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Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Promise of a Transformative Agenda

by Sakiko Fukuda-Parr

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About the authors

Sakiko Fukuda-Parr is Vice Chair of UN CDP and Professor of International Affairs at The New School, New York.

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Abstract

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 represents a landmark achievement that redefined development to integrate environmental, social and economic objectives and as a universal challenge. It was not only the culmination of the work of determined norm entrepreneurs across decades, many of whom are from the Global South, but also a global consensus on the radical action needed to save the future of humanity. It has been embraced by stakeholders worldwide and generated a multitude of initiatives to respond to the challenge. Nonetheless, the road to implementing the transformational, integrated and universal Agenda has met with continued contestation. Politics, power and vested interests in the status quo have eroded the most transformative ambition of the agenda through weakening of indicators and interpretation of the norms. Focusing on the SDGs’ transformative ambition, this article connects the work that underpinned the Agenda’s emergence with the continuing challenges of its implementation as a process of norm making and norm evolution.

Keywords: Global Goals, Sustainable Development Goals, Norm dynamics, Inequality, Development paradigms.

1. Introduction

A rare sense of euphoria permeated the adoption of *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*¹ on September 25, 2015 at the UN Sustainable Development Summit. It was a moment of celebration after the intense negotiations that stretched over three years and engaged not just states but a multitude of civil society and business groups. In it, world leaders pledge: “We are resolved to free the human race from tyranny of poverty and want and to heal and secure our planet,”² and that “no one will be left behind.”³ The world had come together to agree on a new course, responding to the urgency to act in a world going in the wrong direction: unfettered economic growth that is breaching planetary limits, and creating wide disparities within and between countries. Despite all the compromises made along the way, the Agenda that was adopted is a visionary statement that calls on all sectors of society – not just governments, but businesses, civil society organizations, media, and the public – to implement a transformative agenda.

The agreement on the Agenda – better known by its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – was an important achievement. It is a significant normative advance in global governance of development. Pathbreaking for its scope and ambition, it is the first development agenda that aims at sustainability and inclusion as key development objectives and is universal, recognizing that all countries, not just developing countries, face urgent challenges of social, economic, and environmental sustainability. Its formulation process was unprecedented in facilitating open and participatory consultations, and in the use of goal setting as a tool for negotiating an agenda. Its implementation, designed for multi-stakeholder and decentralized initiatives, is a radical departure from earlier agendas conceived in a post-colonial era of state-centric global governance.

As soon as they were adopted, the SDGs were widely embraced and accepted by all major public, private and civil society stakeholders as the over-arching framework for development. Disseminated widely to the public, they have become a pervasive reference for global challenges and mobilize a wide range of actors – from universities to corporations to municipalities – to launch SDG initiatives and contribute to achieving the goals. Yet, the promise of transformative change is not in sight. Midway to the 2030 implementation timeline, the world faces a triple crisis of growing inequality, accelerating climate change, and the pandemic. The pandemic had a devastating effect across the goals, but even before the pandemic, progress had been mixed at best. As the UN Secretary General (SG) stated in his Foreword to the 2019 SDG progress report, “it is abundantly clear that a much, deeper, faster and more ambitious response is needed to unleash the social and economic transformation needed to achieve our 2030 goals.”⁴ There is a gap between the wide embrace of the agenda and a multitude of responses that do not add up to changing the course of the future.

This chapter is about the SDGs as a transformative agenda. Transformation cannot be achieved by business-as-usual strategies and continuation of current trends at a faster pace. Transformative change requires rethinking strategies and addressing root causes of unsustainable development and obstacles to addressing them.⁵ Are the obstacles due to resistance to idea change, or to gaps in the agenda as an operational plan, or to the limitations of UN norms and goal setting as a policy instrument?

¹ UN General Assembly resolution 70/1.

² United Nations (2015), *Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, New York, p. 5.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴ United Nations (2019), *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2019*, New York, p. 2.

⁵ United Nations Research Institute for Sustainable Development (UNRISD) (2016), *Policy Innovations for Transformative Change: Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, Geneva.

Focused on its transformative promise, this paper does not discuss in detail the substantive policy content of the SDGs that has been published elsewhere.⁶ The aim of this paper is to explore how the transformative elements of the agenda emerged as institutionalized norms and are being implemented and interpreted. The SDGs are a politically negotiated framework that emerged from a marketplace of ideas. Ideas are promoted by aspirations but also built on knowledge of a particular epistemic community. The SDG consensus was particularly difficult to achieve as it involved contestations between environmental and development communities, states of the North and South, and non-state actors with their own commitments. The contestations over ideas do not necessarily stop after a political consensus is reached; how are the elements that were most divisive during the negotiations being interpreted and pursued?

The paper starts with a brief introduction to the SDG framework as a paradigm shift. The second section discusses the dynamics of norm change and the contestations over the new framework. The third section explores how the contestations continued after the adoption of the agenda. The final section concludes with an assessment of the key obstacles to the implementation of a transformative agenda through global goal setting.

2. Development as sustainable development: a transformative agenda

Global goals are a vehicle for norms, providing a platform for negotiating agreement on the core ends (values and objectives) and means (priority actions needed) of development. The SDG agenda is transformative because of its ambition, but also because it is a radical departure from earlier development agendas in a number of ways, amounting to a paradigm shift for global governance: the definition of development; universal applicability with adaptation to local context; multi-stakeholder engagement; addressing social equity (leave no one behind); and addressing structural issues (means of implementation and others).

