The 2030 Agenda in Uruguay: critical aspects of its implementation during the period 2015-2020

La Agenda 2030 en Uruguay: aspectos críticos para su implementación en el periodo 2015-2020[1]

Natalia Millán Acevedo[a], Ignacio Martínez Martínez[*]

[a] *Professor of the Departament of Political Science & Public Administration. Faculty of Political and Social Science. Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Campus de Somosaguas/Pozuelo de Alarcón. Community of Madrid, Spain – nmillana@ucm.es – https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8310-8532*

[*] ***Corresponding author:*** *Professor of the Departament of Political Science & Public Administration. Faculty of Political and Social Science. Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Campus de Somosaguas/Pozuelo de Alarcón. Community of Madrid, Spain– imartine@ucm.es – https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5257-272X*

A B S T R A C T

We are facing a time of multidimensional crisis that demands new policy responses that place sustainable development at the centre. The 2030 Agenda was born in 2015 as a framework for collective action in response to the challenge of the multidimensional crisis, with the aim of serving as a guide for all countries to move towards sustainable development. This article addresses this challenge by studying the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Uruguay between 2015 and 2020. It analyses the deployment of this agenda with reference to six critical areas for the success of the 2030 Agenda: the visions and narratives of the agenda, the institutional framework, the strategic vision, coordination and coherence between actors, the role of civil society and the specific instruments for its implementation. The article focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of this process, highlighting the excessive focus on the dynamics of technocratisation and accountability that can undermine efforts for achieving sustainable development.

Keywords: 2030 Agenda, Uruguay, Sustainable Development, Institutional Design, Public Policy Coherence.

R E S U M E N

Nos encontramos frente a un momento de crisis multidimensional que demanda nuevas respuestas políticas que pongan en el centro al desarrollo sostenible. La Agenda 2030 nace en el año 2015 como un marco para la acción colectiva en respuesta al desafío que representa la crisis multidimensional con el objetivo de servir de guía al conjunto de los países para avanzar hacia un desarrollo sostenible. El presente artículo aborda este desafío a partir del estudio de la implementación de la Agenda 2030 en Uruguay entre 2015 y 2020. Para ello se analiza el despliegue de esta agenda a través del desempeño en seis ejes críticos para el éxito de la Agenda 2030: las visiones y narrativas sobre la agenda, el marco institucional, la visión estratégica, la coordinación y coherencia entre los actores, el papel de la sociedad civil y los instrumentos específicos para su puesta en marcha. El artículo se centra en las fortalezas y debilidades de dicho proceso destacando el excesivo foco en las dinámicas de tecnocratización y rendición de cuentas que pueden desvirtuar el trabajo por el desarrollo sostenible.

Palabras clave: Agenda 2030, Uruguay, Desarrollo Sostenible, Diseño Institucional, Coherencia de Políticas Públicas.

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1. THE 2030 AGENDA: TOWARDS AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH BETWEEN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

We are at a turning point in the history of societies where human activity is calling into question the sustainability of the lives of all living things on the planet (Hickel, 2020; Steffen *et al.*, 2018; United Nations, 2020). In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that we find ourselves in a global society at risk (Beck, 2005) where society's problems have been transnationalised, generating challenges that go beyond the traditional barriers of the nation state and reconfigure the relationships between states, private actors and civil society. This critical juncture is also expressed in the multidimensionality of development processes, affecting the social (Pikkety, 2019; United Nations, 2019a), economic (Sabogal, 2014), political-democratic (Brzezinsky, 2012; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019) and cultural (Kozlarek, 2017) spheres.

Given this scenario, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (hereinafter 2030 Agenda), promoted by the United Nations and signed by 193 countries in 2015, is the most significant international normative fact at the present time. Indeed, the 2030 Agenda, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aims to put people, prosperity, and the planet at the centre of political action, and to promote a global alliance where all actors are committed to sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). As a fundamental framework for promoting sustainable development, the 2030 Agenda possesses important potentialities related mainly to its commitment to multidimensionality, transversality, and the strengthening of the state in a democratic way. However, there are also various risks that are embodied in an excessive process of technocratisation and depoliticisation of political processes (Martínez Osés & Martínez, 2016; Santander, 2020). Nonetheless, it seems clear that the 2030 Agenda can stand as a cooperative and multi-level response to this multidimensional crisis of sustainable development.

In addition to a framework for collective action, the 2030 Agenda presents challenges that cannot be overlooked from a social science perspective. There are several theoretical derivatives that particularly affect Political Science in its dialogue with the field of Development Studies, which have not yet been sufficiently explored, and which underpin work of a mainly empirical nature such as that presented in this research article.

There are various questions of a theoretical nature that arise from the 2030 Agenda and the socio-ecological challenges it enshrines. Among others, it is worth noting the role that this Agenda can play in the challenges that overcoming the biophysical limits of our planet pose for democracy (Lucas, 2022); the challenge of implementing interventionist public policies in the context of transnationalisation, in which the state has lost a significant part of its capacity to respond to citizens' problems and to be the main provider of public goods and satisfaction of rights (Alonso *et al.*, 2022; Rodrik, 2011); and the challenge of the transnationalisation of public policies as a way of deepening democracy within the context of structural limits of the international system (Held, 1997). However, the depth and complexity of many of these questions makes it unfeasible to address them explicitly in a work of this nature. It is pertinent, however, to emphasise the need to deepen our understanding of the dialogue between national political systems and public policies, and the collective action frameworks proposed by the global development agenda. This dialogue, which affects the transnationalisation of politics and the incorporation of the challenge of sustainability from a global perspective for all political actors, regardless of their territorial nature, and which addresses all the aforementioned questions, requires adequate processes of interpretation of the global and comprehensive mandate of the 2030 Agenda at the national level.

