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Global governance by goal-setting: the novel approach of the UN Sustainable Development Goals

Frank Biermann^a, Norichika Kanie^b and Rakhyun E Kim^a

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations present a novel approach to global governance where goal-setting features as a key strategy. 'Governance through goals', as exemplified by the SDGs, is new and unique for a number of characteristics such as the inclusive goal-setting process, the non-binding nature of the goals, the reliance on weak institutional arrangements, and the extensive leeway that states enjoy. While the SDGs hold a great potential, their collective success will depend on a number of institutional factors such as the extent to which states formalize their commitments, strengthen related global governance arrangements, translate the global ambitions into national contexts, integrate sectoral policies, and maintain flexibility in governance mechanisms. Research communities also have an important role to play, especially with regard to measuring genuine progress, aligning the goals with existing governance arrangements, and integrating the economic, social, and environmental dimensions.

Addresses

^a Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands^b Keio University, JapanCorresponding author: Biermann, Frank (f.biermann@uu.nl)**Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability** 2017, **26–27**:26–31This review comes from a themed issue on **Open issue, part II**Edited by **Eduardo Brondizio, Rik Leemans** and **William Solecki**For a complete overview see the [Issue](#) and the [Editorial](#)

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Introduction

In September 2015, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as an integral part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [1]. These 17 goals were to build upon and broaden the scope of the earlier Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which expired at the end of that year. The SDGs mark a historic shift for the UN towards *one sustainable development agenda* after a long history of trying to integrate economic and social

development with environmental sustainability. They also mark the most ambitious effort yet to place goal-setting at the centre of global policy and governance.

This article provides an analysis and assessment of the evolution, rationale, and future prospects of the SDGs. In particular, we illustrate how the SDGs exemplify a novel type of global governance where goal-setting features as a key governance strategy. The study draws on a multi-year research effort that has involved about thirty international scholars as well as a series of international workshops in Asia, North America, and Europe, including multi-stakeholder events in New York with UN officials and diplomats [2**]. In the following, we summarize the key findings of this project with a view to general implications for 'governance through goals' as a novel mechanism of world politics. In addition, we discuss the challenges for, and opportunities of, the SDGs by identifying several conditions that might determine their successful implementation, and we suggest some possible avenues for further research.

Governance through goals

While past global governance efforts have relied largely on top-down regulation or market-based approaches, the SDGs promise a novel type of governance that make use of non-legally binding, global goals set by the UN member states. The approach of governance through goals is marked by a number of key characteristics, none of which is specific to this type of governance. Yet all these characteristics together, in our view, amount to a unique and novel way of steering and distinct type of institutional arrangement in global governance [3].

First, the new approach to global governance by goal-setting is largely detached from the international legal system. Although the SDGs are grounded in international law [4], they are not legally binding, and the instrument that established them – a UN General Assembly resolution – is in no way intended to grant immediate legal force to the goals. Accordingly, governments are under no legal obligation to formally transfer the goals into their national legal systems. This distinguishes the SDGs from most other global environmental goals or targets on sustainable development that are enshrined in legally binding treaties, for example, for the protection of the stratospheric ozone layer.

Second, governance through goals, as exemplified by the SDGs, functions through weak institutional arrangements

at the intergovernmental level. These arrangements are different from the complex institutions that have been created for the more specific governance domains such as climate stability or biodiversity conservation. The institutional oversight over the SDG implementation at the global level has been left rather vague, and will now be fulfilled by the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development that in itself is new [5,6]. Weak global institutional arrangements, however, do not necessarily imply a low likelihood of successful implementation of the goals. Instead, it is rather the bottom-up, non-confrontational, country-driven, and stakeholder-oriented aspects of governance through goals that its supporters cite as a key potential success factor [7]. Partnerships and emergent properties are envisaged as an innovative feature of the SDGs.