2.1. Defining development – a paradigm shift

For much of the 20th century, the dominant understanding of development was the transformation of economic capacity of low income and mostly post-colonial states to ensure improvements in living standards of their populations. This was reflected in the successive UN development agendas that started in the 1960s. Into the 21st century, the MDGs communicated that ending poverty was the purpose of development. The SDGs were a major shift from earlier paradigms because they recast the ends of development as sustainability of societies, encompassing protecting the environment, respecting planetary limits, ending poverty, and achieving greater social equity. The SDGs present a broad framework that incorporates the poverty agenda of the MDGs, but also reconceptualizes development to address the shortcomings of the narrow MDG framework in responding to the urgent challenges of the 21st century.

Recasting the means of development necessitates conceptualizing development not as a series of linear economic and social changes, but as a more complex, multidimensional process that integrates environmental, social, and economic dimensions. An essential aspect of social sustainability is inclusion and equity as well as ending

⁶ United Nations Research Institute for Sustainable Development (UNRISD) (2016), *Policy Innovations for Transformative Change: Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, Geneva.

poverty; a core commitment of the SDG agreement is to ‘leave no one behind.’ This is a cross-cutting principle to be applied across all goals and targets. Another key feature of the concept is that it presents an integrated agenda which addresses both the trade-offs between economic and environmental objectives and their complementarities. For example, addressing poverty requires both environmental and economic resources; sustainable development requires both environmentally sustainable and inclusive growth. Thus, the 17 goals are described as ‘interdependent and indivisible.’ This constitutes a major epistemic shift because it transcends thinking about development as primarily a social and economic process and breaks the silo between development and environment as conceptual frameworks, policy agendas, and epistemic communities.

Sustainable development is not a new concept. It emerged in the 1970s and was developed as an internationally agreed normative framework, but was negotiated and debated in a separate–environment–policy process, involving different actors, norms, and knowledge bases. The underlying concept originated as a response from the Global South to broaden Euro-centric environmental conservation agendas and integrate development into UN environmental agendas.⁷ The sustainable development frameworks were then subsequently negotiated in the series of UN conferences on environment and development (UNCED), starting with the landmark Earth Summit held in Rio in 1992. As Dodds and others note, “what Rio+20 achieved was creating the possibility of bringing the environment and development communities back together and developing a joint agenda.”⁸

What is new about the SDGs is that they elevate sustainable development as the overall framework for development and break the institutional divide between environment and development that has been part of global policymaking processes and the epistemic communities that were involved. Although there is a large overlap between ‘sustainable development’ and ‘development,’ the intellectual and policy debates and UN negotiations proceeded in separate fora, in siloes. They involved different actors from government and international organizations (ministry of environment vs. finance, UNEP vs. World Bank), academia (environmental scientists vs. economists), and civil society (Greenpeace vs. Oxfam). These actors constituted two separate epistemic communities, each with its own knowledge base and a history of debates about key concepts, priorities, methods, and processes. The power hierarchies were also different; the development community was more clearly divided between aid donors and recipients.

2.2. Universality – political shift

The SDGs are applicable universally, not just for developing countries. This repurposes ‘development’ for the 21st century context. As former President of Ireland Mary Robinson wrote, “The universal nature of the new sustainable development agenda was hard won and transformative. No longer are we talking about development with a donor-recipient mind-set. Every country is challenged, in different ways, to achieve the seventeen goals. Only through action at home and cooperation internationally can transformation be achieved.”⁹

In terms of global governance, this is a radical departure in objectives as well as in the roles and relations amongst stakeholders. The UN decadal agendas and the MDGs were designed to serve North-South commitments, intended to mobilize and guide aid flows to developing countries. Originating as part of the decolonization process, ‘development’ as a UN project was mostly about the responsibilities of the North to assist the countries of the South, particularly through resource flows. Underpinning the UN agendas was the conflation of

⁷ Sakiko Fukuda-Parr and Bhumika Muchhala (2020), The Southern origins of sustainable development goals: Ideas, actors, aspirations, *World Development* 126, pp. 1-11.

⁸ Felix Dodds, Amb. David Donohue and Jimena Leiva Roesch (2017), *Negotiating the Sustainable Development Goals: A transformational agenda for an insecure world*, London: Routledge, p. 24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, xvi.

‘development’ with ‘assistance,’¹⁰ along with the North-South power relationships embedded in development aid. The MDGs were the last and most extreme example of a UN agenda in this colonial model; its focus on poverty provided a clear aid agenda for low-income countries and was championed and disseminated by the leading aid donors (OECD, UNDP, World Bank, bilateral donors such as the UK and The Netherlands).¹¹ As later sections will elaborate, universality and other aspects of the SDG framework responded to the shortcomings of the MDGs’ aid agenda.

While setting out a universal agenda, the framework does not impose a one-size-fits-all implementation plan. The framework encourages countries to set national targets that adjust for local context. This reflects a push back to the MDG framework which imposed a one-size-fits-all set of goals against which countries were assessed as ‘on track’ or not. Critics argued they were irrelevant and labeled them as ‘Minimum Development Goals,’ or worse, disruptive to local policy debates, and called them ‘Most Distracting Gimmicks.’¹² The SDG framework also incorporates the principles of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR), which recognizes that countries face the challenge of meeting the goals with very diverse starting points and resources.