The above justifies the present paper, which is devoted to an empirical analysis of the dialogue between this global mandate based on collective action (represented by the 2030 Agenda) and the deployment of public policies favourable to sustainable development, the main theoretical-empirical contribution of this article. At this juncture, this paper analyses key elements for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the Oriental Republic of Uruguay (hereinafter, Uruguay) for the period between 2015 and 2020. All this aims to contribute to the theoretical and practical reflection on the necessary change in political processes, to promote sustainable development and build just, peaceful and sustainable societies, as proposed by the 2030 Agenda. To this end, after this introduction, the second section explains the methodology used, with special emphasis on the fieldwork for the case study; the third section presents and develops the analytical axes on which this research is based; and finally, the fourth section contains some general reflections on the relationship between a normative proposal from the international system, national actors and political processes.

2. METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS: CASE STUDY "URUGUAY AND THE 2030 AGENDA"

This paper is part of a comparative research project on the adoption of the 2030 Agenda by means of the design and implementation of national policies and programmes. To this end, we have opted for a study of a few cases (a total of four) from which to develop a comparative analysis that allows us to draw general and specific conclusions on the implementation of this agenda. In this way, case studies bring a value of complexity to the understanding of the phenomena studied (Ragin, 1987), allow researchers to understand political events (Gillham, 2000), and can incorporate the diversity of processes, contexts and actors specific to each analysis (Lijphart, 2008; Szmolka, 2009).

In addition, this is a study that aims to understand the causal relations that explain the potentialities in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (process tracing), and is part of a type of case study (explaining-outcome) (Beach & Pedersen, 2013). This article presents the case study of Uruguay.

In terms of coherence, the methodological decisions guiding this case study combine the criterion of comparability between the cases with the criterion of pertinence and adaptation of analytical decisions to the characteristics of the selected case.

2.1. Aim and purpose of the study

The object of study of this paper is the implementation process of the 2030 Agenda in Uruguay for the period 2015-2020. This agenda has an important strength related to its multidimen-

sionality and transversality, which represents a turning point in policy proposals related to sustainable development. However, to the extent that the Agenda aims to integrate all the processes, actors and policies that come together in a government, it becomes an object of study that cannot be encompassed in its entirety. For this reason, this case study focuses on institutional processes, mechanisms and initiatives developed by the Uruguayan government to promote the 2030 Agenda between 2015 and 2020, but does not analyse the deployment of different public policies[2].

With regard to the timeframe, it is important to highlight that the period between 2015 and 2020 (the first five years of the Agenda's implementation) coincides with the third government of the leftist coalition Frente Amplio, which governed the country until 2020. For reasons of relevance and analytical coherence, this article does not address the actions promoted by the conservative coalition government (from 2020 onwards). This is due not only to the short period of time to carry out an analysis with sufficient perspective, but also to the fact that this period has coincided with the global crisis of COVID-19, which makes any analysis extremely difficult.

The aim of this paper is therefore to analyse the strategies and mechanisms for implementing the 2030 Agenda in Uruguay between 2015 and 2020, to understand the reasons that determined the degree of progress in its implementation, and to find out which variables of analysis had the greatest influence on the process. The aim is to obtain useful lessons both for the Uruguayan case and for the other countries analysed, which may also be applicable to countries beyond the sample of this research. The purpose of this paper is therefore not only to describe how the implementation process of the 2030 Agenda has taken place in Uruguay, but also to understand the factors that have influenced its implementation, as well as the potentialities and limits of this political process.

It is, therefore, a research work, positioned at the intersection of the fields of Development Studies and Political Science, of an empirical-explanatory nature, but which, although it is not an evaluative work, does not shy away from identifying lessons that may be of interest in the process of implementing the 2030 Agenda.

2.2. Data collection and analysis techniques

To date, there are no documented independent or academic analyses of the implementation process of the 2030 Agenda in Uruguay. The only identified exercises of a similar nature are the *Informes Nacionales Voluntarios* (Voluntary National Reports -VNRs) for the monitoring of the 2030 Agenda, prepared by the Uruguayan government itself. For this reason, the exercise is based on an extensive survey of primary information and analysis of the discourse of these sources, and on contrasting this information with official documents, mainly those mentioned in the VNRs. This work, therefore,

opens a line of analysis on which it provides some findings and raises new research questions. We will return to the latter in the section that closes the paper.

In terms of methodological design, we have opted for qualitative research, based both on a bibliographical and documentary review and on discourse analysis.

