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The Sustainable Development Goals as a Transformative Force?

Key Insights

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The scope of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals is unprecedented. So is the broad ambition expressed in this agreement. While the United Nations has rarely shied away from declaring far-reaching policy aspirations in the past, the 2030 Agenda sets the bar high – possibly higher than it has ever been before, with ambitious goals to end hunger and poverty while simultaneously reducing unsustainable consumption and protecting the natural foundations of life on earth. The Sustainable Development Goals also add new areas of policy ambition that have not been promoted in this form before, such as reducing global and national inequalities or promoting good governance, both now enshrined as stand-alone global policy goals.

And yet we need to ask: Have these 17 goals helped to steer governments, civil society or corporations towards sustainable development? Have actors, from global to local levels, adjusted their course of action because of the global goals that the United Nations General Assembly set in 2015? If evidence on these questions were positive, this would support those who argue that 'governance through global goals' can work – that the global agreement of ambitious goals can steer policies and change behaviours even when they lack legal force, institutionalization and large funding and are not preceded by major reforms in political and economic structures (Kanie and Biermann 2017). If the goals had steered political systems and societies towards sustainability over the last few years, goal-setting as a global political strategy could be expanded. More goals could be set, the ambition further raised, and slowly but steadily the world would transition towards sustainability.

Yet, is there evidence of such steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals? What is the state of knowledge in the social sciences about this important question that is relevant for both global governance and global sustainability? Did the non-legally binding, often qualitative and ambiguous global goals and targets show normative force in shaping the policies of governments,

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international organizations, civil society, businesses, universities and so forth? Is there evidence for such steering effects – or is it all business-as-usual and the global goals are nothing more than the fading smoke of a 2015 firework of noble ideas and enthusiastic engagement, but in the end also delusion and collective self-deceit?

This assessment has been designed to answer these questions by taking stock of the first seven years of research on the steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals. As we explained in Chapter 1, the assessment relies on the collective work of sixty-one governance scholars who have thoroughly analysed the body of scientific literature on the steering effects of the global goals and the 2030 Agenda, organized around six dimensions. Overall, more than 3,000 scientific articles have been reviewed for this study.

Here we bring all insights together in an overarching conclusion of what the social sciences have revealed, so far, about the steering effects of the global goals. We organize this final discussion following the structure of this book and its six main chapters.

Global Governance

We start with analysing the steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals on the international political landscape, that is, the United Nations system of programmes, agencies and other institutions. We do so because the Sustainable Development Goals are primarily a product of this global policy system. They emanate from United Nations processes, and even though they are to be implemented at all levels, the United Nations should play a key role in achieving the goals, especially providing multilateral leadership and guidance (Beisheim 2020). Since international organizations lack institutional power and financial resources to have a strong direct impact on the policies of governments and local actors, scholars have emphasized that international organizations could function here as 'orchestrators' (Abbott et al. 2015; Abbott, Bernstein and Janzwood 2020; Bernstein 2017). In this view, international organizations act like conductors in a concert hall or at least offer the arrangements that aim to bring out harmonious effects; in this way organizations steer the actors, like musicians in a concert, in synergistic directions with a harmonious symphony as result. But have the United Nations and other international organizations orchestrated global governance towards the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals? What have been the steering effects of the global goals on international agencies in the first place – did international organizations within and beyond the United Nations change their policies and programmes after 2015 because of the Sustainable Development Goals? (See Chapter 2 for more detail.)

In the practice of international organizations, the effects of the Sustainable Development Goals have been largely discursive.

First, the literature suggests a mismatch between the formal aspirations of the United Nations to promote the Sustainable Development Goals as central guidelines in global governance and the limited transformative outcomes. Research indicates that even though the goals might have helped create a few new institutional arrangements and that many organizations have formally aligned their work with the global goals, actual reforms in the operations of international organizations since 2015 have been modest. Changes are largely discursive with limited practical effects thus far (e.g., Schnitzler, Seifert and Tataje 2020). While the governance principles that underpin the Sustainable Development Goals – such as universality, coherence, integration, and 'leaving no one behind' – have changed the discourse in multilateral institutions, there is no strong evidence that the Sustainable Development Goals have had a transformative impact on global governance practices (e.g., Kloke-Lesch 2021; Pérez-Pineda and Wehrmann 2021; Rudolph 2017). Specifically, the literature provides little evidence that the Sustainable Development Goals have had transformative effects on the mandates, practices or resource allocation of international organizations and institutions within the United Nations system (Weinlich et al. 2022).

