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## Assessing the Impact of Global Goals

### *Setting the Stage*

FRANK BIERMANN, THOMAS HICKMANN AND CAROLE-ANNE SÉNIT

In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly agreed on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to guide public policies and inspire societal actors to promote sustainable development worldwide. The core of this programme are 17 ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ with 169 more specific targets. Two years of intense intergovernmental negotiations at the United Nations headquarters in New York preceded the adoption of this agenda, which formally entered into force on 1 January 2016 (Chasek et al. 2016). The programmatic timespan is short: the goals and targets under the new agenda for sustainable development should be achieved by 2030. Some targets were to be reached even by 2020.

The ambition expressed in these Sustainable Development Goals is unprecedented. The goals and the overarching 2030 Agenda aim at nothing less than ‘Transforming Our World’ (UNGA 2015). The world’s governments are now committed – within less than a decade – to ending poverty and hunger, providing universal access to basic services such as healthcare, education, water and sanitation, housing and social protection; reducing inequality within and among countries and to ending all discriminations (including gender); protecting our natural environment; and promoting peaceful and inclusive societies.

These goals are not the first attempt at global governance by goal-setting. To start with, the Sustainable Development Goals were preceded by the Millennium Development Goals that were operational from 2001 to 2015. These earlier goals had helped galvanize some individual and collective action, and many actors, from governments to activists, felt that more ‘global governance through goals’, with a renewed set of broader and more ambitious targets, would further bolster sustainable development (Sachs 2012). In addition, the Sustainable Development Goals draw on a few other earlier experiences with global governance through goal-setting, such as the Plan of Action of the 1990 World Summit for Children or the first Development Decade that dates as far back as 1961 (Hickmann et al. 2020; Vijge et al. 2020). The Sustainable Development Goals are thus not entirely new as a mechanism

of global governance. What sets them apart, however, is that they are by far the most comprehensive and most detailed attempt by the United Nations to guide sustainable development policies – through 17 globally defined policy goals and 169 associated targets with 231 indicators (see e.g., Biermann, Kanie and Kim 2017; French and Kotz  2018; Kamau, Chasek and O’Connor 2018; Kanie and Biermann 2017).

The complex structure and broad scope of the Sustainable Development Goals make them unique and special, at least in five dimensions. First and possibly most importantly, the global goals are universal. Unlike the earlier Millennium Development Goals, which targeted only developing countries (and the least developed countries especially), now all countries are meant to implement the Sustainable Development Goals within their societies and through global cooperation, from the many small island developing countries in the Pacific to the United States or the members of the European Union. Also the wealthy countries in the North are now requested to deliver regular reports about their efforts ‘to develop’ towards a more sustainable future.

Second, the global goals cover all dimensions of sustainable development, including social, economic and environmental objectives (Bhattacharya, Khan and Salma 2014). The first set of goals relate to the earlier Millennium Development Goals: Goal 1, *End poverty in all its forms everywhere*; Goal 2, *End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture*; Goal 3, *Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages*; and Goal 4, *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*. Two goals target inequality and injustice: Goal 5, *Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*; and Goal 10, *Reduce inequality within and among countries*.

Five goals seek to advance living conditions more generally, often with emphasis on the needs of the poor: Goal 6, *Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all*; Goal 7, *Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all*; Goal 8, *Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all*; Goal 9, *Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation*; and Goal 11, *Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable*. Goal 12 aims to *Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns*.

Three goals centre on environmental concerns: Goal 13, *Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts*; Goal 14, *Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development*; and Goal 15, *Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss*.

The two last goals, 16 and 17, address governance and implementation. Goal 16 is unique in its novel attention to limitations in political systems, calling upon governments to *Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels* (Biermann et al. 2017). Goal 17 is a programmatic call to institutionally and financially support the other 16 goals and to *Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development*, with provisions on finance, technology, capacity-building, trade, policy and institutional coherence, multi-stakeholder partnerships, along with objectives on data, monitoring and accountability.

In short, the Sustainable Development Goals are all-encompassing. Almost all human activities, and all traditional dimensions of sustainability, are covered in this vast catalogue (for the full text of the 17 goals, see Annex 1). This again makes the Sustainable Development Goals different from earlier goal-setting initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals.