For this purpose, the semi-structured interview was used as the main data collection technique. This is a type of standardised, non-programmed method in which the interviewees are exposed to a similar script, but assuming a wide flexibility in the axes that guide the questions (Valles, 2000). As for secondary sources, data analysis techniques were used to study databases, laws, decrees, documents, reports and academic papers. Many of the arguments and conclusions of this paper are therefore based on the findings obtained from the information generated in the fieldwork and, wherever possible, from the triangulation of information sources.

The fieldwork was carried out in Montevideo, between 1 July and 31 August 2021 and 1 June and 31 July 2022, through 29 in-depth interviews and two focus groups conducted by experts on sustainable development issues (Table 1). This sample included actors from the Uruguayan political system, being mainly those responsible for the Frente Amplio government between 2015 and 2020; consultants and researchers who participated in the process of implementing the 2030 Agenda; authorities and professors from the University of the Oriental Republic of Uruguay (hereinafter Udelar); civil society actors (trade unions, companies, and independent experts), and multilateral institutions, such as the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the United Nations, and the Ibero-American General Secretariat (SEGIB). The selection criteria in all cases were based on the search for profiles that were representative of the institutions and organisations that participated in the implementation process of the 2030 Agenda in Uruguay. In the case of consultants, the aim was to have profiles with in-depth knowledge of the 2030 Agenda and a good capacity to analyse the implementation process carried out in Uruguay. Detailed information on the fieldwork, interviews and data collection can be found in the methodological Annex.

Table 1
Summary of the interviews conducted

	Members of government institutions	Udelar researchers	Consultants	Multilateral institutions	Civil society
Number of people interviewed	8	8	6	4	3

Source: own elaboration.

2.3. *Analytical axes: critical elements for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda*

As explained above, this study has followed a process tracing design (Beach & Pedersen, 2013), with the aim of establishing causal relationships that explain the possibilities of progress in

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[2] Although this analysis is also important for understanding the implementation processes of the 2030 Agenda and for broadening the analytical framework of public policies based on processes of the tensions of transnational dynamics and interdependence that have long been called for by different authors (Subirats, 1991), it goes beyond the scope of this article. The analysis of the impact of the 2030 Agenda on the development of concrete policies is addressed in a second phase of the research project in which this article is framed.

the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In this sense, the operationalisation of the research problem has been based on the identification of axes of analysis (the independent variables) that explain the process of implementing the 2030 Agenda (the dependent variable). This identification responds to criteria that combine the comparability of the case studies with specific relevant elements in the 2030 Agenda implementation process. In this regard, the Uruguay case study, the first of the four planned case studies to be carried out, is useful for fine-tuning the identification of criteria. These have been adjusted for the preliminary steps of the case study, especially in the bibliographic and documentary analysis work.

The axes of analysis identified are therefore explanatory variables of the 2030 Agenda implementation process. In no case does this work attempt to cover all the explanatory elements of the 2030 Agenda implementation process, but rather those that have to do with the first phases of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, linked to its interpretation and the institutional, strategic and instrumental decisions for its implementation. Specifically, these variables cover the institutional design for the deployment of the 2030 Agenda, the specific mechanisms for its implementation, as well as discursive and communicative elements for its dissemination, understanding and delivery.

3. THE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS OF THE 2030 AGENDA IN URUGUAY BETWEEN 2015 AND 2020

This section, dedicated to the analysis of the implementation process of the 2030 Agenda in Uruguay, is based on the axes of analysis identified in the process of approaching the problem, in the literature and document review exercise, and in the methodological design (see Methlogical Annex in supplementary online material). The axes of analysis are the following: i) the narratives, visions and readings of the 2030 Agenda, ii) the institutional framework, iii) the strategic vision, iv) dialogue, institutional coordination and policy coherence, v) the role of civil society, and vi) the mechanisms and instruments for the deployment of the 2030 Agenda.

As noted, these analytical axes respond to a theoretical framework that is derived from the convergence of analyses of global and transnational governance and studies on public policy. From this perspective, political processes, even when they take place within the framework of the nation state or sub-state spheres, are the result of transnational dynamics and multi-scalar interdependencies (Beck, 2005; Hadjiisky *et al.*, 2017; Held, 1997). In the field of public policy, both constructivist approaches (Subirats, 1991), as well as certain neo-institutionalist ones, especially those related to normative neo-institutionalism, offer keys to interpretation and analytical openness of interest for the analysis addressed in this paper. They favour a key theoretical triangulation to understand a complex phenomenon such as the tension generated by the meeting of a global agenda and the existence of public policies, and specifically those related to sustainable development, which are highly determined by the logics of path dependence (Aklin & Urpelainen, 2013).

These are critical axes for the development of the 2030 Agenda, which is why adequate performance in all of them is important to advance towards a process of implementation of the agenda that allows for the fulfilment of the SDGs, conceived of a transformative, multidimensional and comprehensive logic. They are also applicable in all the case studies, so they are adapted to the comparative methodology on which this work is based, and the broader research in which it is framed, and will allow the establishment of general conclusions and proposals for improvement in the implementation processes of the 2030 Agenda.

3.1. Narratives, visions and readings of the 2030 Agenda

A fundamental element in addressing the 2030 Agenda, and defining the implementation process, is the narrative linked to the visions and readings of the 2030 Agenda (Martínez Osés & Martínez, 2016; Santander, 2020). The type of narrative and vision of the agenda adopted will largely determine the orientation, scope and depth of its implementation (Martínez, 2020), and will affect other elements such as institutional design or the mechanisms for its implementation.