Third, the new approach of governance through goals works through global inclusion and comprehensiveness of the global goal-setting process [8,9,10]. While the earlier MDGs were essentially elaborated within the UN Secretariat [11], the new SDGs were agreed upon in a public process that involved input from at least 70 governments as well as numerous representatives of civil society. Unlike the MDGs, the SDGs address both industrialized and developing countries. Conceptually this approach identifies no country as ‘developed’ in terms of sustainability, and turns all countries in North America, Europe, East Asia and Oceania into ‘developing countries’ that have to bring forward plans to transform their societies towards more sustainable development paths.

Fourth, global governance through goals grants much leeway to national choices and preferences. Even though 169 targets have been agreed upon to guide the implementation of the 17 goals, many of these targets are qualitative and leave much freedom for governments to determine their own ambition in implementing the goals. Even when quantitative and clearly defined targets have been chosen, governments can still rely on the non-binding nature of the goals. So in effect, governments retain maximum freedom in interpreting and implementing the goals if they so choose.

Yet the character of the SDGs as non-binding global aspirations with weak institutional oversight arrangements and high levels of national discretion does not imply that we conclude with an outright negative, pessimistic assessment. Instead, we do see the potential for a global governance strategy through goals, as represented by the SDGs, to advance public policy and private efforts towards an ambitious sustainability agenda [12]. Admittedly, this is also in light of the lack of alternatives given the current state of global governance that is so far insufficiently responding to the challenges we face in the Anthropocene [13]. Much will depend on the future policy development around these goals over the next

years, from the evolution of the global institutional arrangements to the ambition of the eventual national and sub-national implementation process to attain the goals.

Following this line of reasoning, in the following sections we lay out several institutional conditions that could help, we believe, the new goals to turn into a success story.

Challenges in implementation

Further strengthening the goals through indicators and commitments

Even though the 17 SDGs are supported by 169 more concrete targets, many of these targets remain relatively vague. Most are also purely qualitative, leaving much room for interpretation and hence weak implementation. For this reason, it will now be important to concretize the SDGs as much as possible through appropriate indicators, combined with formalized commitments by governments at the national level. As Oran Young [14] has pointed out, the success of governance through goals depends on the increasing formalization of commitments, the establishment of clear benchmarks, and the issuance of measurable pledges by governments, all of which may cause embarrassment or loss of face in case of non-compliance.

The struggle continues at the level of indicators that must effectively support the broad ambition expressed in the SDGs. Some progress has been made since the UN Statistical Commission created the Inter-agency Expert Group on SDG Indicators with a mandate to develop an indicator framework at the global level and to support its implementation. Ideally, this follow-up process will go beyond traditional means of national reports and reviews and include other types of review mechanisms [5]. In that regard, the current construction of the follow-up and review mechanisms for measuring progress through indicators as well as the Global Sustainable Development Report is in general heading in the right direction. However, innovative mechanisms such as tailored indicators for measuring progress or new sources of data (e.g., satellite and big data) could be considered.

Strengthening global governance arrangements

While devising effective procedures to track progress is a key element of success for a global governance strategy that relies on goal-setting [14], governance through goals starts with aspirations that are not necessarily integrated into, or aligned with, existing institutional arrangements (see also Refs. [15,16]). A significant development here is the new High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, agreed upon in 2012. The Agenda 2030 has given the High-level Political Forum the mandate to play a central role in overseeing a network of follow-up and review processes at the global level [17]. However, the details and function of the High-level Political Forum have not yet been clearly laid out, and

are hence subject to further intergovernmental deliberations within the UN. Similarly, how the High-level Political Forum could function as an ‘orchestrator’ in global sustainability governance remains an open question [5,15].

In addition, reliable and predictable resource mobilization is key [18]. For example, Goal 17 for revitalizing the ‘global partnership’ will require additional funding from public sources, as has been the case under the MDGs. Public–private and private–private partnerships and other types of action networks will also be increasingly important. While the success will depend on institutionalized review mechanisms and clear and quantifiable benchmarks that measure performance under the global partnership [5,18], interests are also emerging from the private sector to benefit from aligning their behavior with the global value represented by the SDGs in the context of corporate social responsibility, and the UN Global Compact has an important role to play in this regard [19]. Leadership of individual actors, such as Norway in the area of health governance, might be crucial in specific circumstances [20].