Third, the Sustainable Development Goals are novel in the way they have been formulated and agreed. The earlier Millennium Development Goals were a product of the administrative system of the United Nations. While governments gave guidance and later approval, the Millennium Development Goals had been drafted by international civil servants (Chasek et al. 2016). The negotiation of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2013–15, however, was different. This process was more inclusive with multiple venues for interventions of civil society and non-governmental organizations and inputs of over a million people through an online polling and commenting system. Even though these novel options for interventions by ‘stakeholders’ were less inclusive than it first seemed and many groups were still excluded (Sénit 2020; Sénit, Biermann and Kalfagianni 2017), the relative openness and transparency of the negotiations of the Sustainable Development Goals, despite all shortcomings, may have opened a new page in global diplomacy (Kamau, Chasek and O’Connor 2018; Rosche 2016).

A fourth novel feature is that the Sustainable Development Goals have been institutionally embedded at a higher political level than earlier goals in development policy, which were either linked to international agencies deemed most relevant or dealt with in the Economic and Social Council. For example, the Agenda 21 – the Programme of Action agreed at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development – was evaluated and ‘governed’ through the Commission on Sustainable Development, a body that fell under the Economic and Social Council (Chasek 2000). This commission failed to attract decision-makers at the highest level or other key political actors. Over time it became an annual gathering of delegates from environment and development ministries with a motley mix of civil society organizations that added colour but

lacked influence. In 2012, the commission was terminated. In the run-up to the 2012 summit on sustainable development, some studies had argued for a stronger institutional body in the United Nations system, such as a high-level United Nations Council on Sustainable Development (Biermann et al. 2012). Eventually, governments indeed agreed on a new forum with ‘high-level’ representation, but only in a more informal and less authoritative setting than some civil society groups and experts had demanded. This new High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development meets annually, predominantly to review progress towards national implementation and overall achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (for an evaluation see Chapter 2).

Fifth and finally, the Sustainable Development Goals are more visible in public discourse and more central in the United Nations system than earlier initiatives. The Sustainable Development Goals have become the overall programmatic vision for the entire system of international organizations and programmes under the United Nations umbrella. Also at the national level, debates on Sustainable Development Goals abound in many countries and local communities.

Given this mixture of novelty, ambition and general excitement – at least among some government officials, international civil servants and activists – the following questions arise: do these 17 Sustainable Development Goals really help resolve the pressing challenges of poverty eradication, social justice and global environmental protection? Can global governance through goals be effective – and under which conditions? While the United Nations and some governments place great hopes on this strategy, there is still little scientific knowledge on whether such global goals can live up to the high expectations. Because the goals are to be achieved only by 2030, it is too early for a concluding assessment of their eventual success or failure. We can only conclusively have the definitive answer on whether the ambitions and hopes invested in the global goals will materialize after 2030 (conceptually see Young 2017; Young et al. 2017).

Nonetheless, a first assessment of the effects of the Sustainable Development Goals as a governance mechanism is possible today. And it is urgently needed. Each day, crucial decisions are adopted in politics, local administrations, global corporations and civil society. Should there be indications that current policies for the Sustainable Development Goals do not promise their achievement by 2030, decision-makers in governments, civil society and the United Nations could still change course. Should we find that the goals lack any impact on political systems, corporations, civil society and individual daily decisions by citizens, there would still be time to develop alternative tools and political interventions. Should the goals, conversely, prove to be increasingly effective as a global steering mechanism, we could strengthen them even further.

In this context, the coming years are crucial. In June 2022, governments assemble in Stockholm for a conference that follows a line of sustainability summits of the past, from the 1972 Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm to the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro (the ‘Earth Summit’), the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg and the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro. The 2022 Stockholm Conference marks ‘Stockholm plus 50’ and half a century of global environmental diplomacy. It also happens ‘30 years after Rio’ and ‘20 years after Johannesburg’, the two earlier key events that brought together environmental protection and global development under the banner of sustainable development. The 2022 conference is a first key moment to reassess political progress towards sustainability and the steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals, followed by a major High-level Political Forum session in 2023. Should it become clear that the global goals lack effect, that they do not offer direction and that they are being largely ignored by governments, corporations, civil society and citizens, alternatives to these global goals must be on the global political agenda in 2022–3.

For that reason, research on the impact of the global goals has become one of the most dynamic research areas in sustainability science, and many studies on the Sustainable Development Goals have been published since 2015. A first international research symposium in June 2020 – the GLOBALGOALS2020 conference hosted by Utrecht University – featured more than a hundred scientific studies on the political effects of the Sustainable Development Goals, and more than a thousand scholars, practitioners and interested citizens joined the livestreams or watched the recordings of the presentations.

