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Four governance reforms to strengthen the SDGs

A demanding policy vision can accelerate global sustainable development efforts

By Frank Biermann¹, Yixian Sun², Dan Banik³, Marianne Beisheim⁴, Michael J. Bloomfield², Aurelie Charles², Pamela Chasek⁵, Thomas Hickmann⁶, Prajal Pradhan^{7,8}, Carole-Anne S  nit¹

In 2015, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly agreed on 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with 169 targets as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Although the SDGs, which are to be achieved by 2030, are not the first attempt to guide policy actors through global goals, they go far beyond earlier agreements in their detail, comprehensiveness, and ambition. Yet the 2022 SDG Impact Assessment, conducted by a global consortium of researchers, has shown that the first phase of SDG implementation did not lead to a transformative reorientation of political systems and societies (1, 2). As the UN SDG Summit gets underway this month to review the halfway point in SDG implementation, and a further UN ‘‘Summit of the Future’’ is planned for 2024 to debate global governance reforms, we present here a demanding yet realistic policy vision to adjust the course of SDG implementation.

CORE ELEMENTS

The SDGs have had some discursive impacts through influencing how government, civil society, and business actors frame sustainable development policies in their external and internal communications. In terms of more concrete political impacts, however, the goals have, in most cases, not yet succeeded in transforming government policies, institutional arrangements, public and private funding allocations, or international cooperation. We suggest a set of governance reforms to breathe new life into efforts to achieve the global goals, based on four core elements: differentiation, dynamization, legalization, and stronger institutionalization.

Differentiation

First, the current SDG framework needs to be strengthened in a way that commits high-

income countries to stronger and more concrete action. In principle, the SDGs lay down normative aspirations for all countries, and here they differ from earlier goal-setting efforts such as the Millennium Development Goals that focused on low-income countries. The SDGs are presented as universal, indivisible, and interlinked, even though many targets remain qualitative and all governments are allowed to set their own national implementation targets, which may consider their special circumstances while still being guided by the global level of ambition.

This approach was progressive in bringing high-income countries under the UN normative framework (3). Yet in practice, it also resulted in widespread cherry-picking, allowing leaders in affluent countries to focus on those global goals and targets they could easily reach. Goals that are more challenging for high-income countries, however, are still insufficiently addressed, such as reducing unsustainable consumption (SDG 12), phasing out fossil fuels (linked to SDG 7 and 13), protecting terrestrial and marine biodiversity (SDG 14 and 15), and increasing financial support for poorer countries and strengthening global partnerships for sustainable development (SDG 17). The universal framing of the SDGs may have also supported a persistent Western perspective in global media, academia, and civil society, suggesting a unified ‘‘humankind’’ while obscuring unequal consumption and emissions patterns among and within countries, including their spillover effects that impede the fiscal and policy space in low-income countries (4). In short, the global sustainability transition requires that high-income countries define, and deliver on, more ambitious national commitments within the overall SDG framework.

Dynamization

In addition, the original 17 goals and their 169 targets should not be seen as static. The current goals and targets reflect many political compromises during their negotiation (5), and they are often inadequate today given the escalating crises of ecological breakdown,

global pandemics, persistent extreme poverty, and rising inequalities. Similar to the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change and its ratcheting-up process, the SDGs should undergo regular rounds of revisions by which countries can raise their ambition.

For this purpose, the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, which reviews progress on the existing goals and targets, must evolve into a mechanism that over time also adjusts these targets to the exigencies of multiple global crises. Governments should view this process as an opportunity for more effective peer learning, leveraging synergies, tackling trade-offs, and overall increasing ambition (6). During this regular adjustment process, the role of global scientific assessments in reviewing the adequacy of SDG targets needs to be strong. Equally important is a greater involvement of civil society in the reporting and review process to strengthen the ratcheting-up of ambition that we propose.

Legalization

The SDGs have been crafted as non-legally binding and often qualitative commitments that cover broad areas of human activity. Although this nonbinding approach has historically allowed for universal support by governments, it can also reduce incentives for governments to enact the institutional and normative transformations that are needed. Stronger commitments are now crucial. Although the entire set of 17 SDGs is unlikely to become binding under international law, like-minded countries should work toward a series of legally binding, plurilateral agreements and governance arrangements in support of specific goals and targets. Examples are the international treaty to end plastic pollution (7), which is linked to SDG 12; the agreement on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction (8), linked to SDG 14; the existing UN convention against corruption, linked to SDG 16; or the civil society initiative for a fossil fuel nonproliferation treaty (9), linked, among others, to SDG 13.

