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Global Governance

LEAD AUTHORS

MARIANNE BEISHEIM AND STEVEN BERNSTEIN

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

FRANK BIERMANN, PAMELA CHASEK, MELANIE VAN DRIEL,
FELICITAS FRITZSCHE, CAROLE-ANNE SÉNIT AND SILKE WEINLICH

Many observers expected the Sustainable Development Goals to strengthen the institutional architecture of global sustainability governance within the United Nations system and beyond. This ambition was already part of the negotiations of the goals. Here, the United Nations General Assembly had created an ‘open working group’ of only 30 countries, driven by fears that negotiations with universal participation would not lead to an agreement. However, when over 70 countries wanted to join this group, the United Nations found an innovative way to accommodate them by sharing the 30 seats among ‘duos’ and ‘trios’ of countries. In another innovation, the open working group first went through a ‘stocktaking’ process to create a common understanding of the issues and to create legitimacy among governments and stakeholders (Chasek and Wagner 2016; Dodds, Donoghue and Roesch 2016; Kamau, Chasek and O’Connor 2018). However, some studies criticized these negotiations for being ‘unpolitical’ and brushing over conflicts (Rivera 2017; Thérien and Pouliot 2020).

The academic literature has characterized the 2030 Agenda as ‘governing through goals’ (Kanie and Biermann 2017: ix). Typical features include a goal-setting process that aims to be broadly inclusive; the non-legally binding nature of the goals; reliance on weak institutional arrangements to promote and implement the goals; and extensive leeway for states or other actors and institutions in responding to the goals (Biermann, Kanie and Kim 2017; Vijge et al. 2020: 256). Some studies argued that goal-setting can be impactful and that the Sustainable Development Goals encapsulate ‘seeds for transformation’ (Stevens and Kanie 2016). Yet, global governance through goals remains a contested strategy (Kanie et al. 2017: 6; Young 2017: 38). Legal scholars emphasize that goals that are aspirational need additional mechanisms to reach beyond the fragmented and compartmentalized system of international law (Kim 2016: 17). In principle, such mechanisms can be found in the other parts of the 2030 Agenda, especially in the sections on the means of implementation and on the follow-up and review.

In this chapter we assess to what extent the literature identifies major changes in global governance – that is, the system of international agencies, programmes and other global actors and institutions – following the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. We first discuss the range of expectations for global governance arrangements for the goals, considering their stated objectives. We then assess the early performance of governance arrangements in terms of shifts in policy and practice. We focus here on changes within the United Nations system and its interactions with other international institutions and actors since the launch of the goals.

Conceptualization and Methods

In line with the approach of this overall assessment, our study of the goals' impacts on global governance aims at evaluating their steering effects. While the scholarly literature offers several definitions of global governance, most focus on authoritative and purposeful 'steering', making this a good starting point to evaluate whether the goals have constituted or underpinned governance (Bernstein 2011; Rosenau 1995). In practice, steering here means that an organization, actor or institution, individually or collectively, has adjusted its behaviour, policies, programmes or practices by explicitly adopting the goals or by pursuing objectives defined by the goals.

Aspirations and Expectations

Our analysis begins by identifying the governance aspirations mentioned in the 2030 Agenda (which includes the Sustainable Development Goals) (Finnemore and Jurkovich 2020) and the expectations raised by scholars and experts, government representatives, stakeholders, and other engaged groups. Based on official documents and early literature from the negotiations and launch period from 2011 to 2017, we identify four areas of aspirational or expected steering effects (see also Bowen et al. 2017): that the 2030 Agenda and the goals would, first, enhance multilateral leadership and guidance; second, improve system-wide coherence and coordination of global sustainable development policies; third, strengthen the global partnership and the means of implementation; and fourth, strengthen the global level follow-up and review for peer-learning and accountability to citizens. We now outline in more detail these aspirations and expectations, which will be our points of reference for the assessment of the actual steering effects of the goals that follows.

Enhancing Global Political Leadership and Guidance? After the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, governments mandated the

newly established High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development to provide ‘leadership, guidance and recommendations’ for sustainable development (UNGA 2013a). While governments gave the forum this far-reaching mandate, its formal status and resources remained limited (Abbott and Bernstein 2015). Some studies argued that the High-level Political Forum would face shortcomings similar to, or be even weaker than, the institution that it replaced, the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (Strandenaes 2016), or even cautioned that the forum could end up being an ‘empty institution’ devoid of any influence (Dimitrov 2020: 636). It is widely accepted that despite some early accomplishments, the Commission on Sustainable Development had many shortcomings, such as an inability to attract ministers from economic or social sectors; a rigid sectoral-based agenda that prevented it from addressing new issues; and a weak review mechanism (UNGA 2013b). The mandate of the High-level Political Forum aimed to address these weaknesses. Governments also decided to strengthen the forum by having it meet annually under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council and every four years under the auspices of the General Assembly.

Some studies argued that the High-level Political Forum could potentially serve as an ‘orchestrator’ for the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (see also Chapters 1 and 8 of this book). Contingent upon its focality and legitimacy, the forum could employ a soft and indirect governance strategy by enlisting third-party actors as intermediaries (Abbott and Bernstein 2015; Bernstein 2013, 2017). While debate persisted on the extent to which the weak institutional arrangements would affect the High-level Political Forum’s leadership, experts agreed that orchestration would continue to be challenging given the broad array of actors and institutions called upon to implement the 2030 Agenda.

Improving System-Wide Coherence? The 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals renewed the call for greater coordination and coherence by highlighting the need for a more integrated agenda across the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development (Le Blanc 2015). Overcoming institutional competition and turf battles has been a persistent challenge within and beyond the United Nations system (Mueller 2010). The literature describes global sustainability governance as a patchwork of international institutions that vary in their character (organizations, regimes and implicit norms), their constituencies (public and private), scope (minilateral to multilateral), and subject matter, from specific policy fields to universal concerns (Biermann et al. 2009: 16). The 2030 Agenda emphasizes the need for system-wide coherence and coordination in global governance in several contexts. It mentions policy and institutional coherence as ‘systemic issues’, captured for example in target 17.14, to ‘enhance policy coherence for sustainable development’ (UNGA 2015b: 27). It also identifies one of the roles of the High-level Political Forum as promoting

system-wide coherence and coordination of sustainable development policies, working with the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council, and other bodies and processes (UNGA 2015b: paragraph 82) (for institutional integration at the national level, see Chapter 4 of this book).

Potential positive effects noted in some studies include institutional integration (Vijge et al. 2020: 268), the creation of overarching and cross-cutting norms, the institutionalization of the Sustainable Development Goals in soft law instruments, influence on the development of rules and (legal) enforcement (Kanie et al. 2017: 6–8), and the potential to decrease norm conflicts (Vijge et al. 2020: 266). Other studies, however, questioned how far the goals could change the fragmentation of global governance (Kim 2016). This concern has led some studies to call for approaching sectoral issues from a nexus perspective, which could be facilitated by the High-level Political Forum as an integrative global steering body (Boas, Biermann and Kanie 2016).

