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Cherry-picking the Sustainable Development Goals: Goal prioritization by national governments and implications for global governance

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Abstract

The member states of the United Nations collectively agreed on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as equally important global objectives. Yet the same states seem to prioritize certain SDGs in national implementation. Such cherry-picking defies the “integrated and indivisible” nature of the SDGs, and could negatively impact overall progress on sustainable development globally. Which SDGs receive more attention than the others in national policies, and what implications can we draw for global governance? We address these questions in two parts. Through a content analysis of the Voluntary National Reviews of 19 countries of varying income levels, we find that SDGs 1 and 8 on poverty eradication and economic growth are by far most widely prioritized. We then look specifically into Bhutan and Vietnam to explore possible explanations for goal prioritization as well as the potential steering effects of international organizations on their national policies. The findings have important policy implications for global governance. We argue that the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, in particular, has an important role to play to better coordinate international organizations to help mitigate unhealthy goal prioritization.

KEYWORDS

cherry-picking, governance through goals, international organizations, prioritization, Sustainable Development Goals

1 | INTRODUCTION

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the latest set of global goals introduced to guide societies towards sustainable development until 2030. Like the preceding Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the SDGs are non-legally binding, and their effective implementation depends largely on the good will of national governments. Some commentators argue that the leeway governments enjoy is a key factor explaining the potential effectiveness of governance through goals (Biermann, Kanie, & Kim, 2017). Indeed, this bottom-up approach to global goal-setting and attainment has enabled broad participation and support for the SDGs (Stevens & Kanie, 2016).

However, the flexibility comes with the risk of unbalanced attention given to the SDGs. Governments may choose to prioritize certain SDGs over the others based on their national political or economic interests (Horn & Grugel, 2018). We acknowledge that goal prioritization may not be entirely avoidable and in some cases even desirable when taking into account the differing contexts and capabilities of each country (Linnerud, Holden, Gilpin, & Simonsen, 2019). But excessive and prejudicial goal prioritization goes against the intent of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and could pose a significant threat to the integrity and coherence of the supposedly “integrated and indivisible” SDGs. Therefore, reconciling the need to prevent cherry-picking of the goals while enjoying an extensive

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leeway represents a major challenge for national policy-makers and international institutions.

Yet, no study has sought to investigate systematically which SDGs are prioritized by which national governments, and why. To the extent there is an emergent hierarchy of the SDGs, it is unknown whether the current practice of prioritization poses a risk to meeting the spirit of the SDGs, and what it implies for the role of international organizations, among others, as orchestrators in global governance.

Here we make a contribution to filling this knowledge gap by presenting a first mapping of national-level prioritization of the SDGs. We use the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of 19 countries with varying income levels to identify which SDGs are prioritized. We then explore the possible reasons for prioritizing some SDGs. In qualitative comparative case study involving Bhutan and Vietnam, we zoom in on the potential impact of a specific explanatory variable, namely the assistance (or the lack thereof) a government receives from international organizations. According to the literature, international organizations may play a significant role in shaping domestic policies in general (Bernstein & Cashore, 2012; Rahman, Sadath, & Giessen, 2016) and the national implementation of the 2030 Agenda in particular (Abbott & Bernstein, 2015; Cormier, 2016; Tosun & Peters, 2018). We therefore explore the potential role of international organizations as orchestrators of national governments in their prioritization of the SDGs (Abbott, Genschel, Snidal, & Zangl, 2015; Bernstein, 2017).

This paper is organized as follows. We first define the concept of goal prioritization and elaborate on the potential role that international organizations could play to mitigate harmful prioritization. We then explain the methods and data used for the subsequent quantitative analysis of SDG prioritization in 19 countries as well as qualitative case studies of two selected countries, Bhutan and Vietnam. Here we find that SDGs 1 and 8 are most prioritized, and that international organizations have the capacity to steer national-level prioritization when it comes to countries that require external funding. We conclude by offering some insights on the implications of the findings for global governance, and the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in particular.

