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The SDGs as integrating force in global governance? Challenges and opportunities

Maya Bogers[1] · Frank Biermann[1] · Agni Kalfagianni[1] · Rakhyun E. Kim[1]

Abstract

In 2015, the United Nations agreed on 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as an "integrated and indivisible" set of policy objectives with the aim, among others, to unite the diverse and vast system of international organizations under one shared normative agenda. And yet, have these SDGs really become such an integrative force in global governance? Our conclusion here is negative, and our research suggests that the SDGs have not lived up to these high expectations. We find instead that the 17 global goals have not been taken up by a substantial group of international organizations, and some organizations rather cherry-pick those goals that best fit their own agenda and interests. To overcome these challenges and to fulfill the promise of integrated global sustainability governance enshrined in the SDGs, we propose three urgent actions: first, to further push the use of the SDGs across all international organizations, in particular regional organizations outside the United Nations system; second, to facilitate better collaboration across policy domains; and third, to focus attention on those SDGs that are so far "left behind."

Abbreviations

2030 Agenda	2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
SDG(s)	Sustainable Development Goal(s)
UNSDG	United Nations Sustainable Development Group

1 Introduction

When the United Nations agreed in 2015 on 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), they described these as "integrated and indivisible" (United Nations, 2015), because progress on one goal would affect progress on many others. The United Nations officials and global governance experts thus agree that more integrative approaches are needed

✉ Maya Bogers
   m.j.bogers@uu.nl

1   Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, Utrecht University, Princetonlaan 8a, 3584 CB Utrecht, The Netherlands

to ensure that international policies and programs do not conflict. However, developing and implementing such integrative approaches has proven to be difficult, particularly at the global level (Nilsson et al., 2009; Tosun & Lang, 2017).

It is widely assumed that international organizations must play here a central integrative role because of their strong influence on global policy-making, and we focus in this article thus on these organizations. We conceptualize "international organizations" broadly as including both formal intergovernmental organizations and weaker institutional arrangements under multilateral agreements, such as the secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, and we see an organization as an entity in which both member states and the organization's bureaucracy influence eventual decisions (Abbott & Snidal, 1998; Biermann and Siebenhüner, 2009). While we thus recognize the importance of states within international organizations, we pay less attention to internal organizational dynamics, but rather focus on broader international policy practice, and how international organizations overall responded to the SDGs.

One widely recognized barrier for more integrative global governance is that most international organizations operate in silos; that is, they tend to focus on narrow policy domains and seek to serve within such domains largely their own goals. As a result, global governance is fragmented along policy domains (Haas & Stevens, 2017; Young, 2011; Zelli & van Asselt, 2013), which many experts see as problematic (e.g., Candel & Biesbroek, 2016). To fully achieve global sustainability, it is hence often argued that the domain-centered policy silos must be overcome (e.g., Stafford-Smith et al., 2017).

When the SDGs were adopted, many had hoped that these new global goals would better integrate the work of the hundreds of international organizations active in global sustainability governance (Biermann et al., 2017). The overarching policy framework for the SDGs, the "2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," explicitly urged all actors, including international organizations, to "act in collaborative partnership" and to develop "integrated solutions" (United Nations, 2015), building on even earlier calls from the United Nations to "break down silos" (Niestroy & Meuleman, 2016). As a widely supported set of shared goals, many scholars expected the SDGs to evolve into an overarching policy framework also for international organizations. By serving as "orchestrators," the SDGs were believed to facilitate institutional interactions and integration among international organizations, thus ultimately helping to unify global governance (Bernstein, 2017; Haas & Stevens, 2017; Provan & Kenis, 2008; Underdal & Kim, 2017; Vijge et al., 2020). Indeed, the SDGs focus more on interconnections compared to earlier global agendas, for example, by including economic, social, and environmental concerns in many SDG targets and by cross-referencing between the goals (Le Blanc, 2015). The SDGs are thus a better framework than ever existed before to integrate multiple policy domains and their interlinkages (Kamau et al., 2018).