Building a Global Partnership? It was clear that global governance for the Sustainable Development Goals would need to reflect countries' diverse capacities, capabilities and starting positions for implementing the 2030 Agenda. In addition, international rules on finance, trade and technology affect countries differently, leading to asymmetries and inequalities (Ocampo and Gómez-Arteaga 2016). Building on the earlier Millennium Development Goal 8, the 2030 Agenda aspires to revitalize a 'Global Partnership' and define means of implementation. Differences over the nature and scope of development cooperation and the sources of the necessary funding hampered agreement on the key elements of the 'Global Partnership'. Many developing countries advocated for a partnership between developing and industrialized countries, with industrialized countries taking the lead in providing the means of implementation. In addition, developing countries suggested necessary reforms to systemic global issues, for example new or reformed financial, tax, trade and investment architectures (Fukuda-Parr and Muchhala 2020: 7–8). Developing countries also reinforced their demands for greater democratization of global economic governance through increasing the voice and vote of developing countries in international financial institutions.

Many industrialized countries, however, did not see a strong necessity for major institutional reforms. Instead, they emphasized the need to expand domestic sources of financing, increase the role of the private sector, and call on emerging economies in the Global South to shoulder more responsibilities. Their understanding of the 'Global Partnership' went beyond governments and encompassed a wider range of actors, including the explicit endorsement of multi-stakeholder partnerships (Thérien and Pouliot 2020). In addition to official development assistance, developed countries expected financing for the Sustainable Development Goals to include philanthropy, remittances, South–South flows

and other official assistance, along with foreign direct investment, resources and investments of all types – including both public and private and both national and international financing.

The 2030 Agenda captures these conflicting aspirations in Sustainable Development Goal 17, as a stand-alone goal, and in the targets on means of implementation contained in the other goals. The Addis Ababa Action Agenda, adopted in 2015 at the Third International Conference on Financing for Development, also addresses the ‘means of implementation’ for the 2030 Agenda (UNGA 2015a). It is expected that national and international aid and development actors play a significant role and that official development assistance increases. However, aid became less important in the overall mix of domestic and international, as well as public and private, flows to fund the Agenda’s implementation, with the exception of aid to least developed countries, small island states or highly indebted countries with limited access to other sources of finance. The Agenda also envisages changes in policy areas such as finance, technology, trade or data, monitoring and accountability (UNGA 2015b).

While underlining the importance of national implementation, the 2030 Agenda singles out several international institutions. Below, we focus on steering effects on the United Nations development system. Suggesting a need to make it ‘fit’ for sustainable development, the 2030 Agenda stresses the ‘important role and comparative advantage’ of a reformed United Nations system for supporting the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (UNGA 2015b: paragraph 46). For this, the United Nations development entities were also expected to do better in terms of leadership and coherence. Several studies expected multilateral development organizations to play a crucial role in implementing the 2030 Agenda, especially as ‘leaders of the new “global partnership”’ (Kharas and Biau 2015: 12) that could innovate within the development community and build bridges to the private sector (Bhattacharya et al. 2018). In the vision of the 2030 Agenda, multilateral development organizations could coordinate among multiple development actors, support a more coherent approach and provide public goods such as data. The United Nations development system was expected to change its role from funding (that is, mobilizing grants to implement United Nations projects) to financing (that is, bringing together funding flows for a common result) (Bailey 2017). The United Nations was also expected to function as an orchestrator, brokering collective action to support sustainable development in networks of actors whose primary role is not necessarily related to either sustainable development or international cooperation (Paulo and Klingebiel 2016). For all these roles, multilateral organizations would need to complete internal reforms and adapt to changing demands (Browne and Weiss 2014; OECD 2015).

Improving Global Follow-Up and Review? Even before the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda, several studies offered recommendations on the follow-up and review of the Sustainable Development Goals, based on the assessment of strengths and weaknesses of the existing review mechanisms (Beisheim 2014, 2015; Espey, Walecik and Kühner 2015; Halle and Wolfe 2015). In the end, the United Nations established a voluntary review mechanism, comprising thematic reviews and Voluntary National Reviews, the latter based on national processes (UNGA 2015b: paragraph 74–90). The follow-up and review process aspired to be ‘robust, voluntary, effective, participatory, transparent and integrated [to] help countries to maximize and track progress in implementing’ the Sustainable Development Goals (UNGA 2015b: paragraph 72). Governments decided that the High-level Political Forum should have a ‘central role in overseeing a network of follow-up and review processes at the global level’ (UNGA 2015b: paragraph 82). Some negotiators of the 2030 Agenda strongly contested establishing these follow-up and review procedures (Beisheim 2014; Dodds, Donoghue and Roesch 2016; Kamau, Chasek and O’Connor 2018). As a result of many governments resisting more ‘prescriptive’ reviews, the review procedures ended up being designed to promote merely voluntary peer-learning.

Some governments also contested the role of civil society in the reviews. Some studies viewed the 2012–2015 negotiations of the Sustainable Development Goals as the most recent phase in a long-term trend towards increased civil society participation in global governance (Fox and Stoett 2016). Others, however, were more sceptical of the potential of civil society consultations to democratize global governance (Sénit, Biermann and Kalfagianni 2017). The aspirational goal of ‘leaving no one behind’ fostered some expectations for the inclusion of civil society in monitoring and reviewing the global implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (Strandenaes 2014). Indeed, the 2030 Agenda states that the follow-up and review mechanism ‘should be open, inclusive, participatory and transparent for all people and will support the reporting by all relevant stakeholders’ (UNGA 2015b: paragraph 74d) to ‘ensure that no one is left behind’ (UNGA 2015b: paragraph 72) and ‘promote accountability to our citizens’ (UNGA 2015b: paragraph 73).

Methods

We take these four aspirations and expectations as our points of reference for assessing what the academic and expert literature concludes about the steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals in global governance. Our core question, in line with the objectives stated in Chapter 1, is: Did political, economic

or societal actors in global governance change their behaviour because of the Sustainable Development Goals? Following the framework in Chapter 1, we are especially interested in causal pathways that the literature identifies, specifically through normative changes (including adjustments in legislative and regulatory frameworks and policies), institutional changes (including financial incentives and budgets), or discursive changes (including novel concepts and narratives). We limit the scope of our analysis to what the literature says about steering effects at the global level, including horizontal effects across institutional arrangements or governance complexes. While our focus is on the steering effects of Sustainable Development Goals on global governance, these effects must translate into changes and better implementation at other levels to have an impact (see Chapter 3).

Our assessment is based on a comprehensive analysis of academic and expert studies on the impact of the goals on global governance. We identified academic literature published since 2015 from the Scopus database, using a search string that combined keywords such as ‘Sustainable Development Goal*’ and ‘steer* or governance’ and ‘global’.¹ This search resulted in a total of 470 publications. To obtain more specific results, we added keywords for the four types of aspirational or expected steering effects outlined above. After scanning all titles, keywords and abstracts, we identified 90 articles as potentially relevant for our chapter. We then complemented the Scopus search with other relevant publications, including grey literature, found through either a snowball approach or drawing on our own expertise. Altogether, we read and analysed 142 articles and papers that discuss steering effects of the goals on global governance.