In this sense, and from the epistemological perspective of the analysis presented here, working for sustainable development requires, in the first instance, a political commitment at the highest level aimed at transforming dynamics and processes in favour of the common good and the conservation of the planet. Thus, moving towards sustainable practices will necessarily entail the reconfiguration of hegemonic power structures that benefit from a highly asymmetrical and unequal system, which implies addressing conflicts, resistance and contradictions as part of the very process of implementing the 2030 Agenda. This is, precisely, a political framework for collective action aimed at sustainable development, which implies a more ambitious conception than the one that perceives it as a technocratic attempt aimed solely at promoting the quality of mechanisms, indicators and instruments and which are, consequently, alien to the conflict between actors involved in the processes of political transformation (Subirats, 1991). Thus, if visions, beliefs and narratives are crucial in political processes to understand the behaviour of actors, it seems essential to dedicate part of this analysis to the intersubjective, symbolic and power processes in the process of implementing the 2030 Agenda between 2015 and 2020.

It is important to highlight, considering the analysis of the Uruguayan case, that there seems to be a marked consistency between the political programme, official narratives and values that guided the Frente Amplio government and the political proposal of the 2030 Agenda. Although it is true that the Agenda is broad, and at times deliberately ambiguous (giving administrations the option of adopting it independently of their political orientation), the contents it proposes (as well as its Goals and Targets) are oriented towards generating processes of strengthening the capacities of the state to reconfigure public policies in terms of sustainable development. In this sense, the fulfilment of a vision encapsulating the different objectives of the agenda, and their interconnections, is favoured by the existence of a strong state with the capacity to intervene in markets, which is coherent with the political-narrative project of the Frente Amplio (Frente Amplio National Programme Commission, 2018). This provid-

ed an important opportunity for the Planning and Budget Office (PBO) —which, as we will see, is the central piece for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Uruguay— to promote the 2030 Agenda within the government, and also helped to reduce some of the resistance and inertia that SDG-related processes could sometimes bring to bear.

However, the existence of a solid state structure and a vision favourable to the 2030 Agenda, although they seem to be necessary conditions, are not sufficient to guarantee the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The Uruguayan case confirms that politics is constructed of visions, ideas, values and interests, and these define, in a very important way, the possibility, or otherwise, of advancing the transformation processes. To understand the good and bad points of the case studied, it is necessary to understand that there was a personal commitment to the 2030 Agenda on the part of the PBO director, and that this was the fundamental driving force in the work for development during these years. However, the shift of conflicts in favour of the principles and objectives of sustainable development over other agendas and political objectives requires a greater political commitment, with the capacity to reach the whole of government (Mackie *et al.*, 2017).

The more favourable visions of the 2030 Agenda represented by the PBO were divergent from those of other ministries, especially the Ministry of Economy and Finance, which seems to have had a more liberal view of economic development and was therefore less favourable to the intervention and planning processes promoted by the PBO. In the face of this tension, the presidency did not own the importance of the 2030 Agenda with the same political commitment, which was relevant when it came to deciding on public visions and decisions, and as a result, the Uruguayan process of implementing the 2030 Agenda was weakened.

3.2. The institutional framework for the deployment of the 2030 Agenda

A second element of great importance in the implementation processes of the 2030 Agenda, and therefore also in its analysis, is the institutional sphere. This axis of analysis addresses the existence, or otherwise, of an institutional design for the promotion of the 2030 Agenda and the institutions responsible for its implementation (UNDESA, 2020).

In the Uruguayan case, the institutional mandate for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda had the PBO as the main agent. In addition, this system had two main partners: the National Statistics Institute (INE) and the Uruguayan Agency for International Cooperation (AUCI) (Presidencia de Uruguay, 2017a). These three institutions are part of the Office of the Presidency.

Based on the mandate received, the PBO developed mechanisms to promote the 2030 Agenda with four main types of actors: i) ministries, which are part of the government and with which there was fluid communication; ii) departmental governments, actors with whom strategies were developed to deliver the 2030 Agenda in specific periods of time[3]; iii) civil society

organisations with which there were various instances of communication in the form of dialogue sessions, consultancies and informal communications; and iv) international organisations, mainly from the United Nations that worked to support the PBO and the Government in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

From this mandate, a system for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Uruguay was established that did not imply institutional changes with respect to the pre-existing scheme, but rather granted functions to different institutions and contemplated relations with different actors (Figure 1).
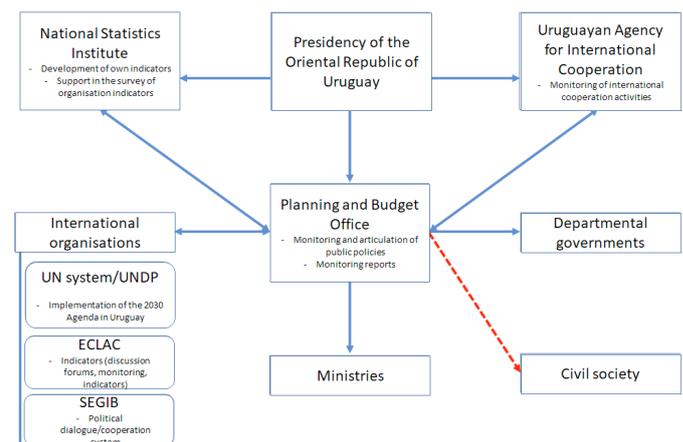

Figure 1
Institutional scheme for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Uruguay between 2015 and 2020

Source: own elaboration based on the Government of Uruguay (2017) and information obtained in the fieldwork.