2 | PRIORITIZATION AND ORCHESTRATION

We conceptualize prioritization in the context of the SDGs as strategic ordering of the goals according to their relative perceived importance (Kim, Kotze, van Asselt, Vijge, & Biermann, 2020). A government may for example choose to prioritize economic goals that are already in line with national strategic plans over environmental goals. Several commentators report on the practice of cherry-picking MDG targets by certain countries to showcase their success (Franklin, 2008; Langford, 2010). In the context of the SDGs, there is a risk of countries favoring certain goals, thereby creating trade-offs and threatening policy coherence (Nilsson, Griggs, & Visbeck, 2016; Bowen et al., 2017; Pradhan, Costa, Rybski, Lucht, & Kropp, 2017; Nilsson et al., 2018; Scherer et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2018; Kroll,

Warchold, & Pradhan, 2019; Lusseau & Mancini, 2019; Moyer & Bohl, 2019). Although the integrative and indivisible nature of the SDGs is given more emphasis than the MDGs, in practice, it has been widely acknowledged that the risk of such cherry-picking is elevated for the SDGs (Schmidt-Traub, Kroll, Teksoz, Durand-Delacré, & Sachs, 2017; Vandemoortele, 2018).

To be fair, prioritization is not entirely avoidable. Some commentators argue that insufficient capacity of many countries to fully implement all SDGs makes prioritization inevitable or even necessary (Allen, Metternicht, & Wiedmann, 2018). Others also point out that certain goals are, or should be recognized as, more important than the others (Costanza, McGlade, Lovins, & Kubiszewski, 2015; Holden, Linnerud, & Banister, 2017). Acknowledging this ongoing debate, here we do not make an *a priori* assumption whether goal prioritization *per se* is inherently good or bad. However, prioritization trends at the aggregate or global level, if unbalanced, may put the integrity of the SDG framework at risk.

Despite the significance, attempts to understand the specific phenomenon of SDG prioritization are scarce. We identify two key knowledge gaps in the literature, which we attempt to fill in this paper.

The first relates to the question of which SDGs are most prioritized by which countries and why. Critics expect that, on the whole, economic growth is most prioritized at the cost of other social and environmental goals. This bias however is expected to be relatively more severe among developing countries. Developed countries with a high income in terms of GDP per capita are expected to prioritize environmental goals such as SDGs 13, 14, and 15 more than the goals where they are already performing well such as SDG 8.

Several studies point out that the politics of goal setting and goal implementation may influence national governments' decision to prioritize certain SDGs (e.g., Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2019). More specifically, they cite insufficient governance capacity (Elder, Bengtsson, & Akenji, 2016; Glass & Newig, 2019), lack of appropriate knowledge (Weitz, Persson, Nilsson, & Tenggren, 2015), and pre-existing development agenda (Horn & Grugel, 2018) as potential factors contributing to the inability to implement the full suite of SDGs. Yet there has not been a systematic, empirical survey to test this hypothesis and contribute to our understanding of the domestic impact of global norms (Cortell & Davis, 2000).

The second relates to the question of what the potential role of international organizations might be in mitigating the practice of cherry-picking by national governments. Can international organizations as orchestrators in global governance (Abbott et al., 2015), and in particular as custodians of SDG indicators, play a constructive role here? Answers to this question partially depend on the degree of influence international organizations currently have on the localization of the SDGs into national contexts. The domestic impact of international organizations is well theorized in the literature (Bernstein & Cashore, 2012; Broome & Seabrooke, 2012) with several scholars elaborating specifically on the role of international organizations in SDG implementation (Abbott & Bernstein, 2015; Bernstein, 2017; Cormier, 2016).

In particular, some studies suggest that financial assistance is a key means through which international organizations exert influence on developing countries in the lower-income category, which are highly dependent on external funding from donors (Bernstein & Cashore, 2012; Horn & Grugel, 2018). Here, international organizations may have a considerable degree of influence on national governments' decision to select certain SDGs as priorities. In some cases, international organizations shape the design and implementation of specific national policies and projects. By doing so, these international organizations may seek to pursue their own development priorities in the recipient country, which may or may not coincide with pre-existing national development plans.