In view of the research questions of this assessment, we note that the number of studies with relevant findings is still limited. The few analyses that have been published in academic journals focus on general theory development, the evaluation of single policies or on normative assessments. Other studies of the institutional changes remain largely descriptive. More analysis is hence needed. In the conclusion to this chapter we discuss areas for future research in more detail.

Research Findings and Practical Insights

When the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda in 2015, the United Nations had already started to align its work with the Sustainable Development Goals. The speed and range of this uptake is impressive, as documented in an annual survey, the ‘United Nations System Sustainable Development Goal Implementation online database’ (see also Office of Internal Oversight Services 2019; UNDESA 2020). Harrington (2019) claims that ‘three genres of global governance mechanisms [have] changed and adapted to

incorporate and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals': first, those created for the goals themselves; second, economic mechanisms; and third, global environmental governance. Building on these initial findings, we now assess the literature that focuses on the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development; the United Nations development system; and global environmental governance. Our focus in each analysis is the four aspirations and expectations for the Sustainable Development Goals outlined above.

The High-level Political Forum

The High-level Political Forum started to review progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals immediately after their launch. The fact that the High-level Political Forum became the 'home' of the Sustainable Development Goals in the United Nations system is itself an institutional steering effect of the 2030 Agenda. The High-level Political Forum attracts a wide range of participants, including high-level representatives from governments, the United Nations system and stakeholder groups. A 2019 survey found that 78 per cent of respondents agree that the High-level Political Forum has brought together participants with diverse backgrounds (UNDESA 2019a). The literature views the High-level Political Forum as a focal meeting place with a high degree of convening power (Adams 2019; Beisheim 2020a; Hege, Chabason and Barchiche 2020).

Enhancing Global Political Leadership and Guidance? Most studies concur that the *formal* leadership and guidance emanating from the High-level Political Forum during its first four-year cycle is limited (Beisheim 2018; Beisheim and Bernstein 2020b; Hege, Chabason and Barchiche 2020; UNDESA 2019b, 2019c). An often-mentioned example is that the outcome document – the pre-negotiated ministerial declarations that are supposed to be adopted at the end of each annual High-level Political Forum – fails to reflect discussions held at the meeting. The document merely reiterates general commitments and challenges without offering much political guidance or measures for follow-up (Beisheim 2018). Studies highlight a significant gap between mandate and expectations, on the one hand, and the forum's actual performance on leadership and guidance, on the other. This gap is notable, given that 83 per cent of respondents to a United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs survey expect the High-level Political Forum ministerial declaration to deliver in this regard (UNDESA 2019a).

Academic studies offer several reasons for this lack of formal leadership. First, the launch of the High-level Political Forum coincided with a period of increasing strain on, and declining commitment to, multilateralism (Hooghe, Lenz and Marks 2019; Morse and Keohane 2014). This is mirrored in many conflicts and an underlying unresolved normative dissent about the forum's mandate and

format (Beisheim 2020b). Hege (2018) suggests these general trends have manifested specifically in the inability of the High-level Political Forum since 2018 to adopt the negotiated ministerial declaration by consensus. In 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic also had an impact on the forum, further diminishing its political leadership. As meetings of the Economic and Social Council were held virtually, governments refrained from voting online. The draft declaration could thus not be adopted through a majority vote. Yet, the United Nations Secretary-General continues to call for an ‘inclusive and networked multilateralism’. For this, policy papers advocate strengthening the High-level Political Forum and turning it into a relevant network node (Beisheim and Fritzsche 2021) or – as a more far-reaching reform option – a powerful Sustainable Development Council (Wieczorek-Zeul et al. 2021, also Biermann 2014).

Second, some studies indicate an unresolved conflict about the status of the High-level Political Forum. The forum could be seen as either the main United Nations forum on sustainable development that has universal membership and, if not takes, at least prepares vital decisions; or it could be seen as a mere platform for informal exchange (Adams 2019; Beisheim 2018, 2020a; Beisheim and Bernstein 2020a). Behind this difference is the deeper divide of governments on the relationship between the High-level Political Forum and the Economic and Social Council, which some member states see as the main United Nations body responsible for follow-up and review (Beisheim 2020a, 2021; Strandenaes 2016).

Third, some studies have argued that the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, which provides the secretariat for the High-level Political Forum, lacks resources and autonomy to support a more robust leadership role for the High-level Political Forum and also shows administrative inefficiencies (Janus and Weinlich 2018; Office of Internal Oversight Services 2020; Widerberg and van Laerhoven 2014).

The literature thus suggests that the High-level Political Forum has fallen victim to these conflicts, shortcomings and, most significantly, lack of political will by governments to remove structural barriers to transformative change (see also Fuchs, Hayden and Kalfagianni 2020).

Improving System-Wide Coherence? The gap between aspirations and performance is also large regarding system-wide coherence. At the High-level Political Forum, speakers increasingly highlight interlinkages between the Sustainable Development Goals. The recommendations of the 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report have supported this shift in discourse. This report offers a detailed framework for supporting coherence and addressing the synergies and trade-offs by identifying six entry points: human well-being and capabilities; sustainable and just economies; food systems and nutrition patterns; energy decarbonization and universal access; urban and peri-urban development; and

global environmental commons. In addition, the 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report lists four levers for transformative change: governance; economy and finance; individual and collective action; and science and technology (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General 2019).

Yet, some studies criticize the High-level Political Forum's annual focus on a subset of Sustainable Development Goals as too siloed (Amanuma et al. 2019) – despite having an overarching theme chosen for each meeting. Nevertheless, the thematic reviews still lag behind their potential to provide evidence-based analyses on interlinkages and cross-cutting issues, trade-offs and synergies, and gaps (Beisheim and Bernstein 2020a). Above all, several studies find that the High-level Political Forum has failed to promote or produce tangible outputs to achieve policy coherence (Beisheim 2020a; Brimont and Hege 2018; Monkelbaan 2019; UNDESA 2019a). Part of the literature has focused on how to improve policy coherence between the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris climate agreement (Janetschek et al. 2020) or the human rights obligations of governments (Danish Institute for Human Rights 2020; Feiring and König-Reis 2020).

Studies on institutional interplay underline that the joint monitoring of individual goals can help with developing shared normative understandings, even though this is limited by structural factors, and legitimacy struggles continue (Addey 2021; Breitmeier et al. 2021). Some of the forum's reviews can build on existing comprehensive processes, for example for the review of Goal 6 on the joint monitoring of several United Nations agencies on water and sanitation (Beisheim 2018). Preparing for other reviews, however, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs had to set up entirely new coordination processes, for example with ten international organizations for the review of Goal 16 (Fritzsche 2020). The forum's meetings and review processes have also been criticized for not engaging with other processes, such as the Bretton Woods institutions or human rights reviews (De Burca 2019).

Beyond the forum's work, some studies identify substantial efforts to align the United Nations' work with the Sustainable Development Goals (Kapucu and Beaudet 2020; Office of Internal Oversight Services 2019). Another analysis, however, finds that the impact of the Sustainable Development Goals on interagency cooperation has been limited to merely providing a cross-cutting visual and rhetorical tool (Schnitzler, Seifert and Tataje 2020).