The High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development has not lived up to expectations of becoming an 'orchestrator' in global governance.

As part of a larger reform following the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, governments decided to terminate the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development and to establish in its place a High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. This new forum was meant to function as a regular meeting place for governments and non-state representatives to assess global progress towards sustainable development and, after 2015, to review the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. The creation of this overarching institution for sustainability governance, involving high-level government representatives, was also expected to enhance system-wide coherence in the follow-up and progress reviews under the 2030 Agenda.

The literature indicates that the High-level Political Forum has not lived up to these expectations. The forum has failed to act as an orchestrator to promote system-wide coherence. The reasons for this include its broad and unclear mandate combined with a lack of resources and a lack of political leadership owing to divergent national interests (e.g., Amanuma et al. 2019; Beisheim 2020; Brimont and Hege 2020; Monkelbaan 2019). The forum has not provided political

leadership and effective guidance for achieving the 2030 Agenda (e.g., Beisheim 2018; Dimitrov 2020; Hege, Chabason and Barchiche 2020). Recent reform discussions did not change this (Beisheim 2021).

The United Nations sought to build on the 2030 Agenda by providing system-wide guidance to the United Nations development system and by authorizing normative reforms and initiating institutional changes. Some of them are far-reaching but not transformational, mostly because of governments' incoherent signals in the governing bodies and funding practices that impede integrated approaches at scale (e.g., Golding 2021; Gruener and Hammergren 2021; Samarasinghe 2021; Weinlich et al. 2020).

The United Nations Environment Programme and the United Nations Environment Assembly, formally mandated to catalyse cooperation for environmental policies, have also not been able to expand their leadership following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda. The polycentric nature of global environmental governance, with more than one thousand multilateral environmental agreements, continues to limit institutional change in this field and system-wide coherence, especially regarding transboundary environmental problems (e.g., Chasek and Downie 2021; Elder and Olsen 2019; Ivanova 2020; Urho et al. 2019).

The Sustainable Development Goals initiated peer-learning among governments.

Some studies suggest that the Sustainable Development Goals and the High-level Political Forum initiated, and served as a platform for, peer-learning among governments. They also offered some new opportunities for non-state and sub-national actors to become involved in global sustainability governance (e.g., Amanuma et al. 2019; Beisheim 2020; Beisheim and Bernstein 2020). At the annual sessions of the High-level Political Forum, for instance, governments present Voluntary National Reviews on their measures to implement the Sustainable Development Goals. This process has enabled some non-confrontational peer-learning among governments (Beisheim 2020). In addition, non-governmental organizations, which are invited as observers to these meetings, perform public review functions by delivering statements or posing questions to government delegates, and by publicly disclosing their critique through their networks. Yet, there is no robust evidence that peer-learning and voluntary reporting has steered governments and other actors in the direction of structural and transformative change towards sustainable development.

Some evidence suggests that the Sustainable Development Goals influence multilateral development organizations and finance and trade institutions beyond the United Nations. One mechanism to involve international organizations is the 'custodianships' through which international organizations have agreed to lead the

development and review of some of the 231 indicators set to operationalize the global goals. For example, it seems that a joint custodianship of international organizations increases cooperation among these organizations and augments policy coherence (van Driel et al. 2021).

Observable changes often reflect long-term trajectories not causally linked to the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Certain ambitions of the Sustainable Development Goals have been part of reform debates in global governance for a long time, for example, the reform of the United Nations development system and the need to increase institutional integration and policy coherence for sustainability. Yet, it is difficult to identify in the literature robust change in long-term trends that could be causally related to the launch of the global goals in 2015. The goals had some discursive effects, and reform processes are now often justified and legitimized by referring to them. Nevertheless, studies hardly ever detect clear, unidirectional causality that any major reform processes have been initiated because of the goals.