2.3. Multi-stakeholders – governance shift

UN development agendas have been state-centric in their formulation, negotiation, and implementation arrangements. The SDGs were the first to proactively involve civil society, business groups, and other stakeholders at all these stages.

The formulation involved two processes: the Post-2015 consultations and the Open Working Group (OWG). The Post-2015 consultations were initiated by the SG in July 2012 to develop a framework to succeed the MDGs, which were set to expire in 2015. No doubt in response to the heavy criticism of the top-down way the MDGs were created, the SG called for open consultations with all stakeholders – civil society, academia, businesses – on a successor framework.¹³ This included (i) a review of the MDG experience by an inter-agency technical team;¹⁴ (ii) a global citizens survey; (iii) a multi-stakeholder consultation at national, regional, and global levels and online global consultations around 11 themes involving numerous events, taking place over 2012 to 2013;¹⁵ and (iv) a High-level Panel of Eminent Persons (HLP) to make recommendations for a new agenda.

The OWG of the UN General Assembly (GA) was the process for negotiating the SDGs specified in the Outcome document of Rio+20. This was designed to break out of the strictures of the standard GA negotiations, the North-South political divide, reliance on the UN secretariat and agencies, and closed debate limited to government delegations. The OWG had 30 seats for individual states, who were not necessarily expected to represent their regions. Non-state actors were included as “Major Groups” representing nine sectors and independent experts on different topics were invited to speak. Meetings were open to the public. This broader participation did away with state-centric negotiations and opened up more open discussion.¹⁶ According to several diplomats who

¹⁰ See for example Olav Stokke (2009). *The UN and Development: From Aid to Cooperation*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN.

¹¹ See Sakiko Fukuda-Parr and David Hulme (2011), “International Norm Dynamics and the ‘End of Poverty,’” *Global Governance* 17, no. 1, p. 17-36.

¹² Peggy Antrobus (2005), “MDGs: Most Distracting Gimmicks?” *Convergence* 8, no. 3, p. 49-52.

¹³ Developed in the back rooms of the UN by technocrats from the World Bank, UNDP, and OECD, and adopted by member states with limited consultations.

¹⁴ United Nations (2012), *Realizing the Future We Want for All: Report to the Secretary General*, New York.

¹⁵ United Nations (2013), *A Million Voices: The World We Want*, New York.

¹⁶ Donohue Dodds, Leiva Roesch (2018), *Negotiating the Sustainable Development Goals*; and Macharia Kamau, Pamela Chasek, and David O’Connor, *Transforming Multilateral Diplomacy: The Inside Story of the Sustainable Development Goals*, London: Routledge.

participated in the OWG, the new structure gave greater voice to smaller countries, to more diverse ideas and positions, and helped de-politicize the negotiations and avoid entrenched North-South divides.

While these two processes differed in their power structures, political dynamics, and discourses – as later sections will elaborate – both were organized to facilitate multi-stakeholder participation. States maintained their control over the process and final shape of the agenda, but civil society groups – notably businesses and NGO networks – exercised considerable influence through daily morning meetings with the co-chairs, multiple side events, circulating analyses, and lobbying delegates.¹⁷ UN secretariat no longer had the dominant role in formulating the agenda.

The SDG framework makes a clear break from state-centric implementation. Partnership is one of the cornerstone principles laid out at the start of the document, which also calls on “solidarity” and “intensive global engagement in support of implementation of the goals and targets, bringing together Governments, the private sector, civil society, the United Nations system and other actors and mobilizing all available resources.”¹⁸ The business sector – led by the International Chamber of Commerce and a number of leading corporations and associations – was active in the Post-2015 and OWG processes where they advocated for involvement in implementation.¹⁹ As explained by OWG co-chair Ambassador Kamau, active participation of civil society and business sector in the negotiations was promoted to secure their ‘buy in’ to the agenda, and ensure that they would contribute to its implementation.

2.4. Means of Implementation

The inclusion of means of implementation in the SDG framework was another important innovation. Unleashing social and economic transformations requires policy changes and access to resources and technology that are resisted by powerful interests. One of the strengths of global goal setting as a way of formulating a global development agenda is that it focuses on outcomes. States and non-state actors with diverse interests and priorities can agree on a vision of a better world, but are much more divided on the policy changes necessary to achieve those ends. Developing countries have had long-standing demands on the international community for finance, technology transfer, and reforms in international economic arrangements.

The SDG framework includes a chapter that outlines the means – access to finance, markets, technology, and policy measures – needed to make implementation possible, especially for resource-constrained countries. For each goal, a set of means of implementation targets are set, listed as a separate category of targets.²⁰ Many call for resource mobilization and technology transfer to support least developed countries, and policy reform in areas such as trade, gender equality in land ownership, and fossil fuel subsidies.

2.5. Ambitious goals

The success or failure of global goals are often judged by whether the targets are achieved. Goals can then be set in line with what is feasible; the MDG targets were set by extrapolating from past trends. As prescribed in the Rio+20 Outcome document, the SDG framework is aspirational and sets goals that are difficult to achieve in three ways. First, the SDGs intentionally set quantitative targets to eradicate, not just reduce, income poverty, hunger and malnutrition, children out of primary and secondary school, gender violence, or to achieve universal

¹⁷ Chasek Kamau and O'Connor, *Transforming Multilateral Diplomacy*, p. 124-128, 132.