Building a Global Partnership? Each year, the High-level Political Forum features sessions to review Goal 17 on the Global Partnership, the results of the Financing for Development Forum and the Science, Technology and Innovation Forum, and the situation of countries in special situations such as least developed countries or small island developing states. Some studies find, however, that these sessions do not provide much added value beyond the two original forums

(Dano 2019; Obenland 2019). Likewise, countries rarely report on their financing strategies in their Voluntary National Reviews, resulting in limited peer-learning (Committee for Development Policy 2020; Hege, Chabason and Barchiche 2020). Accordingly, some studies argue that the follow-up and review system of the High-level Political Forum delivers neither on mutual accountability between donor and developing countries nor on business accountability (Adams 2019; Ocampo and Gómez-Arteaga 2016).

According to its mandate, the High-level Political Forum also aspires to offer a 'platform for partnerships'. To showcase multi-stakeholder partnerships during the High-level Political Forum, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs has launched the 'PX – Partnership Exchange' and the 'Partnerships for SDGs online platform', a global database for self-registering initiatives. Yet, both efforts constitute only a weak 'meta-governance' for multi-stakeholder partnerships for Sustainable Development Goals (Beisheim and Simon 2018). While over 5,000 partnerships and voluntary commitments are registered on the platform, some studies question whether such voluntary bottom-up frameworks will deliver the type of multi-stakeholder partnerships required for true transformations (Beisheim and Ellersiek 2017, 2018; Horan 2019). A case in point is the small number of progress reports in the global registry (174 at the time of writing, with another 1,052 being expected but late and 3,556 more than two years overdue) (see also Bäckstrand, Koliev and Mert forthcoming). As regards causality, Breitmeier et al. (2021) found that in global food governance one partnership – the Sustainable Food Systems Programme – implemented changes *because of* new mobilization of knowledge around the Sustainable Development Goals.

In 2019, the United Nations launched a '2030 Agenda Partnership Accelerator', which aims to scale up partnering and have transformational impact. Moreover, leading up to the 2019 'SDG Summit' (that is, the quadrennial High-level Political Forum under the auspices of the United Nations General Assembly), the United Nations launched a new platform for 'SDG Acceleration Actions'. Future research will need to follow the impact of these new initiatives while also engaging with new analytical approaches (Transformative Partnerships 2030, Sondermann and Ulbert 2021).

Improving Global Follow-Up and Review? The Sustainable Development Goals have strongly shaped the work of the United Nations with data. An Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators developed a global indicator framework, adopted in 2017. The Statistical Commission is working to refine the framework, and a whole array of processes has been initiated in support of this work. Building on this framework, the Secretary-General and the Statistical Commission issue annual reports that review progress towards the goals and targets and inform the High-level Political Forum. Studies lament that this data-driven monitoring

approach is technocratic and ignores politics, specifically attention to power and structural inequalities (Bexell and Jönsson 2019; Fisher and Fukuda-Parr 2019; Fukuda-Parr and McNeill 2019). The academic literature discusses several additional measurement and data issues, which are addressed in detail in Chapter 7.

Overall, the institutional arrangements for the follow-up and review of implementation through the High-level Political Forum remain weak, confirming early criticisms that the 2030 Agenda had a vague and state-centric conception of accountability in terms of ‘what agents are held accountable, for what and to whom’ (Bexell and Jönsson 2017, 27; Donald and Way 2016). As early as 2016, several governments had opposed strengthening the follow-up and review framework for the Sustainable Development Goals (Beisheim 2016; see UNGA 2016). Now studies criticize the quality of both the cross-cutting thematic reviews and the reviews of individual goals (Beisheim 2018; Fritzsche 2020; Hege, Chabason and Barchiche 2020). National reporting is entirely voluntary. Nevertheless, 176 countries reported so far, some multiple times. In 2016, contestation led governments to limit agreement on ‘voluntary reporting guidelines’ of the United Nations Secretary-General to being a ‘suggested tool’ in preparing for the Voluntary National Reviews (UNGA 2016: paragraph 9; see also Beisheim 2018). The literature attributes the large variation in the quality of these reviews to this lack of mandatory reporting rules, reluctance to address problems and gaps, and the failure to highlight commitments for truly transformative action (Beisheim 2018; Hege, Chabason and Barchiche 2020; Kindornay and Gendron 2020; Partners for Review 2019, 2020; Persson, Weitz and Nilsson 2016). While some studies suggest that synergies between reporting mechanisms should be strengthened, for example by linking the forum’s Voluntary National Reviews to the Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Reviews (Feiring and König-Reis 2020), governments could not agree on such a mandate. Nevertheless, one study highlights that the United Nations human rights mechanisms increasingly engage with specific targets of Sustainable Development Goals in their reviews, even though this practice appears uneven (Jensen 2019). Other studies find that countries’ reports tend to prioritize those Sustainable Development Goals that are already part of their national development plans (Forestier and Kim 2020). Research also indicates that the Voluntary National Review processes mainly promote international and horizontal accountability (Bexell and Jönsson 2019), while the development of national, hierarchical accountability would require stronger national processes (Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen, Dahl and Persson 2018) (see Chapter 3 of this book).

The High-level Political Forum provides space for interactive debate but its format is not geared towards collecting and documenting recommendations by the speakers. Some studies criticize the limited opportunity for interventions by non-state actors and marginalized groups and view informal events in parallel to the

High-level Political Forum more positively (Beisheim 2018; Grzywnowicz 2020; Sarwar and Nicolai 2018). The so-called Voluntary National Reviews Labs (that is, informal in-depth discussions of those reviews organized by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs), the many side events, and the growing number of special events are all seen as places for more open and honest discussion about successes and failures (Amanuma et al. 2019; Beisheim 2020a; Beisheim and Bernstein 2020a). Accordingly, experts acknowledge that the High-level Political Forum has offered space for peer-learning and exchanging best practices – but whether this affects the implementation of the goals remains unclear.

An interesting new development is the growing number of ‘Voluntary Local Reviews’. Since 2017, the High-level Political Forum has featured regular special events on local and regional government action, with mainly cities presenting (Dellas et al. 2018; Ortiz-Moya et al. 2020). Parliaments have also become active at the High-level Political Forum, for example through a Parliamentary Forum organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2020). The existing academic literature, however, focuses on the role of parliaments at the national level (Bexell and Jönsson 2020; Vrieze and Fitsilis 2020).

In sum, the literature finds mostly institutional steering effects of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly the creation of the High-level Political Forum and related institutional innovations, including its convening power, peer-learning opportunities and review functions. The High-level Political Forum has become a focal point for promoting the Sustainable Development Goals throughout the United Nations system, supported by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. However, the leadership, authority and capacity of the forum have remained limited, as has its role in enhancing institutional interplay. The value of the forum lies mainly in informal leadership and guidance, for example through peer-learning.

In terms of discourse, the literature suggests that some principles, such as coherence and ‘leave no one behind’, have resonated through meetings and activities of the High-level Political Forum and throughout the United Nations system as a result of its relationship to the Economic and Social Council and the United Nations General Assembly. Yet despite the promotion of these discourses and the informal guidance, there is little evidence in the literature that the High-level Political Forum has effectively produced formal normative outputs to foster policy coherence or directly influence the rest of the United Nations system in that regard.