Implementation at Multiple Levels

The Sustainable Development Goals must eventually be implemented in domestic political contexts through policies and programmes enacted by governments and public agencies with support and engagement of non-state actors. Governments have to formulate and implement demanding sustainability strategies that may range from conventional hierarchical steering to novel governance mechanisms. Cities and regional authorities need to design and implement concrete projects to localize the goals within their political frameworks and capacities. The corporate sector is often seen as an important actor as well, not least as financier of sustainable development projects. Civil society plays a significant role in agenda-setting, raising awareness and monitoring progress towards achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. In short, the success of the goals requires all actors to collaborate in an effective system of multilevel governance. Can we observe any such effects of the global goals at domestic level? (See Chapter 3 for more detail.)

The degree of policy change at country level varies, with sub-national authorities and non-state actors often assuming pioneering roles.

There is some evidence indeed that diverse actors at multiple governance levels have become active in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. The performance of national governments varies, however, and most countries lag

behind in implementing the global goals. Some evidence suggests that sub-national authorities, and especially cities, are sometimes more pioneering and progressive than their central governments in building coalitions for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. We see indications of an increased interest and participation of corporate actors in sustainable development through public–private partnerships, even though the effectiveness of such arrangements is still uncertain. In several national political systems, civil society actors have begun to hold public actors accountable for their commitments to realize the vision of 'leaving no one behind'. The growing role of actors beyond national governments suggests an emerging multifaceted and multilayered approach to implementing the 2030 Agenda (e.g., Björkdahl and Somun-Krupalija 2020; Horn and Grugel 2018; Valencia et al. 2019).

Domestic steering effects are observable largely at the discursive level.

Evidence suggests that political effects of the Sustainable Development Goals have remained largely at the discursive level. For instance, governments increasingly refer to the goals in official policy documents and take part in the voluntary review of their performance in the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (Bexell and Jönsson 2019). Sub-national authorities refer to the Sustainable Development Goals in their communications; corporate actors use language of the 2030 Agenda in their reports, and civil society organizations emphasize the goals in their campaigns (e.g., Banik and Lin 2019; Francis, Henriksson and Stewart 2020; Horn and Grugel 2018). We also found some relational effects, in particular in new or strengthened public–private partnerships and in terms of local collaborative governance (Mawdsley 2018).

These references to the Sustainable Development Goals in the political debate over the last seven years could be a first step towards more far-reaching transformational changes. Examples in some countries are the creation or reform of institutions to promote the global goals or the formation of new relationships and partnerships. In the coming years, this slowly changing discourse could lead to accelerated public and private funding for the implementation of the goals. As of the time of writing, however, it remains uncertain whether the observable discursive effects of the Sustainable Development Goals signal a first phase of deep transformation towards sustainable development or whether their impact will remain mainly at the discursive level until 2030.

Institutional change often replicates existing priorities and trajectories.

Many countries have begun to integrate Sustainable Development Goals in their public administrative system. Some governments have designated bodies or

formed new units and departments that are responsible for implementing the goals. Many of these institutions, however, seem to merely reproduce earlier structures and priorities of governments or lack institutional power to bring about transformative changes towards sustainable development (e.g., Morita, Okitasari and Masuda 2020; Tosun and Leininger 2017). Evidence suggests a selective implementation of those global goals that governments had previously prioritized in their political agendas (e.g., Forestier and Kim 2020), with the result that the 2030 Agenda merely reproduces existing agendas without engendering transformative change. This underlines the importance of actors outside national governments to work towards a more holistic and more transformative implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, for instance, by showing examples of how to innovative realize the goals locally.

There is limited evidence for the mobilization of additional funding.

There is hardly any evidence that governments significantly reallocate funding to implement the Sustainable Development Goals, neither for national implementation nor international cooperation. The global goals do not seem to have changed public budgets and financial allocation mechanisms in any significant way. There is evidence, however, for limited resource effects of the Sustainable Development Goals in some local governance contexts (e.g., Valencia et al. 2019; Wang, Yuan and Liu 2020). Lack of funding could prevent genuine steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals and indicate that the discursive changes that we identified above will not lead to transformative structural change and policy reform.