¹⁸ *Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, para. 39, 14.

¹⁹ Chasek Kamau and O'Connor, *Transforming Multilateral Diplomacy*, p. 124-128.

²⁰ Listed by alphabetical letter rather than numbers, e.g., Target 1.a, 1.b, 2.a.

access to water, clean energy, affordable transport. Second, they set goals that would reverse current trends, such as inequality and climate change. Third, they set transformative goals that would require longer lasting change, such as industrialization and economic transformation, shifts in consumption and production patterns, and access to justice. The latter two types of goals often require overcoming political obstacles and resistance by vested interests, and the implementation of policies that address structural drivers of the issue.

3. Dynamics of the norm change in a marketplace of ideas

How was consensus achieved on such fundamentally different ideas about development? The process of formulation involved intense contestation, not only driven by interests of states but by disagreement over ideas and resistance to accepting new ways of thinking. The literature on norm dynamics schematizes the process as follows.²¹ Phase I starts with committed individuals – norm entrepreneurs – who play an essential role in the emergence of new ideas. Phase II sets in when the new ideas gain momentum and begin to “cascade,” becoming more generally accepted and supported by a broader group of stakeholders to gain legitimacy as a member of a community. The third phase is when the norm is institutionalized and accepted as a matter of fact. The agreement on the SDGs can be understood in this schema, but additionally by the contestations that drove the process. New ideas emerge from a competitive field, where ideas vie to dominate global consensus and influence stakeholders’ thinking. When norms are institutionalized – as when the SDGs were adopted at the UN – the contestation does not necessarily end. As the literature on norms increasingly points out, norms are not settled once and for all, but continue to be contested.²² Thus, with the SDGs, the norms of sustainable development are continuing to be contested as the agenda is implemented, not in the negotiating of the text, but the way that the text is being interpreted.

The next section provides an account of the dynamics of norm emergence and contestations from the origins to the negotiations and implementation of the new agenda.

3.1. Rio+20 and the Genesis of the SDGs

The SDGs originated in the Rio+20 conference held in 2012 as successor goals to the MDGs that were set to expire in 2015. Many core elements of the SDG framework – the idea of an integrated agenda, universality, multi-stakeholder governance, and the ambition of a transformative agenda – originated in Rio and were prescribed in the Outcome document, *The Future We Want*, adopted in June 2012.²³ This document mandated the GA to formulate a suite of SDGs, outlined their key principles, and prescribed a method for their formulation: the establishment of “an inclusive and transparent intergovernmental process... open to all stakeholders, with a view to developing global sustainable development goals to be agreed by the General Assembly,”²⁴ that would “ensure the full involvement of relevant stakeholders and expertise from civil society, the scientific community

²¹ Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink (1998), “International Norm Dynamics and Political Change,” *International Organization* 52, no. 4, p. 887-917.

²² Katharina P. Coleman and Thomas K. Tieku (2018), eds., *African Actors in International Security: Shaping contemporary norms*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers; Amitav Acharya (2004), “How Ideas Spread: Whose norms matter? Norm localization and insitutional change in Asian regionalism,” *International Organization* 58, no. 2, p. 239-275; and Noha Shawki (2016), “Norm Evolution and Change: Analyzing the Negotiation of the Sustainable Development Goals,” in *International Norms, Normative Change and the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals*, ed. Noha Shawki, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, p. 1-16.

²³ UN General Assembly resolution 66/288.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, para. 248, p. 47.

and the United Nations system.”²⁵ The Outcome document also has a significant chapter on the means of implementation.

The emergence of the idea came in the preparatory meetings for Rio+20 that took place in multiple locations in the year leading up to the conference. The proposal to set a comprehensive set of development goals came from a delegate of Colombia, Paula Caballero, who at the time was the Director of Social, Economic, and Environmental Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.²⁶ She was a norm entrepreneur par excellence, driven by the conviction of her ideas – not by commitment to advancing the interests of her government or as a duty of her position in the ministry. Her first task was to convince her hierarchy in the Ministry and government. This was not difficult and her ideas were quickly taken up, including by the head of state.²⁷ She worked tirelessly, against all odds, to advocate for a new agenda that would “revolutionize how we understood development, to create a framework that was more fit-for-purpose to tackle the daunting challenges we face as a global society.”²⁸ She saw the Rio+20 conference as a historic opportunity, two decades after the pathbreaking launch of Agenda 21 and a moment of high political awareness, to make this a reality. Drawing on the lessons of the MDGs that showed how concrete, time bound, quantitative goals could galvanize political attention to priority objectives, she promoted the idea of new set of goals that would present an integrated and universal agenda.

Not surprisingly, the idea met with much opposition on many grounds. First, it broke the established institutional divide between ‘development’ and ‘sustainable development.’ Caballero recalls, “those that did not dismiss it as blasphemous dismissed it as a sheer impossibility, the pipe dream of a negotiator who did not understand the system or the history.”²⁹ Secondly, it would undermine the unfinished business of the MDGs post-2015. As Dodds notes, “at the time, proposing that the SDGs would incorporate the ‘unfinished business of the MDGs’ and would replace the MDGs was unthinkable.”³⁰ Third, the concept of universality challenged the existing worldview that divided the world between the North and the South, and the implicit assumption that the ‘North’ was what developing countries would emulate. This was not only radical thinking but a challenge to the leadership of the aid industry; developing countries feared concessional finance would stop. Fourth, the open process was unheard of and just not the way business was conducted in UN negotiations.