And yet, as we argue here, in the end, the SDGs have broadly failed to integrate global policies and to bring international organizations together. By and large, the SDGs have not become a shared set of connecting goals, and their uptake in global governance remains limited. Many organizations instead cherry-pick those SDGs that are most fitting to their own agenda. Rather than evolving into a unifying force, we find that the launch of the SDGs has even led to stronger "policy silos," where some SDGs are prioritized and others left behind. However, we also see some integrating effects of the SDGs in the United Nations system, and we end this article thus with detailed policy recommendations to strengthen those positive developments.
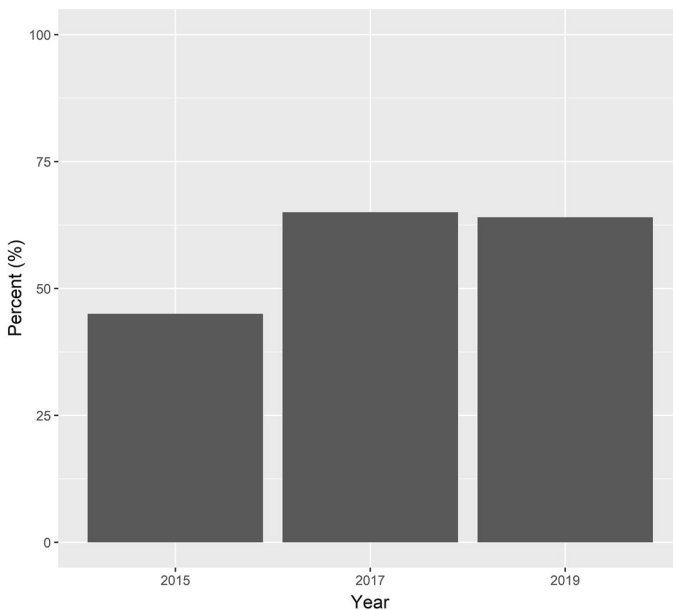
Fig. 1 Percent of international organizations outside the United Nations system (n = 121) mentioning the SDGs at least once on their websites in 2015, 2017, and 2019. Source: authors' own data (Bogers et al., 2022a)

2 Not yet a shared set of goals

Because the SDGs are not legally binding, they can succeed as a shared agenda only if international organizations adopt them voluntarily and align their policies and programs accordingly. Our own empirical research, as well as that of others, suggests here that the SDGs are indeed increasingly adopted in global governance. However, this process is unbalanced; it is mostly the United Nations-affiliated and larger international organizations that use the SDGs (Bogers et al., 2022a; Censoro et al., 2020; Montesano et al., 2021). Outside of these groups, the SDGs seem less relevant as an overarching agenda. Roughly one out of three international organizations outside the United Nations—mostly smaller and regional organizations—does not even mention the SDGs on their website (data from 2017 and 2019, see Fig. 1).

Why is this case? For one, this unbalanced adoption of the SDGs relates to the creation of the goals themselves. When the goals were set (Chasek et al., 2016), more resourceful and powerful international organizations could leave a strong mark on the goals (Fukuda-Parr, 2019; Montesano et al., 2021). Such involvement in formulating the goals may, in turn, have created more ownership and more interest among these organizations to later use the goals as an overarching framework (Locke & Latham, 2002). For example, the World Bank strongly influenced the definition of the targets under SDG 10 on reduced inequalities, and the bank later became a key actor in its implementation, including by serving as SDG "indicator custodian" (van Driel et al., 2022).

While the SDGs are thus increasingly used, they are not yet shared by all international organizations. Instead, they are referred to mainly by larger organizations and by

organizations from the United Nations system. In the remaining seven years to implement the goals until 2030, a key challenge will thus be to find ways how the global goals can become an overarching agenda also for the many smaller and more regional international organizations in global governance.

3 Cherry-picking the SDGs

Even when the SDGs are used, most international organizations do not pay attention to all goals but rather prioritize, or "cherry-pick," those goals that best fit their long-standing policy priorities (Biermann et al., 2022; Kotzé et al., 2022; Schmidt-Traub et al., 2017). In particular, international organizations often cherry-pick SDG 8 (on decent work and economic growth), SDG 9 (on industry and innovation), and SDG 12 (on consumption and production) (Bogers et al., 2023). The extent to which individual goals help coordination and integration of international organizations seems to fall largely within their narrow policy domains (Driel et al., 2022). For example, in global energy governance, the launch of SDG 7 (on clean and affordable energy) has led to more coordination among international organizations *within* the energy domain (Downie, 2020). As a result, empirical evidence from the system level shows that policy silos became even stronger (Bogers et al., 2022b), despite the ambitions of the United Nations to break these silos down. The SDGs thus appear more as 17 independent goals that actors address within their narrow policy domains rather than a set of overarching goals connecting these domains. International decision-making still occurs in silos without a strategy for more cooperation across silos (also Chasek & Downie, 2021). By and large, the SDGs were unable to transform these institutional structures (Beisheim et al., 2022; Bogers et al., 2022b).