In this book we now offer the *first comprehensive scientific assessment* of the political effects of the Sustainable Development Goals on the route towards their target year of 2030.

### **Assessing the Steering Effects of Global Goals**

This book does not evaluate sustainability governance as such. We focus more narrowly on assessing the *political effects of global goal-setting as a governance mechanism*, with emphasis on the Sustainable Development Goals as the premier and most comprehensive global goal-setting effort to date. *Our leading question is whether, to what extent and how the Sustainable Developments Goals have brought about any behavioural change of political, economic or societal actors since 2015.*

At the core of our analysis is thus, first, the assessment of behavioural changes of *political actors*, ranging from international bureaucracies and treaty regimes to

national governments, regional authorities and local municipalities. Second, we review and evaluate literature on possible steering effects vis- vis *economic actors*, such as corporations, partnerships and alliances of business actors. Third, we assess whether there are indications for steering effects on *societal actors*, such as civil society organizations and even individual citizens.

### ***Effectiveness as Behavioural Change because of Global Goals***

Given our focus on political effects of goal-setting we define effectiveness here not in the broadest sense, which would be the progressive attainment of the goals as measured by their targets and indicators. That is, we do not systematically assess whether the 17 Sustainable Development Goals are being achieved in terms of reductions in poverty, increases in renewable energy, reductions in harmful emissions, improvements in gender equality and so forth. Such analyses are done by several international organizations and research networks, and we do not seek to repeat their efforts.

Most such assessments offer a mildly pessimistic view. For example, the yearly report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals finds that progress has been reversed with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (United Nations 2021). While up until 2020 there was some progress regarding, for instance, declining global poverty (Goal 1), it is now estimated that the pandemic-related economic downturn has pushed an additional 119–124 million people into extreme poverty. Progress is still stalled or reversed regarding the rate of climate change (Goal 13), the rate of biodiversity loss (Goal 15) and increasing inequalities (Goal 10). A related assessment is the Global Sustainable Development Report, a quadrennial ‘assessment of assessments’ on sustainability by scientists who have been appointed for this task by the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The 2019 report warned that progress made in sustainability governance over the last two decades is in danger of being reversed through worsening social inequalities and potentially irreversible declines in our natural environment (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General 2019). Beyond this, there are many other reports and assessments. One example, the reports by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network and the Bertelsmann Stiftung, rank countries by how they achieve the goals. In 2020, this group found that Asian countries had progressed the most since 2015 (Sachs et al. 2020). The most recent report from June 2021, however, showed the ‘first-ever reversal in progress since the [Sustainable Development Goals] were adopted’, largely due to increased poverty and unemployment related to the COVID-19 pandemic (International Institute for Sustainable Development 2021; see also Sachs et al. 2021).

These broader assessments of progress towards sustainability are without a doubt important. Yet, methodologically they skirt the question of causality, that is, whether progress that we observe is causally related to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. To give an example: China has achieved in the 2000 to 2015 period several Millennium Development Goals owing to its rapid economic growth and broadening of social welfare. Many indicators related to child mortality, poverty and poor health in China have improved since 2000, and partially because of this development, statistically the poverty rate of the entire group of developing countries was halved between 1990 and 2010. However, few would argue that the Millennium Development Goals are *causally related* to the economic growth rates in China. In other words, China's economic growth cannot be understood as a *political steering effect* of the Millennium Development Goals. China's rapid progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals from 2000 to 2015 is a matter of correlation, not causation.

Therefore, to better understand the political steering effects of global goals we must engage in a more fine-grained analysis. This is what this assessment is designed to achieve. Our core concern is to explore whether and to what extent political, economic or societal actors *have changed their behaviour because of* the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015.

To give an example of global governance: one could ask whether the International Labour Organization has changed its policies and programmes after 2015 because of the Sustainable Development Goals. Such a change would need to be identified over time, with the policies of the International Labour Organization being different before and after 2015. After 2015, the policies of the organization would need to be geared more towards some of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals than before, and this would need to be *because of the goals*. Only if such a policy change in the activities of the International Labour Organization after 2015 could be observed and causally linked to the Sustainable Development Goals, could we be able to speak with confidence of a *steering effect* of the global goals (for a first assessment, see Montesano et al. 2021).