Gradually, the proposal gained support, initially from individuals and then the delegations they brought along, then through a multitude of meetings – both informal and formal. Support came from an eclectic mix of countries – from all regions, from low, middle and high income countries, large and small. Within delegations, opinion was divided, particularly in early stages, and Caballero was careful to avoid the idea becoming politicized and identified as a proposal of a particular negotiating block.³¹ At that stage, it was among many points being advocated as key points for inclusion in the Outcome document. The SDGs began to gain ground, overcome hesitations, and inspire stakeholders; of the 170 submissions made by member states, major states and UN organizations to the preparatory conference, SDGs was the fourth most mentioned.³² Importantly, it made it into the Zero draft of the Outcome document in November 2011, tabling it as a formal element in the Rio+20 negotiations. As the international norm dynamics schema predicts, this Phase I of norm emergence is driven by individuals and their commitment to ideas. Indeed, it was individuals from delegations and UN agencies who

²⁵ Ibid., para. 248, p. 47.

²⁶ Chasek Kamau and O'Connor, *Transforming Multilateral Diplomacy*, p. 40.

²⁷ Paula Caballero with Patti Londoño (2022), *Redefining Development: The Extraordinary Genesis of the Sustainable Development Goals*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, p. 2-3.

²⁸ Paula Caballero (2019), “The SDGs: Changing How Development is Understood”, *Global Policy* 10, no. S1, p. 138-140, 138.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

³⁰ Donohue Dodds, Leiva Roesch, *Negotiating the Sustainable Development Goals*, p. 17.

³¹ Author interview with Caballero (2017), 20 July.

³² Caballero with Londoño, *Redefining Development*.

joined Caballero as norm entrepreneurs, promoting the idea and persuading governments to support its inclusion in the Outcome document. They comprised the ‘Friends of the SDGs’ and included delegates around the world.³³ It was only later into the process that Caballero saw the time ripe to obtain the support of the G77 and China – the developing countries block – where there had been considerable resistance initially.

3.2. Post-2015 and OWG—SDG formulation and negotiations

The Post-2015 consultations ran from July 2012 to May 2013, when the report of the HLP was submitted. The OWG met in fourteen sessions from March 2013 to July 2014 and reached agreement in September 2014 on a proposed list of 17 goals and 169 targets. The process had been a high stakes moment for governments and civil society groups that competed to shape the new framework with their vision, analysis, and priorities.

In this marketplace of ideas, the proposal for a universal, integrated sustainable development framework met much resistance. There was a clear divide between those who envisioned the path forward as a continuation of the MDGs – an MDG v.1.1 agenda – and those who were concerned with the limitations of the narrow poverty agenda and were searching for a broader set of priorities that addressed key challenges of the times such as inequality and climate change. As the HLP report put it, the Panel proceeded by asking “what to keep, what to amend, and what to add.”³⁴

The MDG v.1.1 vision was widespread and deeply rooted within the development community, particularly amongst donors. The MDGs had shown how the donor community could come together around common objectives. During the program period (2000-2015), there was a sharp concentration of development aid into the social sectors, especially health, and a decline in support to productive sectors. The MDG message to end global poverty as a moral imperative mobilized support from domestic constituencies.

Though the Post-2015 debates were open, donor countries exercised considerable influence on key activities such as the HLP through finance and knowledge production. Governments and philanthropies provided special funding support to the UN for the process. Their think tanks –such as ODI (UK), CGD (UK) – were prominent in producing much of the analysis and organizing discussion events on key issues. The HLP was staffed by a technocratic team of externally recruited economists. The report was submitted to the SG in May 2013 and proposed a poverty-focused agenda, including a set of 12 ‘illustrative’ goals with fifty-five targets.³⁵ Though this was not as narrow as the eight MDGs, it did not include the more ambitious goals: inclusion and equality, consumption and production patterns, economic growth and transformation, and a full range of environmental priorities.

Intergovernmental negotiations in the OWG began in March 2013 as the Post-2015 consultations wound down. As a follow-up to Rio+20, this brought in the environmental community and different actors and thinking. The starting point, the Rio+20 Outcome document, spelt out a vision of sustainable development as an integrated, universal, and transformative agenda. Many of the national delegates and NGOs’ representatives in the OWG were not New York based diplomats but came from Rio+20 and UNCED’s environmental ministries in the capitals.³⁶ In contrast, the Post-2015 process was populated by the development community, where the influential actors were the donors, including bilaterals (e.g., UK, France), multilaterals (e.g., The World Bank),

³³ Donohue Dodds, Leiva Roesch (2018), *Negotiating the Sustainable Development Goals*.

³⁴ United Nations (2013), High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, *A New Global Partnership: Eradicate poverty and transform economies through sustainable development*, New York, p. 7.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 15.

³⁶ Donohue Dodds, Leiva Roesch, *Negotiating the Sustainable Development Goals*.

philanthropies (e.g. The Gates Foundation), and NGOs (e.g., Oxfam, Save the Children). The power dynamic in the environmental community was also less asymmetric. Not only had Colombia and several other middle-income countries played a leading role in Rio+20, developing countries had historically a major role in UNCED processes.