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Smaller, focused, plurilateral agreements and “coalitions of the willing” that expand over time would bring some progress in times of geopolitical tensions, which often block new universal agreements. This progressive legalization of some SDGs will also improve governance in sectors that lack effective global mechanisms, such as the international regulation of mining activities by multinational corporations in low-income countries or pollution of outer space. In addition, the SDGs need to be better aligned with other legal frameworks, such as global trade and investment agreements and the UN human rights system.

Institutionalization

Lastly, global policy progress in some areas is impeded by governance fragmentation and insufficient institutional support. Whereas some SDGs, such as health (SDG 3), can build on strong international organizations and national agencies, other areas are barely institutionalized, notably the goals on reducing inequality (SDG 10), responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), and strengthening of institutions and governance (SDG 16). Moreover, various UN agencies act as custodians for individual SDGs, with responsibilities being widely spread among ministries and local institutions (10, 11).

United Nations bodies and governments should thus support further institutionalization around the SDGs and enhance steering capacities in global governance and national policymaking. For example, some researchers have proposed strengthening implementation of SDG 12 by setting up a new “UN forum on sustainable lifestyles” that would “enable international peer learning and elevate action on SDG12” (12). Similar new institutions are conceivable to enable and build capacities for the integrated transformative shifts that are envisaged in the Global Sustainable Development Reports (13).

POST-2030: THE ROAD AHEAD

The future of the SDGs beyond 2030 is uncertain. Despite all shortcomings and criticisms, it would be ill-advised to terminate or to fundamentally redesign the 17 SDGs after 2030. The necessary negotiations within the UN system would cost valuable time and divert political attention, and the eventual outcome would most likely not be very different given current global power constellations. Instead, we propose four reforms to strengthen governance for achieving the SDGs. Our proposals of differentiation, dynamization, legalization, and institutionalization holds the potential to drive policy processes that continue beyond 2030 and generate a global policy framework that would not only be more ambitious but also more effective.

Three complementary reforms would further support the changes that we propose. First, governments should agree on stronger global governance arrangements to initiate, oversee, and refine these processes of differentiation, dynamization, legalization, and institutionalization. In 1992, governments created the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, which was widely judged as unsuccessful. After 2012, the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development was set up to replace this commission; yet most observers agree that this forum has also not lived up to expectations (14). Governments should thus establish a stronger mechanism at the heart of the UN with a clear mandate to not only support but also oversee the proposed differentiation, dynam-

“...subnational success stories are not...sufficiently supported by transnational institutions and networks...”

ization, legalization, and institutionalization of the SDGs. One option would be a new UN Sustainable Development Council (15) that could serve among others as a compulsory, systematic, and more consequential review mechanism for the SDGs, which would go beyond the more voluntary nature of the High-level Political Forum and its predecessor. The 2024 UN Summit of the Future will be an important venue to discuss such innovations.

Second, assessments of the influence of the SDGs have shown that they had sizeable impact beyond national governments, notably in cities and with regional authorities (2). Such subnational success stories are not, however, sufficiently supported by transnational institutions and networks, and the UN is currently unable to provide such coordination. A new post-2030 governance system must therefore recognize the valuable role of local and provincial governments and provide stronger institutions, within the UN and beyond, to support subnational action.

Third, assessments of the role of the SDGs in supporting sustainability transformations in low-income countries have shown that lack of finance is a severe limitation for SDG implementation. The 2023 SDG Summit should thus include stronger commitments by high-income countries to support sustainability transformations in the Global South. In addition, the 2024 Summit of the Future is expected to discuss reforms of the international financial architecture, and bold steps are also needed here. Important to consider are innovative financial mechanisms that increase the costs of harmful consumption

and production and channel new funding into sustainability projects in low-income nations. A Global Energy Transition Fund, new mechanisms to fund global public goods, or regional levies on air transportation and other high-emitting sectors are examples of financial mechanisms that must be explored.

In sum, research has shown that the 17 SDGs have not led to the global sustainability transformation that is urgently needed. The claim by the UN General Assembly in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that the SDGs would enable governments to take “bold and transformative steps that are urgently needed to shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path” has not materialized.

The SDG Summit in September 2023 must pave the way toward a major reform of the SDGs that further differentiates the goals to enable greater ambitions for high-income countries; dynamizes goals and targets by regular pledge-and-review rounds; legalizes certain goals and targets in a network of plurilateral agreements among like-minded countries; and institutionalizes global and national governance in areas where the SDGs lack political and institutional anchoring and support. These four governance measures could be game changers. They are not only central for the acceleration of SDG implementation leading up to 2030 but would also be important cornerstones for a revised SDG framework beyond 2030. Governance for the SDGs must be substantially strengthened to allow these goals to “transform our world,” as the original 2015 UN declaration promised. ■

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