

Multi-level acceleration for the SDGs in the UNECE region

Summary report of side-event to the UNECE Regional Forum 2023 that took place March 30th 2023, hosted by the GlobalGoals project and Earth System Governance foundation

OPENING STATEMENTS

Prof. Dr. Frank Biermann opened the event by presenting the research findings from [a comprehensive assessment of the political impact of the Sustainable Development Goals](#). The scientific evidence shows that the SDGs have had some impact on institutions and policies from the local to global levels. Yet, this impact is mainly on the way actors understand and talk about sustainable development. Changes in resource allocation, legislative action, or other normative and institutional impacts remain rare. While the SDGs were meant to be transformative, their impact has not been transformative so far.

Leonie Grob recognized the key messages from Prof. Biermann from her experience working on urban sustainability with municipalities and civil society actors. She notes that both municipalities and civil society play an important role in achieving the SDGs. There is an on-going exchange between government and citizens about sustainability challenges at the local level, making both actors very knowledgeable and capable actors to address such challenges. While much is already done at the local level to contribute towards sustainability challenges, the SDGs come up very little. The SDGs remain a rather intangible construct and localization is needed to make the SDGs more well-known. For example, in some German cities, a local SDG coordinator has been useful in this regard. Leonie further notes that in her work with cities in developing countries, the SDGs are more often used, commonly because international donors require so. The SDGs thus remain largely a language at the international level, and not so much at the local level.

Montserrat Koloffon-Rosas shared her insights on the potential of multi-stakeholder partnerships. Such partnerships have the potential to contribute towards achieving the SDGs, especially when stakeholders work together across policy domains to create synergies and address trade-offs. However, in the global registry of partnerships for the SDGs hosted by the UN, the Partnership Platform, only very few partnerships appear active and also very few partnerships connect multiple policy domains in their projects. While the SDGs have offered a common language to bring together stakeholders, their integrated nature is not yet reflected in partnerships.

Sandra Pellegrom shared her insights from national level SDG implementation in The Netherlands. Some of the strengths of the Dutch SDG implementation include a bottom-up approach, with many actors already involved in sustainability initiatives before the advent of the SDGs; and a focus on six key transformations to support the SDGs. Many actors in the Netherlands are involved in SDG implementation, including businesses, municipalities and national policy-makers. While not all

businesses engage deeply with the goals, the SDGs have become a sustainability standard for industry. At the municipal level, the SDGs have provided a compass for addressing interlinked issues. However, at the national level, the SDGs have not landed equally everywhere, with many departments still working in siloed ways on the goals. Sandra notes that the SDGs have much potential to support integrated policy-making, but that this requires more effort. One of those efforts is a newly launched policy compass tool, to assess the impact of new policies on all SDGs.

Maya Bogers shared her insights on the use of the SDGs at the international level. While many international organizations use the SDGs and are working towards them, sectoral siloes are an ongoing challenge. The SDGs have not yet been able to reduce siloed ways of working, and the goals are still seen often as 17 separate goals. There are thus similarities between the partnerships, the national level and the international level: while SDGs are embraced and worked towards as individual goals, the integrated nature of the goals is not reflected well yet in policies, programs and activities.

Melanie van Driel spoke specifically on the role of regional commissions in SDG implementation. These organizations could play a pivotal role between the global and local levels. For UNECE, the SDGs have extended its focus to more policy domains, indicating that the SDGs may enhance integrated ways of working. Also, public-private partnerships have been reframed to put people first, echoing the call of the 2030 Agenda to leave no one behind. Yet, these and other partnerships still provide quite general reporting requirements and might profit from becoming more concrete to provide effective accountability mechanisms. Also in the UNECE region, we are off track to achieve many of the SDGs. Moreover, on many targets data is lacking to monitor goal achievement. A potential way forward, in addition to an increased attention to synergies, is to focus on goals that are most left behind and increase efforts for monitoring.

PANEL DISCUSSION

The panel discussion revolved around three key points.