United Nations Development System

Discussions about how the United Nations development system would need to change to accommodate the requirements of the Sustainable Development Goals

began well before the adoption of the 2030 Agenda. The United Nations development system consist of 36 United Nations entities that differ in mandates and governance structures, mostly rely on voluntary funding and possesses weak centralized decision-making. From 2014 on, the Economic and Social Council held a series of dialogues to discuss the repositioning of the United Nations development system. Yet, no decisions towards substantial reforms were made. Several studies attributed this lack of change to the traditional conflict between industrialized and developing countries that prevents governments from delegating further authority to the United Nations (Baumann 2017; Dongxiao, Ruipeng and Lei 2018).

Nonetheless, the United Nations General Assembly firmly established the 2030 Agenda as the overall objective for the whole system, and in May 2018, the Assembly took a series of decisions to better align the United Nations development system's capacities and resources to the 2030 Agenda. Several studies see the 2030 Agenda as the main rationale for these reforms, although some studies also note many pre-2015 grievances that these reforms also aim to address (Browne and Weiss 2021; Dongxiao, Ruipeng and Lei 2018; Reddy 2018). While a few internal studies describe and assess reform efforts, along with a few external, more policy-oriented studies, overall we note a lack of scholarly assessments and especially more theory-led research. The limitations in scholarship suggest the need for more work beyond internal assessments to more generally determine whether changes to the operations of United Nations entities took place because of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Enhancing Global Political Leadership and Guidance? The United Nations General Assembly directed the United Nations development system to propagate global norms and standards, especially the 2030 Agenda. Yet to do so requires not only advocacy but also to incorporate the Sustainable Development Goals in all their operations. The literature highlights ways in which the goals have guided multilateral institutions to align policies. Some studies observe that multilateral development organizations have formally translated the 2030 Agenda into their work programmes, reshaped their policies and operational strategies, created tools to monitor this alignment, and use the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals, their targets and some indicators in country strategies (OECD 2018: 152–67). United Nations entities are described as leading here; most United Nations development strategies at the country-level use the Sustainable Development Goals as a global results framework (OECD and UNDP 2019: 99). As part of the reforms, the United Nations development system as a whole formulates a system-wide strategic document that outlines its collective approach to the 2030 Agenda, defines its roles and commits to principles such as 'leave no one behind' and national ownership (United Nations Sustainable Development Group 2019). An internal

assessment shows, however, that the scope and intensity of change varies across the United Nations (Office of Internal Oversight Services 2019).

The 2030 Agenda has also been translated into policy tools. This process, however, has not yet been analysed in more detail. An interesting yet under-researched instrument for advancing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda is the 2016 ‘Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support’ framework. This framework seeks to orient the technical assistance by United Nations entities in support of the national implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. It aims to guide the translation of the goals into national and sub-national plans, budgets and actions, raise public awareness, and establish practices for monitoring and reporting (UNDP 2019). While the framework has been used widely, it is yet to be assessed from a scholarly perspective.

In terms of leadership, the United Nations has strengthened the role of its Resident Coordinators, who now represent the United Nations Secretary-General in a developing country. The coordinator is accountable to the government for the United Nations’ collective support of the goals and expected to act as an impartial convenor and, where possible, orchestrator.

Yet, while internal reports highlight good progress in implementing reforms, it is questionable whether these reforms will fundamentally alter the work of United Nations entities regarding strong multilateral leadership and guidance. Studies highlight structural impediments and point out that limited funding and the lack of robust mandates hamper a shift of United Nations development entities towards providing more integrated policy advice (Hendra and Baumann 2020; OECD 2020). United Nations development entities have also failed to take the principle of universality seriously. The system has paid little attention to measures that support high-income countries in their sustainable development efforts internally or in their development policies (Weinlich and Baumann 2018).

The unclear steering effects of the goals on United Nations development entities might be in line with a broader pattern. A growing number of studies detail the difficulties for the 2030 Agenda to initiate change: Many lament that development finance at a scale that they deem necessary has not been provided (Barua 2020; Kharas 2019). Moreover, the institutional and instrumental overhaul of national and international development actors called for by the universal, integrated and indivisible ambition of the 2030 Agenda, has failed to materialize. Kloke-Lesch (2021: 147), for instance, argues that ‘development cooperation actors have responded to the 2030 Agenda mainly by adopting its terminology and using it as a reinforced narrative underpinning and incrementally broadening their pre-existing business models’.

The literature discusses several reasons for this limited influence. First, it is argued that the commitments regarding Goal 17, and the ‘means of implementation’

more generally, mostly only reaffirm existing commitments and are too vague. The negotiated text makes it difficult to unambiguously identify what concrete changes are needed owing to soft formulations, static indicators and missing data baselines (Berensmann et al. 2015). Second, without any specific guidance on the quality of development cooperation or a universal framework to assess their contributions, development organizations can easily align themselves with the goals rhetorically or in policy pronouncements (Pérez-Pineda and Wehrmann 2021; Rudolph 2017), while the allocation of official development assistance remains motivated by short-term strategic interests of economic and political opportunities, not by the priorities of the goals (Mawdsley et al. 2018). Third, some studies argue that the 2030 Agenda does not clearly attribute responsibilities for implementing the goals (Bexell and Jönsson 2017; Cooper and French 2018; Spangenberg 2017). Fourth, new development organizations led by Southern actors increased existing coordination challenges within the heterogeneous system of international development cooperation, which was exacerbated by the unresolved conflict between countries from the Global South and Global North on what development cooperation means and who bears which responsibilities. All these factors together have created coordination challenges when it comes to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (Chaturverdi et al. 2021).

Improving System-Wide Coherence? A key aim of ongoing reforms of the United Nations development system is to strengthen cooperation and coordination among the entities and translate their activities into more coherent support at scale for countries' efforts to implement the goals. This effort includes attempts to overcome the divisions between the activities of the United Nations in peace and security, humanitarian aid, human rights, and sustainable development (Ivanova 2021; Samarasinghe 2021). Measures have included increasing the authority of the Resident Coordinators; enlarging systemic support structures and delinking them from the United Nations Development Programme to make them more independent; and new cooperation mechanisms to better integrate the Regional Economic Commissions with the regional structures of the United Nations (Connolly and Mincieli 2019; Connolly and Roesch 2020; Surasky et al. 2020). The narrative was adjusted to support greater coherence as well. The United Nations Development Assistance Framework – the programmatic umbrella for all United Nations activities in a developing country – was renamed the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework. New detailed guidance on how to formulate such a framework both in terms of process and substance is meant to ensure that the United Nations development assistance follows an integrated and multidimensional programming approach based on the goals and principles such as 'leave no one behind'.