Problem-solving through such partnerships may better fit complex problems as they are typical in the Anthropocene [21]. Complex teleconnections and the nonlinear nature of the problems [13,22] might be better addressed in a manner that leaves room for manoeuvre and rapid adjustment in more flexible governance arrangements [23]. On the other hand, such novel partnerships around the SDGs must not repeat the mistakes of the many multisectoral, public-private partnerships that were agreed upon as ‘type-2 outcomes’ of the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg [24,25]. Much will depend on the effectiveness of the network of implementation mechanisms and partnerships that will emerge to help turn the ambitious SDGs into concrete progress by 2030.

Adapting global ambitions to national circumstances and priorities

The SDGs aspire for universal application and are thus global in nature. Yet they are also expected to be adapted to the national and local context by taking into account a number of factors, such as the level of development and existing national and local policies. This is a significant departure from the MDGs that had been set at the global level and were hence often criticized for its ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach [20]. But as Gupta and Nilsson [16] highlight, the translation of the global aspirations into national policies requires significant capacities at the national level, including functioning governance systems. Partially for this reason, governance in itself has now become the subject of the SDGs (Goals 16 and 17), with a number of targets that call upon governments to improve their performance in measurable ways [26,27].

The key to link the global aspirations as they are laid out in the 17 SDGs and their national adaptation is the measure of progress. This will require clear and widely accepted indicators [28]. Once policies and measures by different countries that vary in wealth, priorities, and context conditions can be assessed by the same indicators, progress can be globally compared. International ‘naming and shaming’ as an enforcement strategy can then help motivate countries to nudge their programmes forward.

Successful implementation of the SDGs thus requires effective translation between global and national aspirations. Potential pitfalls are the broad selectivity of the goals when addressed in national policy development. Some initial studies have been conducted in Japan, Sweden, and the Netherlands to contextualize the SDGs into national settings [29,30]. Some developing countries have also taken steps forward, especially those that have a national mechanism for the MDGs in place that they can now adapt for the SDGs. However, the SDGs will not be achieved with government action alone.

Ensuring effective policy integration in implementation

One question will be whether the ‘ecumenical diversity and soft priorities’ [15] evidenced in the 17 SDGs will be sufficient to effectively guide behavior in the right direction, particularly in the absence of an integrating vision and principle of what long-term sustainable development in the Anthropocene means [31*,32–34]. The 2030 Agenda sets out ‘[o]ur vision’ in three paragraphs, but it simply reiterates key priority areas embedded in the individual SDGs [4]. Effective implementation of the SDGs, therefore, requires in many cases systems for issue-oriented problem-solving that go beyond existing frameworks and institutions. A close eye on interlinkages is important here, with a view towards an integrated approach to implementing the SDGs to avoid negative trade-offs and create positive synergies [4,15,35,36*,37,38,39*,40–42].

This is a prerequisite for the success of a global governance strategy for sustainability as such. There is no doubt that all concerns addressed under the eight MDGs have been of utmost importance for development, with the overall great success stories in areas such as poverty eradication and prevention of hunger and malnutrition (even though attribution of these successes to the existence of these goals remains debatable). Therefore, it is vital that these primary concerns have a prime place again in the SDGs, with the central ambition of freeing the world of poverty and hunger by 2030. Yet equally important is the preservation of fundamental life-supporting functions of planet Earth [43,44]. All the success in poverty eradication under the previous development programmes could be negated if the ambitious goals under the climate convention and its Paris Agreement are not met. An integrated approach for the three

dimensions of sustainable development is indispensable. The integration is required at all levels of sustainability governance, from global to regional, national and local levels, and cutting across sectoral borders. For most of the countries this will require a reorganization of their national administrations and government systems. Integration in research will require more interdisciplinarity by breaking down of the silos of disciplinary knowledge, and the development of novel types of transdisciplinarity that combine specialist and stakeholder expertise, along with better architectures for an effective science-policy interface [45*].