During the negotiations, key elements of the transformative agenda were among the most contested. In the OWG, controversies were debated on technical grounds. As the negotiations moved to the list of goals and indicators, economic and political interests became more apparent in the position of national delegations. Developing countries continued to oppose universality, fearing that this contradicted the principle of CBDR and risked undermining development finance.³⁷ Many influential academics and delegations, notably the UK, promoted a short list of goals with a clear focus, arguing that the framework was too complex and had too many goals. This argument was applied to why many goals and targets should be excluded.

Much of the contestation took place goal by goal, target by target, over the wording which either watered down or perverted the intent. For example, environmental targets reflect a perspective that economic growth can be made environmentally sustainable by technological solutions that can achieve ‘decoupling’ or greater ‘resource efficiency.’³⁸ They do not address planetary limits, nor the imperative for reducing the total volume of consumption. Another example concerns social equity which, like environment, is a core element of the framework.³⁹ Leave no one behind is the central theme of the framework, two stand-alone goals aim to end poverty and reduce inequality, and discrimination and exclusion are addressed throughout the framework. Yet, the agenda focuses on poverty and exclusion, rather than on inequality as a problem of elite power. The UK and other high-income countries argued against a stand-alone goal on inequality on the grounds that it would duplicate the poverty goal, and the Goal 10 to reduce inequality within and between countries does not address distribution of income. ‘Leave no one behind’ served as a useful consensus-building commitment and rallying call: it could be interpreted to mean attention to the poor, or a more ambitious agenda of addressing systemic discrimination and inequality.

Ultimately, the OWG achieved a consensus framework in July 2014 and submitted it to the GA. This was a culmination of over three years of high energy and open multi-stakeholder consultations and negotiations that were unprecedented in the history of UN’s history of intergovernmental norm making. The full document of the 2030 Agenda built on the SDGs and drew on the principles of *The Future We Want* and was negotiated with the full 193 state membership of the GA before it was finally adopted at the Sustainable Development Summit in September 2015. As in many UN negotiations, process determines the outcome. There is little doubt that had it not been for the multi-stakeholder process that broke with the tradition of negotiating by regional blocks and the dependence on the Secretariat, the outcome would have been different. According to individuals who led these processes, it helped move forward to new perspectives and agendas.⁴⁰ Under a more conventional process, the HLP’s narrower poverty agenda with 12 goals could well have been the draft that the Secretariat would have provided as a basis of the inter-governmental negotiations. In this case, the co-chairs held the pen. In the innovative OWG process, an alliance of likeminded smaller states from across the regions (Guatemala, the Netherlands, UAE, and others) in the Friends of SDGs that had formed in Rio and a coalition of social justice-

³⁷ Paula Caballero (2016), *A Short History of the SDGs*, available at: <https://www.deliver2030.org/?p=6874>.

³⁸ Mark Elder and Simon Høiberg Olsen (2019), “The Design of Environmental Priorities in the SDGS,” *Global Policy* 10, no. S1, p. 70-82; and Des Gasper, Amod Shah, and Sunil Tankha (2019); “The Framing of Sustainable Consumption and Production in SDG 12,” *Global Policy* 10, no. S1, p. 83-95.

³⁹ Sakiko Fukuda-Parr (2019), “Keeping Out Extreme Inequality from the SDG Agenda – The Politics of Indicators,” *Global Policy* 10, no. S1, p. 61-69.

⁴⁰ Author interviews with Nikhil Seth (17 April 2017); Guilherme Patriota (10 July 2017); Mohammed Gad (23 June 2017); and Macharia Kamau (21 November 2017).

oriented civil society groups (Beyond 2015 coalition) aggressively championed and lobbied for this ambitious, transformative, set of priorities. For example, the Beyond 2015 coalition lobbied at national, regional, and global events to influence governments and other stakeholders on the principle of leaving no one behind, anchoring in human rights, and incorporating changing consumption and production patterns, sustainable energy, and inclusive economic growth.⁴¹

Within the multi-stakeholder process, individuals played a key role in building momentum in support of the sustainable development mandate of the OWG. The co-chairs of the OWG (Ambassadors Korosi of Poland and Kamau of Kenya) and the co-facilitators for negotiating the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs (Ambassadors Kamau of Kenya and Donoghue of Ireland) played a key personal role in achieving the consensus agreement, and facilitating consensus to reach the agreement, motivated by a personal commitment to make a difference at a historic opportunity. Kamau writes about his roles, “it was a scary and seminal time in human history. It had become increasingly clear that something needed to be done and to be done so urgently..... undertaking these twin tasks turned out to be the greatest intellectual, technical and emotional challenge of my life. It was a time of great anxiety and debate, but also a time of great exhilaration and satisfaction.”⁴²

4. Implementation and continued contestations

4.1. Indicator framework

The controversies over the transformative agenda did not end with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs in September 2015. The contestations continued into the choice of indicators, shifting the forum to the UN Statistical Commission and its Inter-agency and expert group (IAEG), the group of national statisticians charged with developing the indicator framework to track progress in meeting the targets. Comprised of representatives of national statistical offices, the group is entrusted with developing the indicators framework on strictly scientific basis. However, the choice of indicators can never be fully neutral. Indicators embed a conceptual understanding of the social reality that is being measured, and theory about the issue that it raises. By the same token, measurement approach can be embedded in a description of the problem. Measurement and indicators were highly contested, particularly in relation to the goals that were most divisive.