As a second example from national governance: the Netherlands has created new institutional arrangements to implement the Sustainable Development Goals (Yunita et al. 2022). Among other measures, the Dutch government has appointed a national coordinator for the Sustainable Development Goals within its foreign office, with the mandate to represent the country in international debates and to support an integrated approach in Dutch policies and society towards the goals. The appointment of this national coordinator is undoubtedly a political steering effect of the goals that we can see in national politics. The subsequent analytical question then becomes, however, whether this appointment resulted in changes in the behaviour of other actors. Because only when further policies, programmes and

activities within the Dutch political system have changed after 2015 as a consequence of the activities of the national coordinator for the Sustainable Development Goals – and hence as a consequence of the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals – could we speak of a broader *political steering effect* of the global goals.

### *Types of Steering Effects*

There can be countless and diverse changes in the policies, programmes and activities of political, economic and societal actors. In this book, we focus on the assessment of normative, institutional and broader discursive changes.

First, we assume that the Sustainable Development Goals might lead to *normative changes* when political, economic or societal actors adjust legislative and regulatory frameworks and policies in line with, and because of, the goals. This could be the adoption of their targets in national policy programmes, in sub-national policy goals of municipalities or in the accounting and self-reporting frameworks of multinational corporations. To ascertain steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals, the normative frameworks of an organization or institution – rules set for others and rules and standards set for the organization – would have changed after 2015 and become better aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals. Explicit references to all or some of the goals in the new policy or regulatory framework would be a strong sign for the normative effect of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Second, we analyse whether the goals bring about *institutional changes*. Such institutional changes could include the creation of new departments, committees, offices or programmes linked to the achievement of the goals, or the realignment of institutional arrangements. The new national coordinator for the Sustainable Development Goals in the Netherlands, mentioned above, is a typical example (Yunita et al. 2022). Similar examples include newly created inter-ministerial coordination bodies within public administrations to implement the Sustainable Development Goals. While such an institutional realignment within political systems can be an indicator to suggest political effects of the global goals, one still needs to assess the eventual political impact of such alignment. Notably, one should entertain the alternative hypothesis of institutions and agencies engaging in only symbolic action or in the setting-up of decoy institutions (that is, pretending political action while avoiding it), or plain institutional ineffectiveness. And yet, observable institutional realignments in political systems because of the global goals are first indications that more profound changes because of the goals are at least conceivable.

Third, in addition to normative and institutional changes, Sustainable Development Goals could have *discursive effects*. The effects of the goals do not have to materialize only in institutions and programmes of public actors, such as international organizations, national governments or municipalities. In many places, the goals have also energized local citizens, civil society movements and initiatives in cities, districts or villages. Also here, whatever one can observe in changes towards sustainability *and* can relate back to inspiration by the Sustainable Development Goals, we identify in this book as a political steering effect of the global goals.

We might expect even broader discursive changes. The vision and ambition of the Sustainable Development Goals – for example in its strong support for the ending of hunger and the eradication of poverty – might bring about in the 2015–30 period a wider transformation in the way political actors understand the challenges ahead. Such discursive changes we might trace back in global and national political narratives, for example in public debates, policy platforms, or even newspapers and social media. Indications for the impact of the Sustainable Development Goals would be when terms prominently used in the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – such as the phrase ‘leaving no one behind’ – could be identified in later policy documents or public narratives around the world.

In short, the political steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals we might find in the core institutions of governments and international agencies, for instance by changing rules, standards, programmes and institutional arrangements or the creation of new institutions and programmes. We might expect such steering effects also in broader diffusions in civil society, in changes in global and national discourses, and in the slow trickling down of novel concepts and ideas from the 2015 United Nations General Assembly decision to the individual understandings and actions of citizens worldwide.

Importantly, steering effects might not always be positive in the sense of advancing sustainability. The use of the Sustainable Development Goals could be instrumental, symbolic or counter-productive (Bexell and Jönsson 2019; Mawdsley 2018). Corporations might for instance instrumentalize the goals to advance their credibility and increase market shares. Governments might announce new strategies to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals while not engaging in structural changes, policy reforms or budgetary reallocation. Non-governmental organizations could adopt the language of the Sustainable Development Goals to attract new funding without changing their policies and programmes. Our assessment hence takes a decisively *critical approach* towards the possible impact of the Sustainable Development Goals. Throughout our analysis we seek to separate real change from pure rhetoric claims.

### Assessment Process

This assessment brings together the body of knowledge among scholars and experts on the political steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals, as it has been published since 2012. Most assessed research deals with the implementation period since 2015. Yet because the goals were negotiated between 2012 and 2015 and were at that time already prominent in policy circles, we have included evidence from the negotiation process as well.