The first point of discussion was **to what extent global crises, including Russia's war in Ukraine and the COVID pandemic, are affecting SDG implementation.** Reflecting on the UNECE region, **Melanie van Driel** noted that the war is one of multiple crises contributing to reversal on some SDG targets, but filtering out effects from the war is difficult, as the effects of the global pandemic are also still reverberating. **Sandra Pellegrom**, reflecting on this from the Dutch context, observed that despite clear negative effects, including a rise in energy poverty, there are also signals that call for cautious optimism. For example, Dutch government has made significant efforts to invest in renewables and increase energy efficiency, also at the European level, in an effort to protect companies and households from the rising energy prices as a result of the war in Ukraine. Furthermore, she observes that alternative models to deal with scarcity – which have long been in use in developing countries – are increasingly being considered in the Netherlands. An example of dealing with water scarcity might be found in Cape Town, South Africa, where conserve drinking water, a basic quantity was provided at an affordable price, and consumption above this basic level significantly increased in price. The crisis is thereby inspiring actors to think outside of the box. Pellegrom also noted that these crises are emphasizing the need for integrated and transformative policies. Instead of looking at the SDGs as siloes, we can thereby move to a systems approach. Finally, **Frank Biermann** noted that the war has had many negative effects, but also noted that carbon dioxide emissions have been declining in the Netherlands, following the need to reduce energy consumption. He noted that this might become a long-term trend, contrasted against the more short-term effect of the pandemic, which produced a (temporary) decrease in commercial flights.

A second key topic for discussion consisted of **reflections on the remaining 7 years towards 2030, and the need to reflect on the options for a post-2030 global agenda**. First, **Sandra Pellegrom** argued to accelerate and retake the SDG agenda during the next global summit, to put in extra effort to reach these goals, before turning attention to post-2030 discussions. Thus far we have learned that the goals are likely to be as relevant as ever in 2030. They are not as clearcut as the Millennium Development Goals that preceded them and require a more fundamental change. As the timeline of the agenda progresses, there is a growing understanding what needs to be done. Pellegrom urges us to not throw away this knowledge, but to make sure we build on it, even if there are many areas where we can strengthen the goals. Reflecting on the SDG impact assessment, **Frank Biermann** noted that it is possible that the SDGs might still produce significant effects, as discursive change might lead to other types of change, and these might be shown in a subsequent assessment. However, thus far transformation remains largely absent. Biermann agreed with Pellegrom that a totally new agenda seems unlikely but did signal the need for a discussion about post-2030 targets. In addition, he suggested three further developments: radicalization, institutionalization and legalization. Legalization might occur by placing elements of the SDG agenda in a stronger legal framework. Even if it remains unrealistic to expect a full treaty covering the global goals, a move away could be inspired from voluntary to more legally binding standards. He noted that in the Netherlands, the Urgenda case has had significant impact on the climate debate and showed that having a legal commitment can increase political accountability. Institutionalization might be strived towards at the global level, where currently a rather weak High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development is tasked with coordinating work on the SDGs. However, at the national level there is also much to be gained, for example through standing committees in Parliament or more attention for the goals at the highest political level. Radicalization, finally, could be pursued through smaller, more radical proposals with clear targets. Interesting examples are formed by efforts in the energy sphere, like proposals to come to a treaty on fossil fuel non-proliferation, or a concrete date to phase out coal-use. **Montserrat Koloffon** shared with Frank cautious optimism that a next SDG assessment might show more progress than the current one. For a potential post-2030 agenda, however, she suggested a more explicit discussion of causes and symptoms, and efforts to focus on the former when creating frameworks for action. **Leonie Grob** added that an honest review of Agenda 2030 is needed, which could already start during the Summits this year.

Last, the conversation turned to **what the panelists are hoping to take away or look forward to hearing at the HLPF and the SDG Summit** later this year. **Leonie Grob** looked forward to a review of what we have achieved the last 7 years, and reflect what has worked and why, with a broad group of voices. **Montserrat Koloffon** hoped for a novel campaign to push for partnerships, and noted she will work to get across the message that more partnerships do not automatically result in quality outcomes without proper planning. In addition, she expressed the hope that the summit will lead to a serious (re-)commitment to the agenda. **Sandra Pellegrom** reflected shortly on the Voluntary Review of the European Union that will be presented this year. She noted its potential, as well as that of the 'better regulation toolkit' of the EU, which together can help make policy more 'SDG-proof'. She also hoped the SDG Summit would lead to both Southern and Northern countries coming together and recognizing that we need to join forces to push the SDG agenda forward. She hoped that the declaration on future generations, which is scheduled to be adopted just before the SDG summit, will create hope that we might future proof policy making, which will also lead to better connections. **Frank Biermann** added that he hopes that governments and other actors realize that the SDGs have not changed the institutions and normative frameworks sufficiently thus far. The transformation that was promised in 2015, the language of Agenda 2030, has not been implemented. As a citizen, he expressed hope that governments at the global level, north and south, come together, as many trends

are negative, especially in the sphere of climate and biodiversity. He also cautioned against problem shifting, citing the example of current proposals to explore deep seabed mining to solve resource limitations for the production of electric vehicles. What might need is a more profound (re-)consideration of the way we live. He hoped the summit will be used for this.