As a consequence, some goals are "left behind." These goals are hardly prioritized and rarely integrated with others. For example, the uptake of ocean and land issues into the SDGs was expected to lead to more attention and better integration of these issues with other global concerns (Visseren-Hamakers & Kok, 2022). And yet, broader planetary concerns such as those under SDG 14 (on oceans) and SDG 15 (on land) are still side-lined in global policies, including within the United Nations system (Bogers et al., 2023; Kotzé et al., 2022). Global and domestic inequality only barely made it into the final set of SDGs as SDG 10 (Kamau et al., 2018), and this goal is still poorly supported and often marginalized (Bogers et al., 2023; Fukuda-Parr, 2019; Sénit et al., 2022).

The design of the SDGs even encourages, explicitly and implicitly, such cherry-picking. The SDGs are specific to policy domains, and the 2030 Agenda explicitly confirms to "respect policy space and priorities" (United Nations, 2015). Also, in its regular review of the SDGs, the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development follows a policy domain-specific approach, focusing on a few selected SDGs for each session (Amanuma et al., 2019). While the targets under the SDGs often incorporate economic, social, and environmental concerns, the more specific indicators often do not reflect those concerns (Kim, 2023).

There are some positive signs, however. While competition between the United Nations agencies persists, some silos around policy domains within the United Nations system might seem to weaken (Bogers et al., 2022b; Weinlich et al., 2022). Larger international organizations, including some United Nations agencies, increasingly focus on policy integration and mobilize the SDGs for this purpose. Over time, the SDGs might thus lead some international actors to strengthen their earlier efforts toward policy integration (Bogers

et al., 2022a; Censoro et al., 2020; Montesano et al., 2021); yet the current progress is still too slow.

4 Policy recommendations

Our research thus points to two main challenges to better integrate SDGs in global governance. First, how can SDGs become an overarching agenda also for smaller international organizations and for organizations outside the United Nations system? Second, how can the system move from cherry-picking toward holistic SDG implementation that fully includes also the less salient goals? To address these challenges, we suggest three actions:

Push the use of the SDGs across all international organizations: If the SDGs are to be a truly global agenda, governments and United Nations agencies must make a renewed push for the uptake of the goals also by regional and smaller international organizations. One opportunity to do so is through the United Nations regional commissions. The regional commissions have already taken on a key role in increasing the uptake of the SDGs as an integrated framework among countries (Georgeson & Maslin, 2018) and often collaborate with regional international organizations.

Increase collaboration across policy domains: Moreover, to overcome policy silos, more collaboration across policy domains is needed. We propose here the establishment of "SDG target custodians." The current system of "custodianship" of SDG indicators has already facilitated collaboration in the past (van Driel et al., 2022), yet such indicator custodians often work in the same policy domain. At the target level, however, all three sustainability dimensions—economic, social, and environmental—are better covered. An extension of the custodianship system to also cover SDG targets may help policy integration among international organizations from different policy domains and make them collaborate more, also by co-developing knowledge on how economic, social, and environmental aspects can be better balanced within an SDG target.

Focus attention on those SDGs that are left behind: Internationally, some SDGs are marginalized in global policy. It is thus important that all international organizations structurally assess the effects of their policies and programs on *all* SDGs. This would improve integrated approaches to achieve these goals as well (Breuer et al., 2019). Within the United Nations system, the Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework has been useful in this regard (Beisheim et al., 2022; UNSDG, 2019). The United Nations, including its regional commissions, and governments could promote the use of this framework also outside the United Nations system. However, simply mapping the goals is not enough. To ensure that some SDGs do not fall behind, new efforts at prioritization are needed. While a "hard" prioritization of one goal over another (e.g., if there is a trade-off between SDG x and SDG y, SDG x must always be chosen) is politically unlikely, guidelines for "soft prioritization" may be created. For example, determining minimum progress thresholds for each SDG target could be a useful approach: should progress under one target fall under this assigned threshold, the target would immediately get priority, and specific policies would be triggered to increase target achievement. This approach has proven valuable in adaptive policy planning (Swanson et al., 2010). Target thresholds would need to be set by governments in consultation with those international organizations concerned.

5 Conclusion

Our research has shown that the SDGs have not lived up to expectations that they would help integrate the system of global governance. The SDGs are not taken up by a large enough group of international organizations, and organizations continue to cherry-pick SDGs that best fit their interest. This situation leads to persistent and even growing policy silos, and some SDGs are left behind. Three actions are needed, at the least, for a more integrated approach that increases chances of achieving the SDGs by 2030: first, renewed efforts to use the SDGs across all international organizations; second, more collaboration across policy domains, among others by agreeing on "SDG target custodians"; and third, a stronger and more structural focus on those SDGs that are still marginalized in global policies. These three steps, among others, are urgently needed to fulfill the promise of the 2030 Agenda that the SDGs would be truly "integrated and indivisible."

Declarations

Conflict of interest Agni Kalfagianni served as interim editor-in-chief during the review of this paper but was not involved in the review process.

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