However, several studies indicate a mixed impact of these efforts and persisting obstacles to reaching greater coherence. Some articles argue that the reforms, if

fully implemented, would make the United Nations development system a strong partner in pushing for a transformation towards sustainable development (Hendra and Fitzgerald 2021). Others warn of high transaction costs of coordination in a loose system (Sohn and Choi 2019). While overall cautious not to rule out improvements regarding system-wide coherence, still others claim that the reforms have inbuilt limitations, in particular with regard to the governance and funding of the system (Weinlich et al. 2022). As Golding (2021: 231) puts it: ‘the inherent constraints of a 75-year-old, fragmented United Nations system, with a long history of building silos and branding, mean that the single biggest challenge remains the alignment of goals, resources, activities, evaluations and reporting back to member states, to donors, and ultimately to taxpayers’. Systemic and structural changes underway are mostly restricted to areas under the purview of the United Nations Secretary-General. They fall short of tackling fragmentation more forcefully, for instance by merging entities or creating a sustainable development board as an overarching governing body (Helgason 2016). The United Nations development system’s central authority remains weak, as do mechanisms to ensure coordination between the pillars, from peace and security to human rights and the environment (Gruener and Hammergren 2021; Samarasinghe 2021).

There is a consensus in the literature that the funding patterns at the United Nations are a strong driver for fragmentation: The long-term trend of earmarked funding means that United Nations entities with overlapping mandates compete for scarce resources, both in developing countries as well as globally (Baumann and Weinlich 2021). The reforms address the issue in the ‘Funding Compact’ where governments pledge to provide more and better quality funding in return for better accountability, effectiveness and efficiency on the part of the United Nations development system (Weinlich and Jenks 2019). Whether these voluntary commitments will lead to a more appropriately balanced mix of resources needs to be closely studied. Determining the impact of such reforms is especially important since the increasingly earmarked nature of multilateral funding is frequently found to be an impediment to multilateral organizations fully delivering on their potential to implement the 2030 Agenda (Baumann, Lundsgaarde and Weinlich 2020; OECD 2020). Earmarked funding promotes a piecemeal approach that limits flexibility and the ability to target funds where recipients believe they are needed most, and it generally restricts the ability to develop integrated approaches to support transformations (Weinlich et al. 2020). Since donor organizations use the power of their purse to direct activities of multilateral organizations instead of seeking multilateral consensus, earmarked funding also undermines global governance and the legitimacy of multilateral organizations (Barder, Ritchie and Rogerson 2019; Graham 2017; Michaelowa 2017).

Building a Global Partnership? As part of the reforms following the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals, the United Nations has started to assist governments in mobilizing and accessing new funding sources. Activities range from establishing green finance products and other pooled funds that are open to contributions from the private sector, to supporting governments in devising so called integrated national financing frameworks (Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation and United Nations Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office 2018: 112–34). The United Nations also engages in analytical and advocacy work to align the financial system with the 2030 Agenda (UNEP 2018). The United Nations Secretary-General, for instance, has founded the ‘Global Investors for Sustainable Development’ alliance to enhance the impact of private investment on sustainable development. There is little scholarly literature that takes stock of these efforts or assesses their effects, although the annual reports of the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation and the United Nations Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office (2020) have showcased several initiatives. There is more interest in multilateral financial organizations and the challenges and potential dangers of using public funds for mobilizing private sector capital (Elder, Shigemoto and King 2018; King, Elder and Shigemoto 2018; Mawdsley 2018; Walker, Pekmezovic and Walker 2019). Some studies assess the United Nations development system’s mixed record in attracting funding for their own activities from the private sector and embarking on partnerships with for-profit companies and philanthropies (Biermann et al. 2020). Some studies, while still underlining the need for increased resources, also raise concerns about the absence of rigorous oversight in line with the United Nations core norms and human rights standards (Adams 2021; Seitz and Martens 2017).

Improving Global Follow-Up and Review? Many entities of the United Nations development system engage in monitoring global progress by acting as ‘custodian agencies’ for indicators under the Sustainable Development Goals (van Driel et al. 2021; Young 2017). As one study describes, since governments do not automatically provide the necessary funding for these tasks, some indicators initially were unclaimed by any entity, while for others, there was competition (Kapto 2019). The United Nations development system also works towards improving data and data collection on indicators in developing countries and strengthening national statistical capacity. Closer cooperation on data, especially on vulnerable groups, is part of the reforms. Some articles describe successful United Nations efforts to harmonize and establish global data standards, adopted in April 2020, that allow individual entities and the development system as a whole to report its activities against specific goals (Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation and United Nations Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office 2019). One study has highlighted

that the reforms strengthened lines of accountability between governments and the United Nations development system (Golding 2021).

In sum, the literature finds a variety of steering effects of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. The United Nations General Assembly prominently anchored the 2030 Agenda as the main purpose of the United Nations development system in its resolutions that provided system-wide guidance and authorized the reform, thereby initiating normative change. Multifaceted institutional changes can also be observed as part of the reform. While the 2030 Agenda provided the key rationale for the reform, many of these changes are seen in the literature as attempts to overcome earlier and longstanding fragmentation problems. While some changes are far-reaching in terms of how the United Nations development system collaborates, they did not include more fundamental steps such as the merger of entities.

The overall impact of the institutional changes also depends on whether governments are able and willing to send coherent signals in the governing bodies and change their funding practices. The literature describes many discursive changes, and the 2030 Agenda offers a new narrative for United Nations agencies towards a more collective approach. Yet it remains questionable how deep these discursive changes go and whether they will override organizational and financial incentives that still drive the system apart and push it towards small-scale interventions instead of integrated approaches at scale.

Global Environmental Governance

Global environmental governance is known to be institutionally fragmented and lacking a central institution such as the International Labour Organization or the World Health Organization in their fields. More than a thousand international environmental treaties create a complex global regulatory framework, each one with their own conferences of the parties as their primary governing body. This institutional fragmentation of global environmental governance has been discussed in the literature since the 1970s, with reform proposals ranging from better interaction management and the clustering of environmental treaties to the creation of a powerful world environment organization (Biermann and Bauer 2005).

To catalyse and better coordinate environmental activities in the United Nations system, in 1972 governments created the United Nations Environment Programme. The programme is meant 'to be the leading global environmental authority that sets the global environmental agenda, that promotes the coherent implementation of the environmental dimension of sustainable development within the United Nations system and that serves as an authoritative advocate for the global environment' (UNEP 1997: 55). Its overall political impact has been limited, however, and many

other actors, notably the conferences of the parties to the major environmental treaties, still dominate the development of global environmental governance.

The 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development sought to improve global environmental governance (UNGA 2012). Among other reforms, governments agreed to upgrade the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme, which had only 58 members, to a more ambitious United Nations Environment Assembly with universal membership. Some scholars expressed hope that the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, agreed three years later, could serve as collective 'headlines' for better connecting the many multilateral environmental agreements (Biermann, Kanie and Kim 2017). The record indicates, however, a more limited impact.