It is important to highlight the role of the PBO as the main promoter of the 2030 Agenda in Uruguay. This institution, which has the rank of Ministry in the Uruguayan Public Administration, has cross-cutting functions that are mainly related to the definition of the economic and social strategy and the formulation of national programmes and policies (Bértola *et al.*, 2018). Given that the 2030 Agenda is, by its very definition, multidimensional and comprehensive, the PBO denotes important strengths to take on this work that are related to: i) the commitment to a multidimensional vision of development (García, 2018); ii) the capacity for influencing public policies and processes; iii) the important commitment to planning and foresight during the 2015-2020 period; iv) the continuous work to promote the country's decentralisation; and v) the capacity to evaluate public policies.

The history, characteristics, visions, competences and capacities of the PBO seem well suited to take on such a complex task as the promotion of the 2030 Agenda. It is an office created from the belief that the state is the main actor in development planning and, consequently, strong public administrations must be created that can actively intervene in political and market processes (Bértola *et al.*, 2018). Within this framework, the PBO stands out for its significant competences that were enhanced in 2015 with the reinstatement of the Planning Office and the processes of the 2050 Development Strategy. Additionally, the PBO is a cross-cutting actor within the Uruguayan government,

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[3] According to Uruguayan government documents, 11 Agenda implementation processes were launched in a total of 17 departmental governments. These processes made it possible to advance the dissemination of the 2030 Agenda and develop their own delivery methodology (Freigedo *et al.*, 2020).

which allows it access to various ministries and decentralised governments, acquiring an overview of sustainable development policies. All of this has been reflected in the successful management of the Organisation's VNRs and its active role in promoting the 2030 Agenda within the Uruguayan government.

However, the political commitment generated in favour of the 2030 Agenda was fundamentally limited to the PBO and, in particular, to the director of this institution. In this connection, it is worth remembering that policies are generated by people and their own visions, interests and motivations within a structural framework that determines the conditions of possibility for promoting political change. In the case of Uruguay, this leadership was crucial to understanding the momentum given to the 2030 Agenda in the country. However, it is not evident that this commitment was shared with the same intensity by the rest of the government ministries, nor by the office of the President of the Republic itself, according to the fieldwork carried out during this research. In this regard, it is worth reflecting that, as sustainable development is an extremely ambitious and complex transformation process that generates high levels of resistance when it comes to implementation, it requires political ownership at the highest level, a phenomenon that was not witnessed in Uruguay during the period analysed.

If the PBO played the central role in the governance and implementation process, two other institutions were relevant in shaping the institutional framework most involved in the mandate to promote the 2030 Agenda. On the one hand, the cooperation system, specifically through the AUCI, was a highly inspiring and promoting actor in assuming a commitment to the SDGs. On the other hand, the INE played a fundamental role in the systematisation of indicators. It should be remembered that the cooperation system is an institution with knowledge and experience in the field of sustainable development, and it is desirable that it acts as an initiator of processes such as the 2030 Agenda, while at the same time needing an actor with political and technical legitimacy to assume this responsibility, as in the case of the PBO. Therefore, the combination of these actors, their complementarity and their political position in the Uruguayan public administration, were decisive in the Uruguayan experience.

In this institutional system, in addition to the central role of the PBO, different international organisations played a very important role. In terms of these, there were three fundamental actors, ranked in order of importance: i) the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which formed part of the Agenda's implementation processes at both national and decentralised levels; ii) the ECLAC, where a fundamental Latin American space for accountability, information exchange and indicator monitoring was generated; iii) various UN Agencies that participated with Uruguayan public administrations in specific programmes; and iv) SEGIB, which is configured as a space for political dialogue that also has a unit dedicated to the Agenda's issues.

Finally, and unlike what has happened in other countries[4], the institutions related to the legislative branch did not play a relevant role in the deployment of the 2030 Agenda in Uruguay, nor were they part of the institutional framework for its fulfilment. This is a relevant issue, as it is a long-term agenda in which stability and long-term agreements favour the conditions for achieving lasting progress in the fulfilment of the SDGs.

On the contrary, interventions by the Parliament were quite limited and spaces for dialogue with the political opposition were not developed, which should be regarded as an important weakness, in the sense that the 2030 Agenda demands long-term public policies that transcend political cycles and partisan visions.

3.3. *The strategy for the deployment of the 2030 Agenda*

Closely related to institutional decisions is the strategic commitment to comply with the 2030 Agenda. Insofar as it is a complex, multidimensional, multi-stakeholder and multi-level agenda that challenges all the policies of a given government, it requires the development of a strategic approach (accompanied by sufficient material and human resources) for its implementation.