For example, the choice of indicator for inequality depends on how the key social problem is considered: a problem of poverty and exclusion, overall distribution, or the distance between the top and bottom income groups. The shared prosperity measure – income growth of the bottom 40 percent of the population compared with the national average – would focus on the poor. The Gini coefficient would be most sensitive to the shifts in the middle of the distribution. The Palma ratio would be the one to best track the distance between the top and the bottom, or extreme inequality. SDG negotiations took place in the context of increasing concern with extreme inequality, the growing power of very wealthy individuals, and poverty. Despite the numerous proposals and comments made by delegations and civil society to the IAEG to use the Gini coefficient or the Palma ratio, the framework includes the World Bank’s shared prosperity indicator which highlights inequality as a problem of poverty and invisibilizes the problems of elite capture of economic and political processes. The arguments in the IAEG were futile since the OWG had already used the shared prosperity measure to define the target.

Similarly, issues of governance have long been contested in international development and the inclusion of Goal 16 was a hard won advance in the agenda. The debate on the indicators for equal access to justice was highly

⁴¹ Donohue Dodds, Leiva Roesch, *Negotiating the Sustainable Development Goals*.

⁴² *Ibid.*, xix.

contentious and led to a choice of three measures which narrowed the concept to violent crimes, reporting rates, and unsentenced detainees, leaving out alternatives that would focus on broader concepts of civil justice and dispute resolution that have more bearing on human rights and development.⁴³ There was resistance to use of data from non-state sources and methods. The indicators reflect a state-centric concern with the rule of law rather than the quest for justice for people as an integral part of achieving the other goals of the SDG agenda.

Over a range of goals, studies of the politics of indicator development show how political motives drove the selection, though veiled behind seemingly technical arguments.⁴⁴ Across the board, indicators weakened the target or perverted its intent.

4.2. Implementation

As of this writing, midway into the agenda timeline, the SDGs have had considerable impact in mobilizing governments, businesses, and civil society. Many governments have harmonized national policies and the SDG frameworks, adapted targets to local contexts, and raised awareness amongst the public at large about the urgent and moral imperatives of taking action to address environmental destruction, social exclusion, and inequalities for the future of humanity. But stakeholders and assessments raise concerns that implementation is falling short of the agenda's transformative promise. The SG's progress-monitoring reports conclude that progress has been mixed at best and have called for a significant upscaling of effort. The Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) 2019 – an assessment by the 15-member Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the SG – concludes that the world is moving in reverse: rising inequalities, climate change, biodiversity loss, and mounting waste, and that this compromises achievement of the other goals. They call for a new collaboration among stakeholders to challenge 'powerful, vested interests' that do not want change. Consistent with these conclusions, a systematic review of literature (over 3,000 peer reviewed and similarly rigorous studies) by a network of over 70 academics found that the effects of the SDGs have been mostly discursive, and where there were institutional and organizational changes, or shifts in policies, they were mostly at local governments, small businesses, and civil society groups rather than in national government and leading international bodies.⁴⁵

The concept of sustainable development requires a new strategy: according to UNRISD, implementing a transformational agenda for the SDGs requires an eco-social turn: policies to address structural causes of poverty, inequality, and environmental destruction.⁴⁶ According to the GSDR, transformations can be most effectively achieved by building on synergies between different targets, and the authors propose a strategy that would focus on addressing the "underlying systems," warning that "focusing on individual Goals and targets—would imperil progress across multiple elements of the 2030 Agenda."⁴⁷

The implementation mindset is firmly anchored in the SDGs. The SG's annual progress report, for example, proceeds goal by goal, building on the statistical monitoring report, with no mention of the SDGs as an integrated and indivisible agenda, the synergies among the goals which are inter-dependent, or the transformative ambition of the agenda, except in very general terms, without mentioning what this means in terms of concrete

⁴³ Margaret Satterthwaite and Sukti Dhital (2019), "Measuring Access to Justice: Transformation and Technicality in SDG 16.3," *Global Policy* 10, no. S1, p. 96-109.

⁴⁴ Sakiko Fukuda-Parr and Desmond McNeill (2019), "Knowledge and Politics in Setting and Measuring the SDGs: Introduction to Special Issue," *Global Policy* 10, no. S1, p. 5-15.

⁴⁵ Frank Biermann, Thomas Hickmann, and Carole-Anne Sénit (2022), eds., *Political Impact of the Sustainable Development Goals: Transforming Governance Through Global Goals?*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press.

⁴⁶ United Nations Research Institute for Sustainable Development (UNRISD), *Policy Innovations for Transformative Change*.

⁴⁷ United Nations (2019), *Global Sustainable Development Report*, New York, xxi.

implementation strategies. The GSDR is an exception in proposing a synergistic strategy, as is the UNRISD report mentioned earlier.⁴⁸ But both these reports are somewhat conceptual.