Improving the adaptability of governance mechanisms

A final condition for the successful implementation of the SDGs is the adaptability of the related governance arrangements to deal with social-ecological changes that are likely to take place over the next fifteen years. Governance through goals in this regard will have to be flexible enough to adjust to changing conditions. For example, we have witnessed numerous changes since 2000 when the MDGs were established. The economies of countries such as China and India have grown rapidly, which has lifted millions after millions of people out of abject poverty. Yet the economic growth also further increased local environmental pollution combined with growing global emissions of carbon dioxide and other pollutants. The unequal speed of development eventually resulted in the further diversification of political interests among developing countries, which limited the coherence of the Group of 77 as their central coalition in multilateral negotiations. Progress in science and the development of better Earth system models showed the need to change human behavior in order to avoid catastrophic events [46]; and gradually the knowledge was shared. More non-state actors participate in decision making at various levels of governance than before. Thanks to the rapid development of information and communication technologies and social media, citizens are now better networked with each other at a speed much faster than ever. Many of these recent developments, however, had not been accurately predicted in 2000. Governance arrangements and core institutions for the attainment of the SDGs must therefore be dynamic and flexible enough to respond to unpredictable changes over the next fifteen years and beyond. How such flexibility will be maintained after the further institutionalization remains an open question.

Outlook for future research questions

The SDGs pose new sets of questions for academic research and policy analysis. First, the success of the SDGs will stand or fall with our *ability to measure genuine progress*. A key task lies here with statisticians, but also many other research communities are required to contribute [28,47]. For example, how can you measure progress towards better governance, more transparent policies,

less corrupt administrations, or better rule of law – all elements of Goal 16 – without further efforts in improving the methods underlying the appropriate indicators, along with increasing intergovernmental agreement on what indicators are most meaningful in assessing progress [26]?

Second, the new approach of governance through goals poses important new research questions regarding the *embedding and integration of goals at global level* into existing governance arrangements; the *effects the goals at global level may have* on other governance systems; and the question *to what extent further governance reforms are needed* to cope with the resulting challenges. We have touched on this in our project but there is an ongoing need for research in this area. ‘Orchestration’ in global governance might be one overarching concept to understand the function of the SDGs [5,15,48]—even though some might argue that a better description for governance through goals might even be conductorless jazz, given the bottom-up nature and emerging properties within a common vision!

Third, the *academic support for the integration of the economic, social, and environmental dimensions* of the SDGs will also be critical. While the MDGs were essentially related to a traditional economic and social development agenda, the SDGs now attempt to integrate the three pillars of sustainable development with the 17 goals that simultaneously touch upon all three aspects, even though to variant degrees. Integrating these aspects with their different agendas and rationales in the implementation of the SDGs is a key challenge for decision-makers and other stakeholders at all levels of governance. Yet it is also an important issue that the research communities need to address in inter- and transdisciplinary research projects. The emerging focus of the research community on the food-water-energy nexus, for example, reflects the importance of an integrated approach for sustainability, as well as a stronger focus on the social dimension.

Conclusion

Even though the SDGs draw on earlier efforts such as the MDGs, there is no doubt that the level of ambition and comprehensiveness of the new goals surpasses all existing attempts at global governance by goal-setting, making the SDGs one of the most intriguing new global initiatives in the area of sustainable development and environmental policy. As the UN Secretary-General aptly summarized after the conclusion of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate: ‘We are the first generation that can end poverty, and the last one that can take steps to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. With the adoption of a new development agenda, sustainable development goals and climate change agreement, we can set the world on course for a better future’. The novel type of governance through goals, we believe, will certainly be a vital part of this ambitious agenda.

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