This situation, however, was not clear in the case of Uruguay. On the contrary, there was a clear lack of an overall strategic vision in relation to the 2030 Agenda, as well as a lack of budget and specific mechanisms for its development. This has been a weakness of the Uruguayan process.

It should be noted, however, that in 2015 the Planning Directorate of the PBO was re-established in Uruguay with the aim of installing new public policy agendas with the participation of civil society (García, 2018). The most significant contribution in this framework was the presentation, in 2019, of the 2050 Development Strategy (Presidencia de Uruguay, 2019b). The Strategy sets out a vision of sustainable development adapted to the frameworks and proposal presented by the 2030 Agenda, incorporating social, economic, environmental, institutional and gender elements into the vision of development and establishing development planning as a core element of any political process (Presidencia de Uruguay 2019a: 19). In addition, a comprehensive and cross-cutting development planning system was established through a Decree Law (Gobierno de Uruguay, 2019), to foster better coordination between predictive, strategic planning and the different levels of planning (Presidencia de Uruguay, 2019b).

From a sustainable development perspective, deploying a long-term strategy accompanied by a cross-cutting planning system is a process that is conducive to promoting sustainability, fostering policy coherence, establishing a democratic and sovereign position on sustainable development, and providing for a public policy planning system. In other words, if this process had been sustained[5], it could have been a turning point for progress on the 2030 Agenda and sustainable development and, therefore, a strength of the Uruguayan government in terms of the object of study under analysis.

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[4] See in this regard the Voluntary National Reports of countries such as Argentina and Colombia, which consider the role of Parliament in advancing the 2030 Agenda.

[5] The government established in Uruguay in 2020 has not taken on board the 2050 Development Strategy and, in fact, the Planning Directorate of the PBO (Ministerio de Economía y Finanzas, 2020) has been dismantled.

However, it is worth mentioning that this process had certain limitations mainly related to the lack of human resources in the Planning Directorate, which limited the competences to integrate all aspects of this Strategy, relying excessively on external consultancies and advisors. In addition, the planning cycle of the 2050 Development Strategy was relatively detached from the monitoring process of the 2030 Agenda, and the elaboration of the VNRs, although both were located within the PBO.

For all these reasons, although the elaboration of the 2050 Development Strategy and its subsequent development constituted a context of great opportunity for the promotion of the 2030 Agenda in Uruguay, in practice it lacked its own long-term strategic framework with the capacity to guide public action by the different Uruguayan institutions and actors.

3.4. *Inter-institutional dialogue and inter-ministerial coordination*

Calls for concerted action and the need for policy coherence with sustainable development are present in the 2030 Agenda and in the literature generated around it (United Nations, 2015; Futuro en Común, 2018; UNDESA, 2020). To this end, it is important to have an inter-institutional dialogue, to coordinate actions between different areas of government and ministries, and to assume the principle of coherence of public policies with sustainable development[6].

During the process of delivering the 2030 Agenda in Uruguay, however, the participation by the rest of the government ministries was not contemplated, nor were spaces for articulation with local governments provided. As the discourse from the fieldwork reveals, this meant a heterogeneous political commitment, with actors with diverse visions and interests, which made the process of implementing the 2030 Agenda from a common perspective (whole of government approach) complex.

The Uruguayan administration is structured around relatively vertical and compartmentalised governance processes, with limited instances of coordination and consultation between political actors. Despite the fact that, as discussed below, the elaboration of the VNRs (the main instrument for monitoring the 2030 Agenda) necessarily demanded processes of information exchange and dialogue, the organisational culture was hierarchical and vertical, where each ministry seemed to have its own political agenda and their own loci of power.

This view of public policy, derived from Weberian bureaucratic rationality, seems particularly pernicious for the dynamics proposed by the 2030 Agenda, which imply a cross-cutting view of political processes. There is therefore a significant gap between the political proposal put forward by the Agenda and the institutional, political and cultural structure of the Uruguayan government. This fact, together with the lack of political own-ership by the presidency of the government, explains to a large extent the variable commitment to the Agenda that can be observed in the different ministries, where the Ministry of Economy and Finance did not seem to have developed any political or technical development of its own in favour of the 2030 Agenda.

Aside from this case, there is a culture of compartmentalised government in Uruguay, where each ministry is itself a power structure with its own agenda, interests, objectives and processes, and where spaces for coordination and dialogue, although they exist, are relatively limited.

The 2030 Agenda, insofar as it proposes a holistic, cross-cutting, multidimensional and participatory perspective, poses a real challenge to this way of managing public affairs, as it contradicts the codified rules and histories that have been collectively constructed in the Uruguayan public administration. Therefore, in broad terms, the 2030 Agenda seems to have been configured as a normative fact that engaged in a conflictive manner with the national dimensions structured by ministries and which involve specific competences, autonomous power logics and reduced spaces for dialogue, coordination and collaboration.

3.5. *The role of civil society*

The role of civil society is important not only in the development and monitoring of the 2030 Agenda, but is also a key element in the process of interpretation and grounding of the Agenda in a given territory and political community. The degree of ambition and the possibilities of transformation from the implementation of the 2030 Agenda will depend on how this interpretation is produced, based on the mandate that emanates from it. Therefore, although complex, the dialogues and negotiations between different social groups and the government and institutions are decisive for advancing the democratic implementation of the 2030 Agenda (Futuro en Común, 2018). Not surprisingly, the Agenda is presented as a multi-stakeholder and multi-level alternative, which requires stable and formal mechanisms for the promotion and monitoring of political processes aimed at sustainable development.