There is growing evidence that some corporate actors, including banks and investors, engage and invest in sustainability practices, promote green finance, facilitate large-scale sustainable infrastructure projects or expand their loan portfolios to environmental and social loans (e.g., Consolandi 2020; Denny 2018; Lee 2020; Liaw et al. 2017). Such practices are often discursively linked to the Sustainable Development Goals. Some studies warn here of 'SDG washing' by corporate actors, selective implementation of the goals, and the political risks linked to private investments in the context of continued shortage of public funding (Bebbington and Unerman 2018). Overall, a more fundamental change in incentive structures to guide public and private funding towards sustainable pathways seems still to be lacking.

Interlinkages, Integration and Coherence

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals and their 169 targets form a complex mesh of norms and rules that seek to address almost all areas of human activity. Some studies suggest that synergies among goals can be achieved by designing policies

in a holistic way (e.g., Nilsson, Griggs and Visbeck 2016). Others argue, however, that inherent trade-offs in the 2030 Agenda and the goals are too often neglected in academic research and require more attention (Brand, Furness and Keijzer 2021). Overall, the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals are expected to provide guidance and resolve normative conflicts, institutional fragmentation and policy complexity. Many thought the goals could serve as 'orchestrators' in intergovernmental and transnational politics, using the soft power of conviction and persuasion to create better integrated and coherent governance from global to local levels (Abbott, Bernstein and Janzwood 2020) (see Chapter 2). To assess whether the global goals have advanced integration and coherence since 2015 has been the focus of a rapidly evolving research programme and a growing body of literature. (See Chapter 4 for more detail.)

There is limited empirical data on interlinkages, integration and coherence.

Substantial academic work has been devoted to the conceptualization of governance fragmentation, institutional interlinkages and integration, and policy coherence. This has enhanced theoretical understanding and terminological clarity (Biermann and Kim 2020). Yet there are limited empirical insights on how these concepts play out in the national implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Several case studies on Bangladesh, Belgium, Colombia, Germany, India, the Netherlands, Sri Lanka and small island developing countries suggest that synergies and trade-offs in the 2030 Agenda manifest differently across national systems and governmental levels (e.g., Breuer, Leininger and Tosun 2019; de Zoysa, Gunawardena and Gunawardena 2020; Scobie 2019; Yunita et al. 2022). However, broader comparative assessments on the impacts of the interlinkages of global goals on national politics are lacking.

The institutional integration for the Sustainable Development Goals varies.

Evidence suggests that some governments have taken measures to align their institutions towards the Sustainable Development Goals. Some countries like the Netherlands have established coordination bodies within central agencies, and others like Germany have promoted inter-ministerial exchanges to bring their public administrative systems in line with the holistic vision of the 2030 Agenda (Breuer, Leininger and Tosun 2019; Yunita et al. 2022). These attempts, however, differ from country to country, leading to a huge variation of institutional integration for the Sustainable Development Goals at national level. Moreover, the responsibility for the goals lies in some countries in ministries and in others with

the head of state or government. The impact of either strategy remains uncertain and warrants further investigation.

Policy coherence is lagging.

Despite modest advances in institutional integration in some countries, governments overall fall short of enhancing policy coherence to implement the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. While some governments have begun to integrate the goals in national development strategies and action plans, this has rarely led to the formulation of (cross-)sectoral policies and programmes that cohere with one another (e.g., de Zoysa, Gunawardena and Gunawardena 2020; Trimmer 2019). Most governments seem to be stuck in traditional divisions of tasks between line ministries without effective mechanisms to formulate policies that aim to exploit synergies across policy domains and address trade-offs. Experts are divided in their expectations as to whether stronger policy coherence for the Sustainable Development Goals will emerge until 2030.

Barriers to institutional integration and policy coherence remain.

Evidence points to many barriers in public administrative systems to institutional integration and policy coherence (e.g., Allen, Metternicht and Wiedmann 2019). These include cumbersome bureaucracies, lacking political interest, short-term political agendas and waning ownership of the Sustainable Development Goals. Admittedly, breaking down such barriers will take some time and require political leadership, continuous efforts by progressive policy-makers and pressure by civil society organizations. So far, however, there are few indications that the adoption of the 2030 Agenda has significantly reduced such barriers.