3 | METHODS AND DATA

We employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to map the pattern of goal prioritization by national governments and explore the possible influence of international organizations. We began with a quantitative content analysis of the VNRs submitted to the HLPF to assess the extent to which national governments prioritize certain SDGs. To determine which SDGs are prioritized, we operationalized prioritization as instances where a government makes explicit reference to specific SDGs as prioritized in its VNR. We treated prioritization as a binary variable, hence in our analysis, a country can either prioritize or not prioritize an SDG.

For the analysis, we carefully selected VNRs with a view to obtain a representative and comparable sample of a manageable size while avoiding selection bias. The complete set of VNRs was first filtered based on data availability using the following criteria: the VNR is written in English, it includes an assessment of all SDGs, and it was published between 2017 and 2018. Furthermore, we paid attention to the income level (gross national income per capita) and the geographical region of countries themselves for balanced economic and geographical representation of our sample. Through this selection process, a total of 19 VNRs were retained, which belong to 8 lower-middle-income countries,¹ five upper-middle-income countries,² and six high-income countries,³ in accordance with the World Bank classification. Any remaining selection bias was deemed negligible for the purpose of our analysis.

The degree of variation was quantitatively assessed and compared across the SDGs, across the three income groups, and across the three pillars of sustainable development. Here we used the goal categorization of Waage et al. (2015) to classify the 16 SDGs into three pillars of sustainable development, namely "well-being,"⁴ "infrastructure,"⁵ and "natural environment."⁶ The 17th SDG was excluded as it applies to the entire framework as a goal for implementation.

Followed by this quantitative overview, our analysis then turned to explaining prioritization processes in greater depth by examining, in particular, the relationship between the assistance of international organizations and goal prioritization at the national level. Here we selected two countries, Bhutan and Vietnam. These two countries

were chosen by reflecting on the results of the quantitative analysis, which we will present in the next section. First, we deliberately picked two countries from the lower-middle-income group expecting relatively high degree of influence of international organizations there. Second, we chose Bhutan and Vietnam for the diverse set of goals they prioritize (SDGs 1, 4, 13, and 15). For the two case studies, we used information gathered from both academic and grey literatures, especially the official publications of national governments such as sustainable development plans, strategies and related documents, as well as the reports of international organizations.

4 | GOAL PRIORITIZATION BY NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS AND THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

We present results of our analysis in two parts: (a) an overview of 19 countries and their prioritizing of the SDGs; and (b) an in-depth study of two of the 19 countries and how their goal prioritization might have been influenced by international organizations.

4.1 | A quantitative overview

An overview of goal prioritization per country is presented in Table 1. The results confirm the expectation that most countries prioritize a subset of the SDGs when it comes to national implementation. In our analysis, 16 out of 19 countries prioritize one or more SDGs, with the average of 4.7 SDGs per country. The number of the SDGs prioritized varies considerably between the countries ranging from 1 to 12 SDGs with a standard deviation of 3.6.

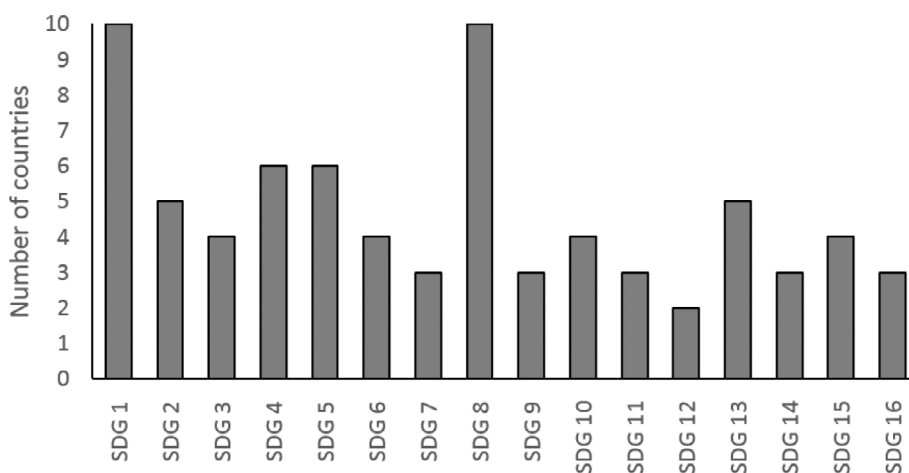
SDGs 1 and 8 on poverty eradication and economic growth are both prioritized by 10 out of 19 countries, making them clearly the most widely prioritized goals among the 16 SDGs analyzed (Figure 1). This is not surprising given the ongoing emphasis on these two objectives. Notably there is a considerable degree in overlap (80%) between the 10 countries that prioritize SDGs 1 and 8. This suggests that these two goals might be understood or being framed as coupled objectives: lifting people out of poverty requires inclusive and sustainable economic growth, and vice versa. The degrees of prioritization of the remaining 14 SDGs are comparable to each other with about three to five (out of 19) countries per SDG. The results show that while the specific goals prioritized vary between the countries that engage in prioritization (Table 1), if you look across the globe, all except for SDGs 1 and 8 are given comparable attention.