However, despite the relevance of this issue, the role of Uruguayan civil society throughout the deployment of the 2030 Agenda was relatively limited. The institutional framework for the promotion of the 2030 Agenda in Uruguay did not have a participation and consultation body that allowed for the integration of diverse actors, the development of continuous consultation and monitoring processes, and the availability of diverse (and sometimes critical) views that contrast and complement the government's vision.

As opposed to a structured and regulated participation proposal, a more timely and reactive type of participation was chosen. In this sense, the PBO carried out several consultations with civil society during 2016 and 2017 through the Social Dialogue Forum (Presidencia de Uruguay, 2017b), and from then on, relations with social actors were informal, or through consultancies with social researchers and actors from the Udelar (especially for the elaboration of the VNRs).

This is therefore a weakness of the institutional design in the promotion of the Agenda, which drastically restricts civil society's potential to energise and promote it, and calls into question

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[6] There are several references to policy coherence in the document *Transformar nuestro mundo: la Agenda 2030 para el Desarrollo Sostenible* (Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development), which gives substance to the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs (Naciones Unidas, 2015). Furthermore, one of the most relevant targets of this agenda, target 17.14, points to the need to put in place mechanisms to improve policy coherence with sustainable development (Naciones Unidas, 2017).

the areas of political participation and democratic quality that are fundamental to mechanisms aimed at promoting sustainable development.

3.6. *Mechanisms and instruments for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda*

As noted in the previous sections, the implementation of the 2030 Agenda requires various initiatives and proposals that imply the setting up of institutional mechanisms and political dialogue, as well as the development of a strategic framework to be operationalised.

In addition to this, it is also necessary to put in place specific instruments —financing, management, implementation, monitoring, communication, among others— for the development of policies and actions aimed at meeting the challenges presented by the agenda; otherwise, the failure to deploy instruments to guide policies towards the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda constitutes a passive and continuist approach to it. This is an approach that loses sight of the fact that the SDGs represent an opportunity to transform public policies towards a greater commitment to sustainable development. In this case, in the case of the continuist vision, the 2030 Agenda is reduced to merely a useful agenda to make visible the actions carried out in favour of sustainable development, which means emptying the 2030 Agenda of its transformative content to prioritise its legitimising effect.

In the Uruguayan case, no specific mechanism was developed for the promotion of the Agenda. According to the fieldwork carried out and the documentation analysed, the framework of instruments for the promotion of the 2030 Agenda in Uruguay was mainly oriented towards the development of the VNRs[7].

In this way, the VNRs are fundamental in this case study insofar as, in the absence of other government documents on the 2030 Agenda, or other instruments to promote and monitor its fulfilment, these reports are, in practice, the only documents that take an official position on the issue. At the same time, they are also the main instruments for their fulfilment. However, these documents are mainly oriented to account for Uruguay's progress with respect to the SDGs, without explaining in detail the guidelines, strategies, processes and practices of transformation over and above accountability.

This fact denotes a reactive implementation process of the Agenda, i.e., once the 2030 Agenda was signed and there was a commitment to implement it, the main effort seemed to be oriented towards accountability and highlighting SDG achievements, but not towards a political transformation in terms of sustainable development. Hence, the contents were aimed at identifying the state of play, the experience in the implementation of public policies (both at the state and decentralised level) the integration of the SDGs in the national budget and the presentation of activities for the promotion and dissemination of the Agenda (Presidencia de Uruguay, 2017a;

Presidencia de Uruguay, 2018a; Presidencia de Uruguay, 2019a)[8].

In this regard, it is possible to observe in the Uruguayan process important potentialities derived from the process of elaboration of the VNRs that are mainly related to: i) an important dynamic of dissemination and promotion of the Agenda within ministries and public administrations; ii) the promotion of spaces for coordination between different actors where the 2030 Agenda was discussed; iii) the promotion of various spaces for dialogue with civil society (although, as explained, in a timely, non-systematic manner); iv) the development of a methodology that allows government actors to carry out a diagnosis of the SDGs in Uruguay; v) the optimisation of the system of indicators proposed by the INE, which also allowed for the incorporation of its own indicators.

In contrast, the centrality of the VNRs in the Uruguayan system seems to distance itself from the spirit in which the United Nations 2030 Agenda was designed. The central aim of the 2030 Agenda was to promote a change of perspective to place sustainable development at the centre of public action and to transform policies, actors and processes. In this framework, the VRNs should have been the result of a transformation process and not, as in the Uruguayan case, the final objective of the Agenda's implementation system. This dynamic seems to have endowed the Uruguayan system with a technocratic and depoliticised character, of a continuist nature, and with an excessive tendency towards accountability, whilst at the same time disregarding the political process of transformation implied by the 2030 Agenda.

In short, the concentration of a significant part of the Uruguayan system's efforts to prepare the VRNs was far from generating a multidimensional, transversal and comprehensive transformation process as demanded by the 2030 Agenda. This does not, however, prevent us from affirming that Uruguay has been extremely efficient in the elaboration of these reports and that this dynamic has meant important advances for sustainable development in terms of dissemination, promotion, participation and coordination.