Inclusiveness

Since the 1990s, inequality has risen in most countries, and ever larger shares of national wealth are accumulated with the richest families and individuals. Internationally, the gap between the richest and the poorest countries has grown as well. The 2030 Agenda is meant to address these inequalities and to ensure that no one is left behind. Vulnerable groups and vulnerable countries are extensively mentioned in the 2030 Agenda and in several goals and targets (UNGA 2015). The preamble of the 2030 Agenda identifies groups of people and countries that deserve attention, such as children and youth, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and migrants and refugees (UNGA 2015: paragraph 23), as well as African countries, least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and

small island developing states, countries in situations of conflict and post-conflict countries (UNGA 2015: paragraph 22). Additionally, Goal 10 explicitly seeks to reduce inequality within and between countries, while Goal 5 is dedicated to promoting greater equality for women and girls. Yet, have the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals delivered on their promise to leave no one behind? (See Chapter 5 for more detail.)

Rhetoric and action do not match.

Evidence suggests a mismatch between rhetoric and action when it comes to the impacts of the Sustainable Development Goals on inclusiveness within and between countries. On the one hand, vulnerable people and vulnerable countries are often discursively prioritized in the implementation of the goals, as evidenced by the broad uptake of the principle of 'leaving no one behind' in pronouncements by policy-makers and civil society activists. On the other hand, the normative or institutional effects of such discursive prioritization remain limited.

Within countries, the steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals in reducing inequalities vary significantly and seem to be bound by domestic politics (e.g., Gehre Galvão, de Almeida Gontijo and Antunes Martins 2020; Siegel and Bastos Lima 2020). The literature suggests that the goals have not brought additional normative or institutional steering that promotes inclusiveness. Instead the Sustainable Development Goals have been leveraged, if at all, as an overarching international normative framework to legitimize existing national policies and institutions for the promotion of inclusiveness (Abualghaib et al. 2019; Banks et al. 2020; Dhar 2018). In some countries we even see counterproductive effects as political elites capture the goals to overlay exclusive institutional settings and add legitimacy to entrenched marginalization.

Internationally, there is no evidence that the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 has advanced the political or economic position of the world's poorest countries in global governance (Biermann and Sénit 2022). These countries are as vulnerable, politically and economically, as they were before 2015. There are no indications that the Sustainable Development Goals have steered global governance structures towards more inclusiveness, especially regarding least developed countries (e.g., Choer Moraes 2019; Fioretos and Heldt 2019). Some studies doubt whether the Sustainable Development Goals will ever be able to transform legal frameworks towards an increased political participation of vulnerable countries. The constant lack of compliance with longstanding norms that seek to support least developed countries, such as special commitments on aid from the Global North, further indicates the lack of steering effect of the goals on the inclusion of these countries in the global economy (Biermann and Sénit 2022).

There is some evidence, however, that emerging economies in the Global South increasingly frame their aid and investment commitments to poorer countries as promoting the Sustainable Development Goals (e.g., Banik 2018).

The Sustainable Development Goals offer a novel accountability mechanism for civil society.

There is some evidence that civil society organizations increasingly use the Sustainable Development Goals as a reference framework to hold governments to account (e.g., Alade and Oyatogun 2020; Chancel, Hough and Voituriez 2018; Goegele 2020; Lynes 2020). Even if this does not provide evidence of normative, institutional or discursive steering effects as defined in this assessment, this trend might be important to prevent policy backlash against inclusiveness, especially in countries that are less welcoming to civil society influence. More research is needed here to assess the steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals in domestic institutions and how citizens use the goals as a tool to enhance the democratic quality of national policy-making.

Research evidence is strikingly limited.

Overall, the academic literature on the relationship between the Sustainable Development Goals and national and global inclusiveness and inequality is very limited. There is also not much research on Sustainable Development Goal 10, which seeks to reduce inequalities within and among countries. This lack in knowledge might reflect postcolonial structures of a predominantly Global North-based science community. More research is needed to understand the varying impact of the Sustainable Development Goals on inclusiveness and the conditions under which the goals may steer inclusion nationally and internationally.

