic of the SDGs. Without institutional independence and adequate capacity, SAIs may be constrained in their ability to provide meaningful oversight of SDG-related processes.
2. Governments could more systematically leverage SAI findings and recommendations, by:

- a. Integrating audit conclusions and recommendations into the design, implementation, and monitoring of national SDG strategies, budgets, and programmes;
- b. Acting on audit recommendations to update laws, regulations, and institutional arrangements that support SDG implementation, both at a whole-of-government level and in areas such as equity, equality and inclusion, climate action, and sound public finance management;
- c. Applying a whole-of-government approach, using SAI insights to coordinate action across sectors, entities and levels of government and ensure that policies are aligned with SDGs and mutually reinforcing.

3. Governments should aim to maximize the contribution of SAIs to national SDG follow-up and review processes. This includes ensuring that audit findings inform national monitoring and reporting systems, and, where appropriate, formally engaging SAIs in voluntary national review processes. Such integration would help enhance the evidence base of national SDG assessments and reinforce accountability.

For supreme audits institutions:

1. INTOSAI, its bodies and member SAIs can continue to expand SDG-related audit work, building on the experience acquired through SDG preparedness and implementation audits and expanding audit coverage to other SDG areas.
2. SAIs should continue to build the skills to apply a whole-of-government approach and consider policy coherence in their SDG-related work. This includes assessing interlinkages, synergies, and trade-offs across policies and ensuring that audit work captures the cross-cutting nature of the SDGs.
3. There is potential for more systematic integration of the “leave no one behind” principle into audit work. SAIs can continue to strengthen attention to the situation of disadvantaged groups, to disparities in access to public services, and to mainstreaming an equity, equality and inclusion perspective across audits, including through cross-cutting approaches and by applying recent audit methodologies and guidance.
4. SAIs should continue to leverage innovative methodologies and tools to expand audit coverage, enhance audit quality, and add value to their work. Among many others, innovations such as the ClimateScanner, the INTOSAI Development Initiative’s SDG audit model (ISAM), data analytics and digital tools

are mentioned by SAIs as important areas of focus in auditing SDGs. Aggregating and consolidating audit findings across audits can provide Governments and stakeholders with deeper insights on budgets, climate action, equity and inclusion, and other topics. Moreover, integrating public finance audits with performance audits in specific sectors can provide additional insights to support more informed decision-making.

5. There is potential for SAIs to expand forward-looking work, including prospective assessments of fiscal sustainability and debt trajectories, the feasibility of national climate commitments, and other long-term risks and opportunities.
6. SAIs can continue to strengthen stakeholder engagement around audits of SDG implementation, engaging with government entities and diverse stakeholders—including parliaments, statistical offices, academia and experts, civil society, and local communities—to enrich audit scope, improve data availability, enhance the relevance of audit findings and increase the impact of audits.
7. Building on the massive efforts undertaken since 2015, the SAI community should continue to invest in capacity development on SDG matters. This includes continuing to build expertise in performance auditing and sustaining the successful model of cooperative audits, which have been acknowledged by SAIs as key enablers in the development of their SDG expertise.
8. The SAI community can continue to promote knowledge sharing and collaboration on SDG auditing. Coordinated audits, regional and global thematic initiatives, and global forums such as the UN/INTOSAI Symposium are some of the many channels that can support further diffusion of the experience of SAIs in auditing the SDGs. Financial and technical support from the INTOSAI Development Initiative and INTOSAI Committees and Regional Organizations will continue to be key in this respect.
9. The SAI community, its donors and institutional partners should continue to support SAIs with limited resources and capacities, particularly those from SIDS and LDCs. This includes tailored capacity-building initiatives that respond to the specific institutional constraints and needs of those SAIs, enabling them to contribute meaningfully to auditing the SDGs.

For the international community:

1. In order to fully benefit from SAIs' insights, the international community, including the United Nations, should continue to engage with INTOSAI and its bodies on matters that are central to SDG implementation, including on the link between public financial management and development outcomes, public debt sustainability, climate action, and the operationalization of the principle of leaving no one behind. Such engagement can help promote the integration of audit evidence into decision-making.
2. United Nations country teams should use relevant work of SAIs on SDG topics to inform country diagnoses and engagement strategies.