When we group the SDGs according to the three pillars of sustainable development as defined by Waage et al. (2015), the results indicate that governments pay more attention to social and economic goals than to environmental goals. Figure 2 shows the average number of countries that prioritized the goals belonging to each of the three sustainable development pillars. However, the difference is not as significant as one would have expected. Notably, the domination of SDGs 1 and 8 in prioritization decisions creates some, but not an

TABLE 1 SDGs prioritized by the 19 countries

| | SDGs | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--------------|------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 |
| Armenia | ✓ | | | | | | | ✓ | | | | | | | | ✓ |
| Australia | | | | | | | | ✓ | | | | | | | | |
| Bhutan | ✓ | | | | | | | | | | | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Cabo Verde | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Canada | ✓ | | | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Egypt | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | | | | |
| Jamaica | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Kenya | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | ✓ | |
| Laos | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Lebanon | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Maldives | | ✓ | | | | | | | | | | | | ✓ | | |
| Netherlands | | | | | ✓ | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Palestine | ✓ | | | ✓ | | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | | | |
| Poland | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Saudi Arabia | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Spain | ✓ | | | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| Sri Lanka | | | | | | | | ✓ | | | | | | | | |
| Thailand | ✓ | | | ✓ | | | | | | | | | ✓ | | | |
| Vietnam | | | | ✓ | | | | | | | | | | | | |

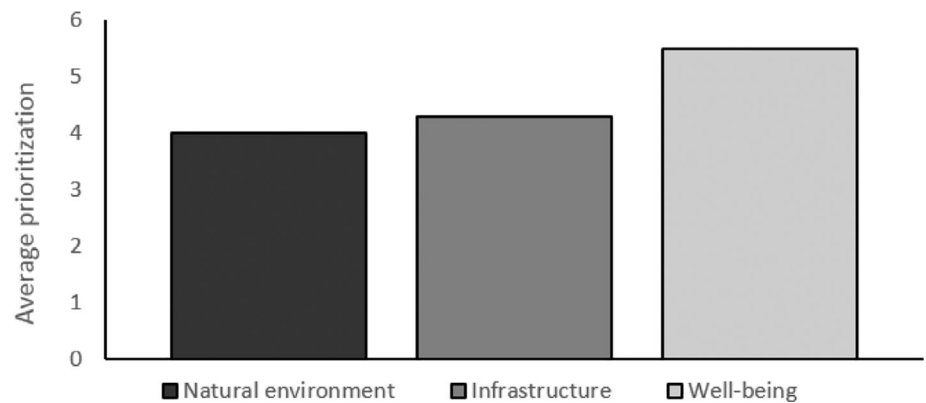
Abbreviation: SDG, Sustainable Development Goal.

**FIGURE 1** Number of countries (out of 19) that prioritized each Sustainable Development Goal

unbearably large, imbalance in trends across the three pillars of sustainable development.

Comparing the results between the 19 countries grouped according to their income level has shed light on three key findings (Table 2). First, SDG 1 is most widely prioritized across all income groups. In the case of SDG 8, however, we found that high-income countries, on average, prioritize SDG 8 on economic growth more than other income groups and more than any other goals in the SDG framework. The fact that rich countries continue to put more emphasis on economy than the environment is a disconcerting sign.