Enhancing Global Political Leadership and Guidance? The key body to provide leadership to implement the Sustainable Development Goals is the High-level Political Forum, discussed above. As for the United Nations Environment Programme, some studies indicate that its influence might have become more limited since the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals, partially because of the integrated nature of the 17 goals and the now wider set of actors, institutions and norms that engage with environmental concerns (Elder and Olsen 2019; McInerney 2017). Others observe a further division of policy concerns in the three components of atmosphere, land and water, as they are distinctly covered in Goal 13 on climate change, Goal 14 on life below water and Goal 15 on life on land (Scholtz and Barnard 2018). Some studies indicate that the United Nations Environment Programme has been unable to fully use the potential of the new United Nations Environment Assembly, now with universal membership, to steer the global environmental agenda in support of the Sustainable Development Goals. Formally, the Assembly is committed to the 2030 Agenda and communicates its messages to the High-level Political Forum (McInerney 2017: 17; Urho et al. 2019: 29). Yet, the Assembly has also become more political. Governments have become more interested in the Assembly, as indicated by an increase of 21 per cent in the number of delegations attending between 2010 and 2017 (Urho et al. 2019: 23). Governments have also assumed more responsibility for introducing resolutions and the number of resolutions has increased; both developments have reduced the role of the secretariat. Consequently, many resolutions are often less aligned with the programme of work of the United Nations Environment Programme, which has raised confusion about ownership and follow-up, including about which Sustainable Development Goals are relevant (Urho et al. 2019: 25). Some studies conclude that the United Nations Environment Programme still faces hurdles to being an anchor institution for the global environment and to steer collective action for the 2030 Agenda (Ivanova 2020a; 2020b: 347).

Improving System-Wide Coherence? Environmental governance has been described as one of the most fragmented domains of global governance (Biermann 2014; Zelli and van Asselt 2013). The Sustainable Development Goals here seem to have had a largely discursive impact. For example, the Environment Management Group, through which the United Nations Environment Programme seeks to coordinate with 51 multilateral bodies, has now included the 2030 Agenda in its terms of reference and adopted in 2016 a system-wide framework of strategies on environmental issues. The Sustainable Development Goals seem to have inspired the Environment Management Group to move beyond its thematically driven approach, as it now aims to converge agency strategies and strengthen capacity to support the integration of the environment in the implementation of the goals (McInerney 2017: 5; Urho et al. 2019: 43). Starting in 2017, the Environment Management Group organized a series of Nexus Dialogues on thematic and institutional interlinkages between environmental issues, frameworks and agendas in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals. Yet, following the United Nations' own assessment, the group's functioning is 'limited in effectiveness and scope' (UNGA 2018: paragraph 81).

Some institutional effects can be found, even though many reforms follow a longer trajectory of increased interaction management and are not a direct effect of the global goals. Many multilateral environmental agreements have taken decisions to strengthen synergies and cooperation through shared approaches and operational tools. An example is the mapping of biodiversity-related conventions to the Aichi Biodiversity Targets in 2016 (Azizi, Biermann and Kim 2019: 460). Some environmental treaties used the Sustainable Development Goals to justify linkages with other sustainability issues and refer to the goals as higher-order priorities. Yet, operational difficulties remain because of diverse memberships and objectives and the often-limited integration between the objectives of multilateral environmental agreements and the Sustainable Development Goals and their targets. For example, Dauvergne (2018) concludes that despite Goal 14 on oceans, global governance of marine plastic pollution remains highly uneven, without strong regulation with binding targets and timelines. Harrould-Kolieb (2020) argues that Goal 14.3, *Minimize and address the impacts of ocean acidification, including through enhanced scientific cooperation at all levels*, lacks the specificity required to have effect and requires a much stronger governance framework.

The United Nations Environment Programme could play a role in facilitating coherence among international environmental treaties as it aims to focus more strongly on cross-cutting areas in its programmatic cooperation with treaties within and across their thematic clusters. This includes more connections with 'non-environmental' development objectives, such as human rights, gender equality,

economic growth and employment (UNEP 2020). Yet the relationship of the United Nations Environment Programme with the hundreds of conferences of the parties to multilateral environmental agreements is still vague; decision-making seems often to continue to operate in silos without an overall strategy or mechanism for cooperation to facilitate system-wide coherence (Chasek and Downie 2021: 302; Urho et al. 2019: 85). The Sustainable Development Goals do not seem to have structurally transformed these global institutional architectures.

Building a ‘Global Partnership’? In terms of global partnership, envisioned by the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, no transformative effects are reported in the literature. Funding for environmental programmes has not substantially increased. Many changes in collaboration among countries that have occurred follow the trajectory of international environmental treaties that make up the texture of global environmental governance, but have not been directly motivated by the Sustainable Development Goals. For example, the climate convention processes have continued without clear added impact of the Sustainable Development Goal 13, *Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts*.

Improving the Global Follow-Up and Review? The United Nations Environment Programme is supposed to provide a central narrative on the environmental dimension of sustainable development for the annual reports that inform the High-level Political Forum, partially because of its role as a ‘custodian’ in the United Nations system for 26 environment-related indicators that do not fall under a multilateral environmental agreement. Indeed, there are some efforts to increase information management, for example in two web portals (McInerney 2017: 3; Urho et al. 2019: 12). A ‘World Environment Situation Room’ is intended to provide a global digital environmental platform underpinned by economic and social data, drawing on private and citizen science (UNEP 2020: 7). These datasets aim to track progress on multilateral environmental agreements (UNEP 2020: 30). However, environmental data remain a weak area in implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, with only about 40 per cent country-level data coverage for the 93 environment-related indicators (Campbell et al. 2020: 446).

The 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development also called upon the United Nations Environment Programme to ‘ensure active participation of relevant stakeholders’ (UNGA 2012: paragraph 88). This focus has led to an interpretation of ‘partnership’ that is more consistent with a focus on broadening the range of actors or multi-stakeholder partnerships than on financing or structural reforms. Changes include more flexibility in accrediting civil society organizations, which led to an increase of 80 per cent in accredited organizations between 2013 and 2018, from 272 to 490 (Urho et al. 2019). Participation in the United Nations Environment Assembly has also increased over time, from 1,200 in the

first assembly to 4,450 in the third assembly. However, civil society actors and the private sector are still rather disconnected from decision-making (Urho et al. 2019: 64). In its 2022–2025 Medium-Term Strategy, the United Nations Environment Programme has restated its ambition to increase partnerships, including South–South, North–South and triangular cooperation, as well as cooperation with civil society and science, especially regarding data collection (Campbell et al. 2020; UNEP 2020).

In sum, the literature shows some adjustments in global environmental governance because of the Sustainable Development Goals, yet with only mixed results. Most changes are discursive, with international organizations, programmes and treaty bodies adopting the language of the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda. The leadership of the High-level Political Forum is also limited in global environmental governance, and the leadership role of the United Nations Environment Programme has not been structurally transformed. The alignment of multilateral environmental agreements has not been drastically affected by the Sustainable Development Goals (see also Chapter 6). The Nexus Dialogues, however, suggest that the Environment Management Group can inspire a more integrated approach, which could be related back to the broader vision of the 2030 Agenda.

As in other areas, so too in global environmental governance is it difficult to analytically separate the steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals from the broader changes initiated since 2016. Many conferences of the parties to the hundreds of environmental treaties have continued their policy development, with more or less success; yet the impact of the global goals on these treaty bodies remains doubtful and is unlikely to be transformative. Institutional effects related to the Sustainable Development Goals concern data collection, indicator development and the Nexus Dialogues.