Our assessment is a systematic meta-analysis of peer-reviewed academic literature and to a limited extent ‘grey literature’ that follows similar standards. The studies that we relied on include analyses of the impact of the Sustainable Development Goals over time; single or comparative case studies on individual goals or on specific countries; systematic assessments of expert opinions, for instance through broader surveys or series of systematic interviews; and a few quantitative data sets that provide information on the steering effects of the goals over time. All chapters draw on multiple sources of evidence and on evaluations of the largest possible bodies of literature that are available to date. They hence go beyond reliance on impressions by a few experts or practitioners.

Altogether, the author teams of the different chapters collected and considered over 3,000 scholarly studies. (This number entails some double counts of key sources that are relevant for more than one dimension of this assessment.) All studies were identified based on a comprehensive assessment of the academic literature through a keyword search with the reference software *Scopus*. The number of articles per topic varied greatly, which indicates current research trends and points to under-researched issues. The author teams first sorted scholarly studies according to their relevance and then analysed the most relevant works in-depth in smaller teams. The insights from this qualitative content research were complemented by findings from grey literature and from the authors’ own research and expertise when literature was scarce on a specific topic.

The breadth of the assessment required a large, diverse and inclusive group of social scientists and experts from universities and think-tanks, all with specialized expertise on the Sustainable Development Goals. Each of the six substantial chapters 2–7 is written by a team of scholars with special expertise in that area, led by some of the most prominent scholars and experts on the Sustainable Development Goals in collaboration with mid- and early-career scholars who specialize in this field. To the extent possible, all chapter author teams are balanced in terms of regions and gender.

### Assessment Areas

This assessment analyses the body of knowledge on the steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals in six key areas that we now introduce and that

form the organizing principle for the following chapters 2–7. In each area, we have synthesized research and knowledge on the normative, institutional and discursive effects of the Sustainable Development Goals. Each chapter also charts new research directions to catalyse the transformative potential of the global goals in the decade of action to deliver the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Furthermore, each chapter provides insights into political reform needs that reach beyond 2030 and may point to a more ambitious and fundamental political reform agenda.

### ***Global Governance***

First, the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda were expected to have a major impact on the United Nations system, which should reorient towards this agenda for the 2015 to 2030 period. All international organizations, programmes and agencies are formally committed to implementing the 17 goals and the broader 2030 Agenda. International conferences, treaty regimes and transnational partnerships and networks were called upon to refocus in the direction charted by the Sustainable Development Goals and their 169 targets. To provide for global oversight and guidance, governments created a new global forum, the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, which meets annually to review the implementation of the global goals and the national reports that countries are requested to submit (Abbott and Bernstein 2015; Beisheim 2015; Bernstein 2017). In short, the Sustainable Development Goals were to launch a new era of ‘global partnership’ – as announced under Goal 17 – that would exceed the often weak global governance mechanisms of the past (Andonova 2017; Chasek and Wagner 2016; Kamau, Chasek and O’Connor 2018).

And yet, can we really see any changes in the system of international agencies and programmes after 2015? Have the Sustainable Development Goals reshaped the policies of international agencies? Do we see more cooperation among international bodies to work towards the implementation of the global goals? Or do we have to conclude that the United Nations system follows a business-as-usual approach, without any discernible impact of the global goals? How can the role of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development be evaluated? Did the new forum live up to the high expectations raised in 2012 when it was set up to replace the weak Commission on Sustainable Development? These questions stand in the centre of Chapter 2 of this assessment.

### ***Implementation at Multiple Levels***

Second, the Sustainable Development Goals are expected to change domestic politics. They are supposed to be implemented by central governments and to

influence national legislation, strategies and policies. Local and regional authorities are expected to join the global effort and align policies and programmes with the Sustainable Development Goals and their targets. We should find the global goals reflected in the initiatives of cities, provinces and villages, from the town halls of municipalities to school boards, city planners, university councils and public utilities. Also the private sector – from global corporations to local business – is called upon to support the global goals and their sustainability agenda. Major business associations have taken part in formulating the global goals, and the central get-togethers of the business leaders – such as the World Economic Forum in Davos – are full of references to the goals. We should thus find steering effects of the goals in corporate programmes on social responsibility, but more importantly in investment decisions and internal policies, for example on inequalities and discrimination or in policies against corruption.