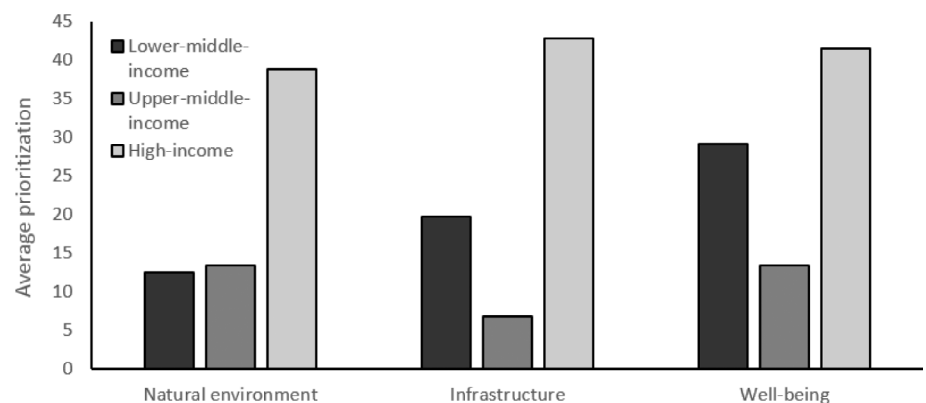
Second, the pattern of prioritization around SDG 12 on responsible consumption and production is most vividly polarizing. No lower- or upper-middle-income country in our dataset was found to be prioritizing SDG 12, while a third of the high-income countries are. Similarly, the two goals addressing inequalities—SDGs 5 and 10—are sparsely prioritized by the two lower-income groups while scoring high in the high-income group. This is contrary to our expectation that the lower the level of economic development of a country, the more emphasis it is likely to pay to reducing inequality among countries.

FIGURE 2 Average prioritization per sustainable development pillar**TABLE 2** Percentage of countries in each income group that prioritize each SDG

| | SDGs | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----|------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 |
| LMI | 50 | 25 | 38 | 38 | 38 | 25 | 13 | 50 | 13 | 13 | 13 | 0 | 13 | 0 | 25 | 0 |
| UMI | 40 | 20 | 0 | 20 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 20 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 20 | 20 | 0 | 20 |
| HI | 67 | 33 | 17 | 33 | 50 | 33 | 33 | 83 | 33 | 50 | 33 | 33 | 50 | 33 | 33 | 33 |

Note: For example, 83% of high-income countries in our dataset (i.e., five out of six) prioritize SDG 8.

Abbreviations: HI, high-income; LMI, lower-middle-income; SDG, Sustainable Development Goal; UMI, upper-middle-income.

FIGURE 3 Average prioritization per income group and sustainable development pillar

Third, high-income countries, overall, prioritize more goals than the other two groups, while many SDGs are not being prioritized by upper-middle income countries. This may be partially explained by the more advanced stage at which most developed countries are in terms of SDG implementation, which includes the identification of priority areas (Allen et al., 2018). But this could also be interpreted as pointing to the possible relative reluctance of upper-middle-income countries to cherry-pick the SDGs at the cost of a more balanced approach to long-term sustainable development.

In Figure 3, we can see that the degree of goal prioritization is relatively homogeneous for high-income countries. On contrary, lower-middle-income countries clearly prioritize the well-being-related goals (SDGs 1, 3, 4, 5, 10, and 16) more than the natural environment-related goals (SDGs 13, 14, and 15). This observed pattern of national prioritizing aligns with the national challenges

highlighted in the literature (e.g., Linnerud et al., 2019). Results also confirm the conventional understanding that as a country develops, it transitions from selective prioritizing socio-economic objectives towards a more balanced consideration of all three pillars of sustainable development.

4.2 | Qualitative case studies

This section delves into two lower-middle-income countries in particular—Bhutan and Vietnam—in order to gain a more context-specific understanding of why certain SDGs are prioritized and to explore the potential influence of international organizations on national-level SDG prioritization by means of providing financial assistance.

4.2.1 | Bhutan case study

Bhutan has prioritized SDGs 1 (no poverty), 13 (climate action), and 15 (life on land) (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2018). This decision was taken by the Gross National Happiness Commission, the national government's coordinating body for socio-economic development. The priority goals are specified in the 12th Five Year Plan (2018–2023).