Importantly, the relationship between global environmental governance and the Sustainable Development Goals is in many instances bidirectional, that is, the global goals themselves reflect decisions and processes that centre on other institutions. Goal 13, *Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts*, is not much more than a reference to the climate convention and related processes, without adding new ambitions or different targets. In a footnote to Goal 13, the 2030 Agenda explicitly ‘acknowledge[s] that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is the primary international, intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change’. Bidirectionality is less visible for Goal 14 on oceans and Goal 15 on life on land. But also here, some targets refer to standards from other policy processes or organizations, such as the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission Criteria and Guidelines on the Transfer of Marine Technology.

Finally, we need to conclude also that this area is in need of more research, especially of large-scale comparative assessments of the extent to which norms, standards and decisions by international environmental treaty bodies have been affected by the Sustainable Development Goals beyond mere discursive recognition.

Conclusions and Future Directions

We started this chapter by first identifying four aspirations and expectations for the steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals at the global level: enhancing global political leadership and guidance; improving system-wide coherence; building a global partnership; and improving global follow-up and review. We examined what the literature says on the degree to which these expectations were met in the operations and performance of the United Nations' work on the Sustainable Development Goals in three areas: the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development; the United Nations development system; and global environmental governance. Here we review the main findings, focusing on whether the literature identified normative, institutional, or discursive changes in line with the four aspirations in each of the three governance arrangements assessed.

Looking across the three arenas, overall we conclude that there is a broad consensus in the literature that the Sustainable Development Goals have had some effects on global governance through their widespread adoption as normative references in policy and programme pronouncements, through establishing new institutions and changing existing institutions, and in a changed discourse within global institutions that now addresses the global challenges targeted by the Sustainable Development Goals. United Nations entities have aligned their work with the Sustainable Development Goals. Moreover, the commitments and principles in the 2030 Agenda, the agreement over the means of implementation, and the framework for a follow-up and review helped to advance alignment processes in the United Nations system.

At the same time, however, the literature does not show compelling evidence or confidence that the Sustainable Development Goals have had any transformative impact on broadening or changing the mandates, practices or resource allocation of international organizations and institutions. While the underpinning governance principles of the Sustainable Development Goals – such as universality, coherence, integration and 'leaving no one behind' – have changed the discourse in multilateral institutions, there is limited evidence of whether these discursive changes have transformed the practice of global sustainable development governance.

In terms of institutional changes, the creation of the High-level Political Forum in 2013 and its reviews of the Sustainable Development Goals from 2016 onwards

is evidence of institutional reform in both anticipation of and response to the Sustainable Development Goals. Yet, the leadership and guidance required for actual steering towards substantial transformations has not materialized. The most blatant manifestation of this absence is the outcome documents of the High-level Political Forum, which lack any specific guidance or action plans and do not even reflect the discussions in the forum. Moreover, given the expectations of servicing the 2030 Agenda, the responsible divisions of the United Nations secretariat suffer from weak mandates and limited resources. While the literature identifies several reasons for these weaknesses, the lack of political will among governments is likely to top the list, which reflects wider problems in the multilateral system and also impacted the 2021 negotiations on the review of the forum.

Conversely, the High-level Political Forum provides a platform for peer-learning among governments, especially by providing opportunities for interaction with, and among, non-state, local and regional actors. The literature documents a high level of buy-in and participation in follow-up and review, but also notes a need to enhance the quality of these processes, making them more inclusive, coherent, evaluative, action-oriented and geared to inform future decision- and policy-making. The academic literature has not yet systematically addressed whether and how this peer-learning has led to transformative normative (legislative or policy) changes, at global, national or local levels. More research is needed on the development and uptake of best practices. The 247 presentations of Voluntary National Reviews until 2021 could be seen as an excellent source of data for larger and more systematic empirical analyses of the steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals through these global reviews. Moreover, there is hardly any research that identifies *causal* links between processes and changes.

The United Nations development system more broadly also shows evidence, according to the literature, of incorporating the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals discursively in policy pronouncements that translate into institutional and normative changes in how entities support and engage in monitoring the goals, and plan and evaluate their activities. However, many of those reforms and policy initiatives are congruent with broader and longer-term changes in development cooperation, for instance towards greater coherence and the inclusion of the private sector: they cannot be attributed solely to the goals, even though the 2030 Agenda has provided an additional impetus for change. This holds particularly for the wide-ranging reforms initiated in 2018 to strengthen what the United Nations development system can collectively contribute to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. While the literature assesses the reforms as being extensive, it also concludes that they fall short of more fundamental changes (for example, organizational mergers, embracing universality, bridging thematic pillars, or devising new funding structures). This might in the end limit their impact and the role that the United Nations development system can play in

pushing for transformations towards sustainable development. Overall, more research is needed to better understand the scope of changes in the United Nations development system and their impact.

In global environmental governance, the United Nations Environment Programme sees itself as the primary forum for promoting implementation of the environmental dimension of sustainable development. Yet, its leadership has thus far been limited, which some studies attribute to the politicized nature of its decision-making body, the United Nations Environment Assembly. Universal membership and increased participation by civil society and the private sector may have the potential to build a broader global partnership for implementation, but this has not yet expanded to decision-making. The highly polycentric nature of global environmental governance, including the United Nations Environment Programme and the myriad multilateral environmental agreements, continues to limit institutional changes and system-wide coherence.

Taken together, the 2030 Agenda has been heralded as a call for transformation of policy-making and practice of multilateral institutions. Yet there are few academic studies on how international organizations have changed in response. While experts observe institutional and discursive changes that seem aligned with the 2030 Agenda, there is not much scholarly discussion on whether those changes were *caused* by the agenda or the goals or merely reflect trends already underway. Moreover, while the literature frequently refers to the Sustainable Development Goals as catalysts for reform, it also highlights that the observable changes are not transformational – even though the 2030 Agenda carries the title ‘Transforming our World’. Accordingly, many studies see a mismatch between aspirations and outcomes in global governance. Reforms have been modest, and changes have been largely found only in discourses with limited practical effects.

At the same time, assessing the degree of transformation depends on one’s expectations for change in relation to other processes: for example, compared to the Millennium Development Goals, institutional changes have been more extensive and rapid. Also, seven years since 2015 is only a short period for major reforms in global governance to take effect. Further empirical work is needed to study the degree to which United Nations member states will authorize and support agencies to further adjust their mandates and organizational structures. Similarly, such work will need to assess movement toward an integrated approach that stands at the heart of the Sustainable Development Goals by increasing cooperation and coordination with other parts of the United Nations system, and fostering collaboration more broadly with a wide range of actors expected to work with, and within, these entities. Studies should focus on the conflicts and politics that are connected to this. It would be important, for example, to study changes in the role of the major groups and other stakeholders or the role of science in these United Nations processes. More work is also needed to better understand the requirements

and conditions under which the United Nations can better position itself to successfully orchestrate partnerships and voluntary initiatives on the global goals.

In short, systematic, theory-informed empirical analyses are now needed for deeper insights about the steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals on global governance.

Note

- 1 Search string (TITLE-ABS-KEY ((“sustainable development goal*” OR “SDG*”) AND (steer* OR governance) AND (global OR international OR “united AND nations” OR “un”) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2021) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2020) OR LIMIT TO (PUBYEAR, 2019) OR LIMIT TO (PUBYEAR 2018) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2017) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2016) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR, 2015))).

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