Finally, civil society organizations and eventually all citizens are expected to find inspiration in the Sustainable Development Goals. Environmentalists, unions, youth organizations, farmers' associations, political parties, along with students, universities, schools, sport clubs, faith-based organizations – all these local and transnational actors would need to rally around the 2030 Agenda. Substantial resources have been invested by international organizations, governments and local authorities into outreach and dissemination to bring home the message of the 2030 Agenda and the 17 goals. Colourful pictograms have been designed to turn the often-dry United Nations-legalese of the 2030 Agenda into a trendy checklist of societal goals that can inspire in the age of Twitter and Instagram.

And yet, have the Sustainable Development Goals been effective in achieving their aims in domestic governance? Have prime ministers, mayors, party and business leaders or school directors and governors responded to the call of the 2030 Agenda and changed their programmes, policies and strategies because of the global goals? Are there differences in domestic impact between the wealthy countries in North America, Europe, East Asia or Australia and the developing countries in Africa, Latin America or Asia? Are the Sustainable Development Goals more effective in some types of countries or are steering effects broadly similar?

Importantly and methodologically most challenging: how can we attribute positive changes and progress that we might observe 'on the ground' to the global agreement of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015? Is there evidence that national or local actors, in the public or the private sphere, have changed their behaviour because of the global goals? In Chapter 3 of this volume we evaluate research and evidence on these important questions.

### *Interlinkages, Integration and Coherence*

Third, there is little doubt about the tremendous complexity of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. The 169 more specific targets under these goals offer a mindboggling mix of aims and objectives, sometimes quantified, sometimes qualitative, in an incredibly broad range of areas. The global goals ask us to end hunger, transform our cities, reduce inequality, protect marine ecosystems, fight corruption, end discrimination, raise the living standards in least developed countries, reduce infant mortality and so on. There are complex interlinkages and interdependencies between the goals and the 169 targets. Optimizing and achieving one target might reduce progress on other targets (Le Blanc 2015; Liverman 2018; Lusseau and Mancini 2019; Nilsson et al. 2018; van Soest et al. 2019; Weitz et al. 2018). Trying to advance all 169 targets easily overchallenges actors. For that reason, some experts had argued during the negotiations of the goals for a more limited number of goals, such as ten, which some believed would be the maximum to keep public focus and engagement. One early intervention by Jeffrey Sachs (2012) even listed only four sustainable development goals. And yet, the complexity of the sustainability challenge, along with the negotiation dynamics in 2012–15, resulted in what we have today: a potpourri of 169 targets under 17 global goals.

Importantly, the goals were designed in a way that each would combine the three traditional ‘pillars’ of sustainable development, that is, economic growth, ecological protection, and social justice and well-being. The weight of each of these three ‘pillars’ differs per goal – there is more concern for the environment when it comes to Goal 14 (*Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development*) and more concern for social justice when it comes to Goal 10 (*Reduce inequality within and among countries*). Yet at least in theory, no goal is only economic, social or environmental. This approach illustrates even more the challenge posed by the interlinkages and interdependencies of the 2030 Agenda for political and societal actors.

Given the lack of an ordering principle, some studies have expressed doubts that the goals would be effective (e.g., Allen, Metternicht and Wiedmann 2018). Some argued that

in the absence of such an overarching principle and vision, the impact of the Sustainable Development Goals on global governance will likely materialize primarily as spurring some further clustering or realignment of existing regimes and organizations within crowded policy domains. . . . [G]iven the nature of the challenge [. . .], the Sustainable Development Goals cannot be expected to generate major architectural reforms or new integrative practices that will significantly reduce the fragmentation of the global governance system at large.

(Underdal and Kim 2017: 254)

Such an outcome, however, would run counter to the broad ambition that governments expressed in the 2030 Agenda: that goals will add coherence and consistency, not complexity and confusion. The goals are supposed to better align the efforts of political and societal actors and to further the integration of governance instruments in support of the goals (Nilsson, Griggs and Visbeck 2016). Target 17.14 especially calls upon governments to ‘Enhance policy coherence for sustainable development’. And yet, is such integration of governance around the goals observable? Where do actors align their efforts, and where is this attributable to the global goals that were adopted in 2015? Even though the Sustainable Development Goals were designed to advance overall coherence in sustainability governance, often they still seem to operate in silos. But where are trade-offs between goals and targets? Where are instances and trends where actors prefer one goal over the other? Research into interlinkages between these goals is thus important to inform policy and provide evidence-based recommendations on how to resolve trade-offs, use synergies and accelerate progress across all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (e.g., Nilsson et al. 2018). We cover this important research in Chapter 4.