But why these three goals? On the one hand, these priorities existed long before the SDGs came about and the selected SDGs are simply a continuation of what was there before. For example, poverty reduction has been a long-standing priority central to the 10th and 11th Five Year Plans (United Nations Country Team, 2012) and is now viewed as a last-mile challenge (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2018). The prioritization of climate action (SDG 13) stems from a national commitment made under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to remain carbon neutral (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2017; Yangka, Newman, Rauland, & Devereux, 2018), and the prioritization of life on land (SDG 15) can be traced back as early as 1969 when the Forest Act began requiring 60% of all land to be under forest cover (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2017).

On the other hand, goal prioritization is also approached as a way to showcase the country's successful SDGs implementation efforts. In other words, choosing the three priority goals where Bhutan has performed reasonably well is a way for the government to display its progress on sustainable development and to provide an example for the international community to emulate.

Against this backdrop, international organizations seem to have played a considerable role at later stages of the goal prioritization process, by providing technical and financial assistance. For example, the United Nations Development Programme and other United Nations organizations provided support to the national government with its preparation of the 12th Five Year Plan. This Plan specifies the three SDGs as prioritized, and each of which is covered by the National Key Result Areas. The United Nations has also provided technical and financial support for the synthesis of several assessments and trends, which was in turn used to identify the strategic focus of the Plan's strategy, objectives, programs, and flagship projects (United Nations Development Programme, 2016). Therefore, the involvement of the United Nations organizations played a significant role in the process of localizing and implementing the SDGs, through which the prioritization of certain SDGs became institutionalized.

We also found that prioritizing of the two environmental goals is also partially geared towards attracting more external funding from outside the country. The 12th Five Year Plan, for instance, makes it clear that aligning national policies with the SDGs on the environment, climate change, and disaster resilience will increase the chance of attracting international development funds (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2017). The Five Year Plan itself is presented to donors to leverage assistance for its implementation. As donors retain the freedom to select which aspects of the Plan to fund, they possess negotiating power in addition to an avenue for influence on the

prioritization of certain aspects of the plan, although their actual impact would depend on the capacity of the country to find alternative sources of funding. In essence, the SDGs serve as an important tool for the national government to legitimize pre-existing policy objectives and mobilize funding. And international organizations play an indirect role in steering which goals are prioritized.

4.2.2 | Vietnam case study

Vietnam has prioritized SDG 4 on education (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2018). Education has been the country's top national priority going back at least to 1991, when it was acknowledged as a basic condition for realizing socio-economic objectives (Dang, 2009). Despite the long-standing emphasis and progress on education, disparities in educational opportunities remain within the country (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam & The United Nations in Vietnam, 2017). The prioritization of education is therefore an ongoing commitment dating from long before the SDGs were adopted, but one that remains relevant.

This implies limited influence of international organizations on the decision to prioritize SDG 4 in Vietnam. However, this does not mean no influence. At the time of writing, Vietnam is still in a transition period without detailed plans for the implementation of the SDGs. The 2016–2020 Socio-Economic Development Plan makes only three brief references to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2016). The loose integration of the SDGs in the plan is in large part due to poor timing, with the Socio-Economic Development Plan being developed at the same time as the 2030 Agenda. In this context, there is much room for international organizations to influence the direction taken by Vietnam on the SDG implementation by channeling funding streams. In fact, the real test for the SDGs will come when the Vietnamese government develops its new development strategies.

The United Nations acknowledges the influence of international organizations on policy-making in Vietnam. Two of the four priorities introduced in the United Nations One Strategic Plan for Vietnam (2017–2021) focus on offering “objective and impartial development policy options drawing on collective global knowledge” and on “helping to develop clear and practical approaches in support of the realization of the SDGs” (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam & The United Nations in Viet Nam, 2017, p. 13). Vietnam benefits from the experience, technical and financial assistance of the United Nations and other development partners to both develop and implement policies. These insights indicate that international organizations can have a tangible impact on policy-making, opening the door for a more indirect influence on priorities pursued in practice.