Annual overview assessments of the VNRs by the UN Committee on Development Policy (CDP) have found a disconnect between the transformative vision of the SDGs and national implementation strategies; they rely on conventional policies, such as social protection policies, to implement strategies to reduce multi-dimensional poverty and achieve the commitment to leave no one behind, and are generally short on reflecting on medium- to long-term strategies to achieve structural changes.⁴⁹ These assessments also find that most reports cherry pick themes, goals, and targets to report on, consistently focusing on the MDG legacy poverty goals, and under-reporting on inequality, partnership, environmental, and governance goals.⁵⁰ These reports mostly lack substantive discussion of challenges and lessons learned and rarely discuss the need for policy change that requires difficult political obstacles, such as environmental regulation and incentives to combat climate change and biodiversity loss, long-term strategies and technologies for shifting production patterns, or redistributive fiscal policies to reduce income inequalities.

Non-state actors and sub-national governments have perhaps been more responsive to the concept of sustainable development as an integrated agenda, as they develop programs that address the environment and socio-economic challenges. Many cities and municipalities have responded to the integrated concept of sustainable development. Spontaneously, local Voluntary National Reviews have gained momentum.

The principle of universality has gained some traction. High income countries have consistently submitted VNRs. Some still relate to the SDGs in their role as aid donors, but others have responded to the SDGs by setting an inter-ministerial process for developing sustainable development strategies (Finland, Japan), and promoted the SDGs nationally. But the principle of universality was also a call for solidarity to develop collective action. This has been a major failure, with lack of joint action on a global scale.

Related to universality and solidarity is the renewed commitment to *Means of implementation in Goal 17 for global action and within each target focusing mostly on national action*. This has been a disappointment on both fronts.

Multistakeholder approach has gained considerable traction, and has become increasingly promoted as a new approach to development cooperation and development financing. This involves mostly Public Private Partnerships under a variety of arrangements. These are controversial; critics raise concerns that this involves public sector subsidies that increasingly benefit businesses, and retreat of the state from core public functions.

5. Conclusion

The SDGs spawned a flourishing of responses from public, private, and civil society actors that are evident and positive at the local level but have not triggered shifts at the national and global level. National governments and leading actors in the international community have failed to modify strategies, policy frameworks, resource allocation, or organizational arrangements to address the root causes of the unsustainable path of the world. On the other hand, the SDGs have contributed to shifting roles of actors, opening up a reconfiguration of the roles

⁴⁸ United Nations Research Institute for Sustainable Development (UNRISD), *Policy Innovations for Transformative Change*.

⁴⁹ Committee on Development Policy (CDP) Subgroup on voluntary national reviews (2021), "What did the 2020 Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports still not tell us?", Available: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/what-did-the-2020-voluntary-national-review-vnr-reports-still-not-tell-us/>.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

of private and public sectors in implementation. It is then not surprising that the outcomes are what they are in progress towards achieving the ambitious goals and targets set by the SDGs.

What do these outcomes tell us about global goal setting as a tool of governance? The SDGs had a powerful discursive effect, but the most transformative elements that challenge the status quo continue to be contested, and the discourse of sustainable development continues to be watered down and reinterpreted. Norm-making by goal setting facilitates this reinterpretation: the goals can be cherry-picked and minimized. For some, the SDGs are just about leaving no child out of school and little more; the difficult challenges of crafting strategies that integrate economic, social, and environmental priorities are conveniently put aside. The discourse of sustainable development conveyed by the list of goals and targets is inevitably reductionist and leads to simplification and distortion of the vision. It undermines the need for complex strategies.

The implementation challenges of the SDGs can only be understood in the context of the current global political economy of 21st century capitalism and hyper-globalization in which states have shrinking space to pursue the public interest. The SDGs' calls for changes that challenge the status quo are resisted by powerful actors, particularly the leading corporations and economies of the world. They were made possible by the participatory process that raised the power of civil society and less powerful states. The contestations during the formulation, characterized as 'bruising,' continue into implementation. The SDGs institutionalize the norm of sustainable development and commit governments without binding obligations. Moreover, the policy frameworks for implementation – on climate, finance for biodiversity, technology access, trade rules, finance for development – are being shaped and agreed in different processes. Those processes remain dominated by powerful states and increasingly influenced by corporate interests. The failure of multilateral action in responding to the pandemic illustrates the political obstacles in implementing the SDGs.

The importance of the context and the role of power structures in shaping how we understand global goals is illustrated in the SDGs' contrast to the MDGs. The MDGs are often said to have been a 'success' because they not only shaped the global discourse of development but are attributed as having driven poverty reduction. This is a dubious claim; the MDGs were set with unambitious and achievable targets that did not challenge the interests of powerful actors. In fact, the MDGs were an agenda of the powerful actors in the development community – the World Bank, UK and other leading bilateral donors, UNDP, and others – who actively championed its dissemination, finance, and implementation. The MDGs did not challenge the interests of the powerful actors but rather, as argued by this author, provided the framing of a narrative that would mobilize broader support for the agenda.⁵¹ In contrast, the SDGs challenge the interests of the powerful. The most transformative elements are the most challenging. It is no wonder that multi-stakeholderism is gaining momentum, interpreted and shaped as an idea to facilitate, not check, corporate interests.

In these ways, sustainable development is continuing to be contested through the SDGs, and while the list of 17 goals, 169 targets and 232 indicators will remain fixed, their interpretation will no doubt evolve over the rest of the implementation period. Their impact on realizing the transformative potential in shifting global policy will depend on the political processes that take place in other negotiating fora.

⁵¹ Sakiko Fukuda-Parr (2017), *Millennium Development Goals: Ideas, Interests, Influence*, London, Routledge.