### *Inclusiveness*

Fourth, the Sustainable Development Goals and the overarching 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development emphasize the need to improve the life of the global poor. The goals include explicit commitments to the eradication of poverty (Goal 1), the ending of hunger (Goal 2) and the reduction of global and national inequalities (Goal 10). The protection of the poor and the most vulnerable also runs through other goals, from health to urban settlements, where special provisions address the needs of the poor and most vulnerable. A central part of the 2030 Agenda is the commitment that no one should be left behind. The ‘leave no one behind’ formula has become a very visible part in the development discourse after 2015, indicated by use of its bureaucratic acronym, ‘LNOB’ (Hathie 2020).

More inclusiveness is also the ambition for global governance more broadly, with the commitment to bring in, and advance the interests of, those countries that fared worst in economic globalization, especially the least developed countries, but also a few other partially overlapping categories of countries, such as the small island and landlocked developing countries (Biermann and S nit 2022). The least developed countries are mentioned twenty-seven times in the targets under the Sustainable Development Goals and thirty-eight times in the broader 2030 Agenda. Goal 10 explicitly calls for ‘achiev[ing] and sustain[ing] income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average’, to ‘promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all’, to ‘ensure

enhanced representation and voice for developing countries in decision-making in global international economic and financial institutions in order to deliver more effective, credible, accountable and legitimate institutions' and to 'implement the principle of special and differential treatment for developing countries, in particular least developed countries, in accordance with World Trade Organization agreements'.

In short, global inclusiveness and the advancement of the interests of the poorest and most vulnerable are central in the 2030 Agenda and the 17 global goals. Yet, where can one observe a better inclusion and support of poor and vulnerable communities and, internationally, of the least developed countries? Did the promise of 2015 materialize in more inclusive policies and in curbing inequalities within and among countries? Research on this topic we evaluate in Chapter 5.

### *Planetary Integrity*

Fifth, the claim behind the Sustainable Development Goals is that they help align social justice with the protection of life-supporting earth systems. In recent years, scientists have become louder in their warnings that the planetary system might be at the brink of collapse and transition to new states of operation. Johan Rockström, one of the prominent scholarly advocates, has even called for the declaration of a 'planetary emergency' (Rockström 2020). More concretely, 'tipping points' in the earth system have been suggested, and scientists have begun to quantify values for 'planetary boundaries' that need to be protected for the sake of the stability of the planetary system (Rockström et al. 2009; Steffen et al. 2015). For example, a value of 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has been suggested as the 'planetary boundary' of the climate system. However, these planetary boundaries do not consider the social and economic dimensions of sustainability and have therefore met much criticism (Biermann and Kim 2020).

When the Sustainable Development Goals were negotiated, they thus stood in an inherent tension with the idea of planetary boundaries and the question of the priority of either social or earth system concerns (Kotzé 2018). Proponents of the 'planetary boundary' concept had lobbied at the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development for a reference to planetary boundaries in the conference outcomes. Some non-governmental organizations even submitted a Draft United Nations Declaration on Planetary Boundaries to the conference (Planetary Boundaries Initiative 2012; Fernández and Malwé 2018). However, the planetary boundaries concept found no entry into the 2030 Agenda. Developing countries in particular viewed them as insufficiently concerned with the social and economic development needs of the Global South.

The Sustainable Development Goals are the political compromise between these conflicting interests and concerns. The 17 goals are to integrate social justice,

economic development and the global protection of ecosystems, while the relationship of the goals remains non-hierarchical. Although one could read a prioritization in the decision to begin the list of Sustainable Development Goals with the commitments to end poverty (Goal 1) and hunger (Goal 2), it is evident from the 2030 Agenda that all goals are equal and to be achieved simultaneously. Some academics have advanced framings that would grant the more ecosystem-related goals 13–15 – climate, life on land and life under water – more prominence. Some argued that the Sustainable Development Goals should be hierarchically organized with priority to those that most closely relate to ‘staying within planetary boundaries’ (Costanza et al. 2015). One often-cited example is the ‘wedding cake’ model (Rockstr m and Sukhdev 2016). Yet overall, such attempts of hierarchizing the Sustainable Development Goals run counter to the integrated and inclusive approach advanced in the 2030 Agenda.

Given the conflicting values, the question arises: to what extent did the goals help to navigate these dimensions? How is the vital concern of preserving the stability of planetary systems – what we describe here as ‘planetary integrity’ – reflected in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals? Did the goals advance planetary integrity in areas and policy fields that have only marginally been associated with ecological concerns? Where can we see change towards more planetary integrity in governance that can be attributed to the goals? Research insights on this topic will be evaluated in Chapter 6.