We highlight that Vietnam, as a lower-middle-income country, still lacks the needed capacity to provide due attention to all of the SDGs in a balanced manner. The decreasing level of Official Development Assistance received in Vietnam has made the implementation of the SDGs in the country particularly challenging (Le Thuy, 2017). The Socio-Economic Development Plan laments the difficulties of finding

sufficient financial resources (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2016). This implies that external assistance is a key bottleneck in Vietnam. The potential impact of international organizations as assistance providers is therefore deemed considerable.

4.2.3 | Key insights from a comparative perspective

There are several similarities in prioritization processes occurring in Bhutan and Vietnam. In particular, the prioritized SDGs in both cases are long-lasting national policy objectives identified at high political levels. The governments did not start prioritizing goals that they did not internally value before the SDGs came about. It did not matter whether the pre-existing priority was explicit as in the case of Vietnam or implicit as in the case of Bhutan, which only identified priority SDGs after the 2030 Agenda was adopted in 2015. Therefore, policy inertia is a key explanation for the little change in terms of domestic development priorities. This implies that, in both case studies, the national governments appear to have picked their main priorities rather independently from external influence. This finding corroborates with existing studies that put emphasis on path dependency (e.g., Horn & Grugel, 2018; Tosun & Leininger, 2017).

Nevertheless, international organizations can influence priority-selection processes especially at later stages. The case of Bhutan revealed that the United Nations Development Programme assisted the national government in designing its latest Five Year Plan, in which priority areas were identified. In both cases, the process of receiving assistance to fund plans is similar and donor assistance was deemed important. In the current context, negotiation processes coupled with the authority and financial power of international organizations are likely to give them influence on which projects are funded and pursued by a government, therefore increasing their influence on which goals are prioritized in practice, if not on paper. As the Vietnamese government does not appear to have selected priorities to attract external funding, lacks a detailed SDG implementation plan and has emphasized financial resource scarcity, the country appears more inclined to be influenced by external assistance including that of international organizations.

5 | IMPLICATIONS FOR GLOBAL GOVERNANCE THROUGH GOALS

The practice of prioritizing certain SDGs by national governments is real and happening. Expectedly there is some variation in the prioritized SDGs. Which SDGs are prioritized seems to depend at least in part on the level of economic development of respective countries. Furthermore, our case studies suggest that the goals that are prioritized often correspond with what their existing priorities were before the SDGs came about. This implies the SDGs themselves do not directly steer national policies but rather the goals are used to legitimize existing priorities of national governments. For a balanced approach to the Agenda

2030, the practice of goal prioritization will need to be globally orchestrated effectively at the implementation phase.

Improving goal-setting as a novel global governance mechanism requires careful reflection on the goal prioritization patterns across different income groups. We observe two that requires mitigation: (a) developing countries need to have a more balanced approach to goal prioritization, that is to pay equal attention to the environment; and (b) developed countries need to lessen their prevailing emphasis on economic growth. These instances of potentially harmful prioritization have significant implications for the future of global governance through goals.

With regard to the first, international organizations do not appear to have a strong influence over the selection of priorities by national governments, but they have the capacity to influence the manner in which the priorities are pursued. In other words, international organizations may shape the design of national development plans by providing expertise as well as financial and technical assistance. This is not a trivial impact that international organizations have. They may advise governments of the importance to consider potential trade-offs that may arise when narrowly pursuing sectoral goals. It is likely that the degree of influence will be in countries where their dependence on external financial support is also high. In such cases, international organizations would have more leverage in deciding where to allocate resources and assistance during joint projects.

However, international organizations may not necessarily be motivated to pursue a balanced implementation of all SDGs nationally as well as globally. This is because international organizations are themselves sectorally differentiated and “champion” certain SDGs.⁷ Therefore, by design, most international organizations advocate a small subset of the SDGs. And as these international organizations are not equal in terms of the level of resources they have at disposal, power asymmetry among international organizations may be reflected on the pattern of goal prioritization and implementation at the national level. Therefore, the extent to which international organizations may help counter any prevailing trend of prioritization depends on the extent to which they themselves are coordinated. Coordination efforts could reduce the potentially negative impacts that actions undertaken in issue areas funded by international organizations have on other—perhaps less-funded—fields. But without appropriate coordination, these interests are reflected in the assistance they provide.