Even so, to advance towards a transformative implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the VNRs cannot occupy the role of the main instrument for implementing the Agenda, as in the case of Uruguay. All of this leads us to point out an important risk in the implementation of the Agenda (which also goes beyond the Uruguayan case), that is related to visualising the SDGs as a technical recipe and framework for accountability, rather than as a complex and multidimensional political transformation dynamic that necessarily involves political conflict (Martínez Osés & Martínez, 2016; Santander, 2020).

4. FINAL REFLECTIONS: MAIN POTENTIALS, LIMITS AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE CASE STUDY

An increasingly abundant analytical literature on the 2030 Agenda points to the existence of different approaches to this

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[7] In the period between 2016 and 2020, Uruguay produced three VNRs. Subsequently, in 2021, under the next government, it submitted a new report, making it the country with the highest number of VNRs submitted in the region.

[8] The 2021 VRN has not been included in this analysis, since it corresponds to the new political cycle (2020-2025) which, for methodological reasons already explained, does not form part of the analysis of this paper.

agenda throughout the implementation process. On the one hand, we observe critical and transformative interpretations of the 2030 Agenda, based on a diagnosis of a multidimensional crisis; this demands a profound change in public policies and in the practices of the different actors to move towards a model of global coexistence capable of guaranteeing the sustainability of life. On the other hand, and for the most part, the 2030 Agenda, especially when addressing implementation processes, is conceived of as a discursive framework in which to align specific initiatives and to guide political communication and accountability exercises. In this respect, these are continuist and mostly technocratic approaches to the 2030 Agenda (Martínez, 2020).

Considering the research work carried out, the empirical evidence seems to confirm that the "Uruguayan way" is framed within the continuist visions, insofar as the agenda did not entail a significant change in institutional designs and in the mandate for developing public policies. All of this occurred despite the existence of a favourable context for the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda and the evident efforts made for its deployment, which made possible the presence of some elements (especially narrative) of the most transformative model.

This statement, and based on what has been analysed so far, allows us to reflect on the political dimension of the 2030 Agenda and its close relationship with political cycles, power structures and the intersubjective elements (values, ideas, interests) that construct and transform reality. According to the analytical framework of this research, progress in the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda from a transformative perspective is only possible through the strengthening of the state and the implementation of institutional, strategic and instrumental decisions that favour the implementation of public policies aimed at redistribution, the protection of human rights, and the promotion of an eco-

nomic system that develops in harmony with the planet. In this way, the 2030 Agenda requires democratic political projects that are committed to state intervention in the economy, control of markets and the promotion of the common good over the interests of capital.

In the case of Uruguay, it is worth noting that this political vision was shared by the Frente Amplio government, which allowed it to implement a significant range of mechanisms to promote the Agenda while reducing possible resistance and limitations on the part of various political actors within the government.

The analysis carried out shows different degrees of progress and depth in the different axes of analysis. Far from showing homogeneous progress in all of them, Uruguay shows great heterogeneity in the progress on the different factors that, in the framework of this research, have been identified as determinants for progress in the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda.

Narratives, visions, interests and values shape political actors and define, to a large extent, behaviour and processes oriented towards sustainable development. As can be seen in the case of Uruguay, there are noteworthy elements, such as discursive coherence with sustainable development, the establishment of a 2050 Development Strategy and the work of various actors to advance these parameters; in contrast, the absence of political commitment from the Presidency, the top-down organisational culture, the heterogeneity of agendas and visions of the ministries, and the absence of mechanisms for the deployment of the 2030 Agenda, have hindered the process of political transformation that sustainable development and the scope of the SDGs entail. To conclude, Table 1 illustrates the most important contributions of the Uruguay case study, as well as the causal relationships found in the analysis.

Table 2
Synthesis of the potentialities, limits and lessons learned in the Uruguayan case based on the main lines of analysis

Relevant elements for the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda	Contributions from the Uruguay case study
Main potentialities	PBO political commitment to the 2030 Agenda. Stakeholders committed to sustainable development (AUCI, INE, PBO). Skills and characteristics of the PBO.
Main limits	Orientation towards technocratisation and bureaucratisation of the 2030 Agenda process. Lack of political ownership of the presidency and other ministries. Compartmentalised and vertical institutional system. Limited political participation and dialogue with civil society. Polarisation and inability to implement development policies that transcend electoral cycles. Excessive weight of accountability instruments.
Main lessons learned	The 2030 Agenda is a framework for collective action for sustainable development, but not an ex ante transformative framework for policy processes. The political cycle (ideas, visions, values) is fundamental to the progress of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. The 2030 Agenda demands political commitment at the highest political level. There is a tension between the comprehensive mandate of the 2030 Agenda and the existence of a sectoralised administrative structure that is very difficult to overcome. The 2030 Agenda is an international normative fact that dialogues in a conflicting way with national structures.

Source: own elaboration.

5. SUPPLEMENTARY FILE

A supplementary file with a methodological annex can be accessed at the following URL: https://ojs.ehu.eus/index.php/CG/article/view/24946/23134

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