Planetary Integrity

The Sustainable Development Goals are thematically more comprehensive than their precursor, the Millennium Development Goals. Partially because of that, tensions between environmental and economic goals and social imperatives are more pronounced. At the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, some environmentalists argued that new policy documents would need to raise the political saliency of protecting the living environment of our planet and what has been described as the 'planetary boundaries' and the 'safe operating space of humankind'. Yet, the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable

Development Goals did not refer to 'planetary boundaries', which proved too controversial, but instead emphasized the fundamental concerns of both people and the planet. The Sustainable Development Goals, as an integrated set of broad ambitions and specific targets, were meant to address both policy directions. But could the Sustainable Development Goals steer governments and non-governmental actors, globally and nationally, into the direction of 'planetary integrity'? (See Chapter 6 for more detail.)

There is limited additionality, ambition and coherence for planetary integrity.

The literature raises doubts about the steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals towards planetary integrity on three grounds: lack of additionality, lack of ambition and lack of coherence.

First, there is little evidence of whether normative and institutional change towards planetary integrity would not have materialized without the Sustainable Development Goals. Experiences from international governance reveal that while the global goals seem to have shaped discussions around the climate and biodiversity regimes and have consolidated support for specific concerns and interlinkages (e.g., Deep Decarbonization Pathways Project 2015; Deprez, Vallejo and Rankovic 2019), many such changes had been part of negotiations well before 2015 (e.g., Johnsson et al. 2020; Rantala et al. 2020).

Second, most studies concur that when it comes to planetary integrity, the Sustainable Development Goals lack ambition and do not call for drastic changes that would be transformative enough (e.g., Adelman 2018; Craig and Rhul 2020; Eisenmenger et al. 2020; Kotzé 2018).

Third, some studies suggest that the Sustainable Development Goals lack coherence to foster a meaningful and focused push towards planetary integrity. There are indications that this lack of ambition and coherence partially results from the design of the goals (e.g., Gasper, Shah and Tankha 2019). For example, economic growth as envisaged in Goal 8 might be incompatible with some environmental protection targets under Goals 6, 13, 14 and 15 (e.g., Hickel 2019). Some studies argued that the focus of the goals on neoliberal sustainable development is inevitably detrimental to planetary integrity and related justice concerns (e.g., Kotzé 2018). As a result, experiences from the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in domestic, regional and international contexts reveal little evidence of steering effects towards advancing planetary integrity, as countries in both Global South and Global North largely prioritize the socio-economic Sustainable Development Goals over environmental ones, following their earlier national development policies (e.g., Forestier and Kim 2020; Zeng et al. 2020).

The goals raise concern but do not motivate transformative change.

Recent studies suggest a limited role of the Sustainable Development Goals in facilitating the clustering of international agreements or in serving as collective 'headlines'; however, they are not yet a radical game-changer in global governance to advance planetary integrity. At the global level, there is evidence that the Sustainable Development Goals have had some impact on advancing environmental regimes on biodiversity, climate change or ocean protection (Deep Decarbonization Pathways Project 2015; Delabre et al. under review; Deprez, Vallejo and Rankovic 2019; Watson 2020). At the regional level, while it seems that the Sustainable Development Goals have fed into policies and programmes of regional governance bodies and steered the creation of new institutions, in practice the steering effects of the goals towards better environmental protection remain limited (e.g., Corrado et al. 2020; Hirons 2020; Hickel 2021; Páez Vieyra 2019). Within countries, there is little evidence that the Sustainable Development Goals have strengthened environmental policies (e.g., de la Mothe Karoubi et al. 2019; Haywood et al. 2019). Some recent studies highlight implementation challenges relating to interdependencies and underlying conflicts (e.g., Nunes 2020) and that the goals led to only tactical linkages rather than substantive changes (Mahadi 2020). Overall, scholars tend to agree that while the Sustainable Development Goals may help highlight environmental protection as an important concern, their rationale and content are structurally incompatible with efforts to steer towards a more ambitious programme for planetary integrity. More research is needed to understand variation in the impacts of the goals.

Methods

Research on the steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals has employed a diverse set of methods. There are two broad groups of methods: those that explore the effects of the goals on political, societal and economic actors and their institutions from global to local, and those that seek to measure whether societies are on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals until 2030. (See Chapter 7 for more detail.)

Combining methods is key to gain a complete picture.

Both types of methods are needed for a clear picture of the overall impact of the Sustainable Development Goals, and it is important to build bridges across methodological communities that often work in isolation from each other. Building such bridges is not easy, yet nonetheless essential to gain a full understanding of

the steering effects of the global goals. While there is some pioneering work that uses mixed methods, more interdisciplinary collaboration is warranted. Particularly we need a better understanding of how the effects of the Sustainable Development Goals on different actors and institutions influence progress towards achieving the goals, and vice versa.