Here the HLPF has a significant role to play as a key orchestrator of international organizations (Abbott & Bernstein, 2015). Future research should delve more specifically into the discourse on prioritization within the HLPF to better understand how it approaches the issue of goal prioritization, and to what extent this is a concern when it comes to a more balanced implementation of the SDGs across the globe. Furthermore, what could the HLPF do to effectively mitigate SDG cherry-picking by national governments and promote a balanced approach to the SDG implementation? So far critics have argued that the HLPF is insufficiently resourced to be effective. But one area where the HLPF could make a difference is by initiating a global process through which the international community comes to a new definition of sustainable development to replace the outdated one from 1987. Such a renewed definition could serve as a clear overarching

goal of the SDGs (Kim & Bosselmann, 2015; Kim, 2016; see also Costanza et al., 2015; Underdal & Kim, 2017; Young, Underdal, Kanie, & Kim, 2017). A promising candidate is the one proposed by Griggs et al. (2013, p. 306), which is "development that meets the needs of the present while safeguarding Earth's life-support system, on which the welfare of current and future generations depends." By recognizing both planetary integrity and poverty reduction as equally important twin priorities, this definition has since garnered support among sustainability scientists (e.g., Lim, Søgaaard Jørgensen, & Wyborn, 2018).

While international organizations may provide a global framework and serve as key orchestrators for the SDGs, they do not solve all of our challenges with respect to mitigating harmful goal prioritization. This is particularly because, as our empirical analysis revealed, SDG prioritization (especially of SDG 8 on economic growth) is more widespread among developed countries. But the potential orchestration effects of international organizations on developed countries is likely to be less significant as their national policies are in general less swayed by external financial assistance or other forms of support. Future research could therefore delve into specific cases where developed countries prioritize SDG 8, and investigate whether and how global orchestration efforts may mitigate potential trade-offs.

6 | CONCLUSION

The analysis presented in this paper sought to uncover the pattern of SDG prioritization by national governments, and the relationship between what we observe and the potential role that international organizations may play in mitigating trade-offs that may result from the cherry picking of the SDGs. The study was motivated by a possible risk that goal prioritization may pose to the integrity of the 2030 Agenda, and the need to manage that risk.

We found that among the 17 SDGs, SDGs 1 and 8 are most widely prioritized, especially among high-income developed countries. A key reason we identified through our two case studies of Bhutan and Vietnam is path dependency. In both of these cases, the governments chose to prioritize certain SDGs in line with their pre-existing national development policies. This implies a limited steering capacity of the SDG framework, which is weaker than one would hope to find. The observed prioritization pattern seems to also reflect the continued dominance of a neoliberal development paradigm, one that views economic growth as a key means to eradicating poverty.

Consequently, greater attention and resources are expected to be allocated to these goals. The emergent de facto goal hierarchy, however, poses significant challenges to global governance through goals. In particular, the apparent preference to focus on achieving economic growth may lead to negative trade-offs on the achievement of other interacting SDGs, and therefore, on promoting a consistent progress on all aspects of sustainable development.

We suggest that international organizations have an important role to play in overseeing the practice of cherry-picking. Our findings

suggest that, although international organizations tend to assist governments to make progress on the SDGs of their choice, they may shape national policies by funding specific aspects of development plans as well as by getting involved in the creation of these plans. Our findings reaffirm the importance of strengthening global coordination mechanisms to ensure a coherent implementation of the SDGs at both national and global levels.

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ENDNOTES

¹Bhutan, Cabo Verde, Egypt, Kenya, Laos, Sri Lanka, State of Palestine, and Vietnam.

²Armenia, Jamaica, Lebanon, Maldives, and Thailand.

³Australia, Canada, Netherlands, Poland, Saudi Arabia, and Spain.

⁴SDGs 1 (poverty), 3 (health), 4 (education), 5 (gender), 10 (inequalities), and 16 (peace and justice).

⁵SDGs 2 (hunger), 6 (water), 7 (energy), 8 (economic growth), 9 (infrastructure), 11 (cities), and 12 (consumption and production).

⁶SDGs 13 (climate), 14 (oceans), and 15 (biodiversity).

⁷For classification of international organizations according to the SDGs they are most closely associated with, see <https://uia.org/s/sdg/en/>.

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