### *Methods for Analysing Steering Effects of Global Goals*

The five core research areas of this assessment, taken together, reveal a final challenge: we are dealing with a compounding mix of novelty, complexity, uncertainty, urgency and, not least, global politics and diplomacy. The scholarly analysis of the steering effects of the goals needs to reflect such a multi-faceted nature of global goal-setting. This situation calls for novel approaches to scientific research, assessment and cooperation. Proposals for a new integrated, worldwide and transdisciplinary ‘sustainability science’ abound (e.g., Clark and Harley 2020), and studying the Sustainable Development Goals is now a prime example where this new generation of sustainability science is needed. Consequently, this assessment includes a chapter dedicated to epistemology and methodology. While Chapters 2–6 evaluate *what we know* about the steering effects of global goals, Chapter 7 discusses *how we can know* in the first place and identifies knowledge gaps and avenues for strengthening our methodological approaches and repertoire.

Given the complexity of the 2030 Agenda and the 17 global goals, this research area has attracted scholars who specialize in quantitative, data-driven work. Scholars have set up research programmes to study the interlinkages of goals and

targets through integrated assessment models (Collste, Pedercini and Cornell 2017; Van Soest et al. 2019). Originating in research on climate and oceans, such models have become more complex and also cover human activities. They are used to understand interlinkages among Sustainable Development Goals and their targets, and conversely, the goals offer a testing ground for elaborating and refining the models. Another data-driven approach to cope with the complexity of the Sustainable Development Goals is social network analysis, a method to show dynamic relations among large numbers of actors, programmes or policies. The GLOBALGOALS Project at Utrecht University, for instance, uses network analysis to map and analyse relations among international organizations and Sustainable Development Goals.

The complexity of the Sustainable Development Goals has also given rise to new approaches in the humanities and qualitative social sciences. Also here, some scholars turn to data-driven approaches, for example in the qualitative content analysis that Galvão, Cabral and Maurer (2020) used to track the influence of Sustainable Development Goals in texts from research projects and surveys of teachers, students and university staff in Brazilian universities. Others revert to qualitative, discursive and interpretative work to study broader questions, such as how the Sustainable Development Goals change perceptions and actions of decision-makers and societal influencers (e.g., Mert and Bäckstrand 2020). Chapter 7 discusses these and many other methods in detail. We especially bring quantitative and qualitative work into the conversation, while keeping the space for both meta-approaches to improve and fine-tune their toolboxes.

### **Organization of the Book**

Taken together, this assessment reviews and evaluates the body of academic and policy literature on the steering effects of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The next chapter discusses the impact of the goals at the global level, for example whether the United Nations – notably the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development – provides multilateral leadership or plays an ‘orchestrating’ role, thereby also enhancing the global partnership for sustainable development and institutional or policy coherence at the global level (Chapter 2 – *Global Governance*). We then look into whether the Sustainable Development Goals have had any impact at the national and sub-national level, including governments, regional and local authorities, the private sector, civil society, covering developing and emerging economies, least developed countries and OECD countries (Chapter 3 – *Implementation at Multiple Levels*). Subsequently, we examine the interlinkages between the Sustainable Development Goals and the synergies and trade-offs across the goals and targets, along with studies on whether

Sustainable Development Goals have led to more institutional integration and policy coherence at national level (Chapter 4 – *Interlinkages, Integration and Coherence*). The following chapter reviews knowledge on whether the goals could bring about a better inclusion and support of poor and vulnerable communities within countries, and of the least developed countries internationally (Chapter 5 – *Inclusiveness*). Next, we evaluate scientific studies and policy reports on the question of whether the Sustainable Development Goals could advance planetary ecological integrity, that is, strengthen policies towards the preservation of global commons (for example, climate, biodiversity, marine environment and forests) in intergovernmental negotiations or national policy frameworks (Chapter 6 – *Planetary Integrity*). The subsequent chapter discusses how to measure overall progress on the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and how to explore their effects on institutional change, decision-making and the political discourse, thereby seeking to identify bridges between methodological camps (Chapter 7 – *Methods for Analysing Steering Effects of Global Goals*). Chapter 8 brings the key insights from the chapters together and provides the overarching conclusions of whether the Sustainable Development Goals have been a transformative force in global sustainability governance to date.

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