Data gaps and unequal coverage of Sustainable Development Goals remain.

Despite the growing number of researchers who study the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, we still lack data (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill 2019; MacFeely 2018). This is particularly evident for data on the local level and data on least developed countries (Engström et al. 2019). Problematic is also the disjunct of language communities; many scientists rely on publications and data published in English, which underreports findings from regions where English is not the common working language. Comparative in-depth studies of steering effects of global goals in local governance are laborious, time-consuming and require adequate funding. Nevertheless, insights from field research are of utmost importance to assess the usefulness of globally agreed policy goals. Similarly, studies tend to focus on a limited number of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and their interactions. As a result, some goals are under-researched, and comprehensive models that cover all 17 goals are lacking. More efforts are needed to understand interlinkages between global goals.

As highlighted throughout this assessment, at the centre of the 2030 Agenda is the ambition to address at the same time economic, ecological and social goals and to break down silos in policy-making at all political levels and societal scales. To overcome silos in decision-making and open windows of opportunity for more coherent policies towards sustainable development, we need to gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of the interlinkages across the goals (Breuer, Leininger and Tosun 2019; Pradhan 2019; van Vuuren et al. 2021). In line with key findings from Chapter 4 of this assessment, while a few recent studies have shed light on interactions between goals, we still need more research on what policies best reflect the synergies and trade-offs in the interplay of the goals (e.g., van Soest et al. 2019).

Scientists need to engage more in science–policy–society interactions.

The Sustainable Development Goals are the outcome of complex intergovernmental negotiations. Civil society groups, corporations and science organizations were able to bring in their views. Yet in the end, the 2030 Agenda and the 17 global goals were adopted by governments as a political agreement marked by

countless political compromises and bargains. To what extent are these goals then based on insights from science and scientific data? While scientists have informed the Sustainable Development Goals through various channels, some scholars argue that this has not been enough and now call for having a stronger voice in the implementation and operationalization of the goals (Roehrl, Liu and Mukherjee 2020). Others again warn of an overly technocratic approach that would give too much room for scientists, who are generally based in the Global North, to decide what are essentially global conflicts of value and interests (Hartley 2020). And yet, many science communities are also still absent in debates on the 2030 Agenda. More involvement of scientists, especially those from the Global South, is needed to help advance the global transformation towards sustainable development.

Conclusion

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals is often seen as a major accomplishment in global sustainability governance. The ambitious agenda, adopted by all United Nations member states, offers a new set of global priorities for achieving sustainable development worldwide. While many goals build on earlier agreements, the full set of 17 goals and 169 targets is breathtaking in its ambition, scope and comprehensiveness. The language of the 2030 Agenda is progressive, demanding and full of references to global justice, the eradication of poverty, and the protection of our planet's life-supporting systems.

And yet, we need to conclude that the 2030 Agenda and the 17 global goals have had thus far only limited political effects in global, national and local governance since their launch in 2015. Reflecting on our assessment in six key governance areas, it appears that the global goals have had discursive effects and have given some impetus to normative and institutional reform. They foster mutual learning among governments about sustainable development policies and experiments. In some contexts, they offer new instruments for local political and societal actors to organize, to gain more support from the government, or to mobilize international funding. The goals also enable civil society and non-governmental organizations to hold governments accountable and to ensure in concrete situations that the implementation of the goals can counter the interests of powerful actors.

But the goals are not (yet) a transformative force in and of themselves. There is little evidence that institutions are realigned, that funding for sustainable development is (re-)allocated, that policies are becoming more stringent, or that new and more demanding laws and programmes are established because of the goals. Attempts to strengthen the role of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development and to harmonize the voluntary reporting system have

not found consensus among governments. This reporting system remains a soft peer-learning mechanism of governments that might even lead to uncontested endorsements of national performances if civil society organizations are not able to act as watchdogs in policy implementation.

It is also apparent that the effects of the Sustainable Development Goals, limited as they are, are neither linear nor unidirectional (see also UNDESA 2021). While the 2030 Agenda and the 17 goals with their 169 targets constitute a strong set of normative guidelines, their national implementation, translation to the local level, and dissemination across societal sectors remain a political process. The 2030 Agenda is a non-legally binding and relatively loose script, purposefully designed to provide leeway for actors to interpret the Sustainable Development Goals differently and often according to their interests. Many actors use the goals for their own purposes by shaping the content of the goals, targets and indicators. This finding challenges the aspiration shared by scholars and policy experts that the Sustainable Development Goals work as orchestrators. Rather, the goals and the 2030 Agenda can be conceived as an extensive set of musical scores played by different actors and subject to change and multiple interpretations. There is little evidence that the United Nations can adopt the role of central conductors to ensure that actors stick to the scores and unite towards achieving sustainable development worldwide.

Our assessment is a snapshot taken in 2021, and the time-horizon of the Sustainable Development Goals is 2030. Only then can their success be conclusively evaluated, and in the coming years the situation might change. Assessing future effects of the Sustainable Development Goals will require political scientists and scholars from related disciplines to deepen understanding of the 2030 Agenda as a field of study (Sianes 2021). Our assessment has shown that several questions are still under-researched, such as the impact of the global goals on planetary integrity or on inclusiveness within and between countries. Comparative research is one way forward, especially when it involves both small-*n* and large-*n* studies to explore a broader set of indicators.

Our conclusion that the goals have so far limited steering effects does also not preclude that many of their targets might eventually be achieved by 2030. As we laid out above, many goals build on existing agreements and are integral parts of other political processes, such as international agreements on biodiversity, climate, oceans or standards and programmes set by the International Labour Organization, the World Health Organization and so forth. For instance, target 3.a simply calls upon governments to 'Strengthen the implementation of the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control in all countries, as appropriate' (UNGA 2015: 16). Any progress on such vague targets that are part of broader policies is not necessarily a result of the global goals. Many targets are

qualitative, with some progress almost inevitable. For example, Goal 7.a − to 'enhance [by 2030] international cooperation to facilitate access to clean energy research and technology ... and promote investment in energy infrastructure and clean energy technology' (UNGA 2015: 19) − is unlikely to be missed, as terms such as 'enhance' or 'promote' remain vague. Other targets, however, are clearly defined, demanding and transformative, for example the targets under Goal 2 to 'end hunger' and to 'end all forms of malnutrition' by 2030 or to 'double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers' (UNGA 2015: 15). Here and under many other goals, transformative change in global and local governance is needed to achieve such demanding targets. And yet, these major changes are not clearly observable today.

Optimists might argue that the limited incremental change that we have detected will eventually pick up speed and bring about transformative change, driven by civil society, progressive businesses and sub-national initiatives. Discursive effects alone can indicate future changes. Language is not without power, as discourse theory argues; any changing discourses may be a powerful and promising sign. Others might respond, however, that to observe any major societal change over the next few years, the seeds of such transformation would need to be visible today in new institutions and policies.

Critics would also point to emerging evidence that the Sustainable Development Goals might have even adverse effects, by providing a smokescreen of hectic political activity that blurs a reality of stagnation, dead ends and business-as-usual. In this perspective, the goals could be seen as a legitimizing meta-narrative that helps international organizations, governments and corporations to merely pretend to be taking decisive action to address the concerns of citizens while clinging to the status quo. The outcome might then be depoliticization – that the positive narrative of the 17 goals, with their promises of global justice, transformative change and a sustainable future, limits political contestation about deeper political and economic structures and marginalizes more fundamental critique and reform proposals (Louis and Maertens 2021).

In sum, our assessment of over 3,000 scientific articles, mainly from the social sciences, has provided some evidence that the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals have influenced institutions, policies and debates, from global governance to local politics. While this impact has so far largely been discursive, the goals had some normative and institutional effects as well. Yet overall, there is only limited transformative impact. The goals are incrementally moving political processes forward, with much variation among countries, sectors and across levels of governance. However, we are far away from 'free[ing] the human race from the tyranny of poverty and want and heal[ing] and secur[ing] our planet' (UNGA 2015: preamble). More fundamental change is needed for the Sustainable

Development Goals to become 'the bold and transformative steps … to shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path' that the 2030 Agenda has promised.

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