

# Global Goals for Sustainability Integration?

The role of ideas, norms and institutions

## Mondiale Doelen voor Duurzaamheidsintegratie?

De rol van ideeën, normen en instituties  
(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

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# Part I

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 The urgency of sustainability integration in the Anthropocene

Since its inception, the notion of sustainability has been linked to that of a balance between needs. On the one hand, the extraction and allocation of resources necessary to ensure human welfare. On the other hand, the preservation of the natural environment needed to ensure that those resources remain available. While these concerns date back at least a couple of centuries (Kuhlman & Farrington, 2010), it was only in 1987 that the report of the UN World Commission on Environment and Development, better known as the Brundtland Report, officially adopted a definition of sustainable development as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (WCED, 1987).

The Brundtland report speaks of only two dimensions that should be reconciled: human development and the environment. Yet, since sustainability evolved into a mainstay of development governance and policy, it is now most often defined by three dimensions or ‘pillars’: environment, society, and economy (Moldan, et al., 2012; Boyer, et al., 2016). The formalisation of this tripartite definition of sustainability has its parallel in the Triple Bottom Line accounting framework used to operationalise corporate social responsibility (Elkington, 1997). However, we should not forget that the modern concept of sustainability itself emerged from a ‘twin’ social and ecological critique of the dominance of economic growth as the cornerstone of development, which stressed the need to integrate environmental and social concerns (Purvis, et al., 2019). In this thesis, I define sustainability integration as the simultaneous and interdependent consideration and implementation by actors of the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental.

Although the existence of the three dimensions of sustainability has been widely accepted for several decades, recent developments have also greatly increased the urgency of understanding and dealing with the integration of these three dimensions. Growing evidence about the unprecedented impact of human activity on the natural environment has led to the reconceptualisation of the entire planetary system as one where ‘human’ and ‘natural’ can no longer be considered separate (Biermann, 2014). In other words, the very high levels of biophysical and socioeconomic interdependence herald a new epoch where humans are no longer mere observers, but key drivers of planetary change: the Anthropocene (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000).

In the past decades, many key Earth system processes - from the carbon and nitrogen cycles to biodiversity - have become dominated by human activities, thereby leading to the reconceptualisation of humanity as a ‘geological superpower’ (Steffen, et al., 2011). Human action has caused the Earth system to approach the so-called ‘planetary boundaries’ in a number of biophysical subsystems: these are defined as the borders of safe operating space, which, when crossed, open up a zone of uncertainty wherein unpredictable non-linear effects can be triggered at any moment (Rockström, et al., 2009). As humankind has taken this new steering position in global dynamics, this also means that not only everything humans *do*, but also – and before that - everything humans *think* and which therefore informs their actions, is bound to have unprecedented relevance in all dimensions of sustainability.

The advent of the Anthropocene has therefore upgraded the integration between the three dimensions of sustainability from an *observable trend* to an *urgent necessity*. At the same time, while the existence of – and, increasingly, the need for integration between - the three dimensions of sustainability is widely accepted today, heated debates in both academic and policy circles are still ongoing as to what the relationship between the three dimensions looks like and should look like. While a detailed conceptual discussion is



beyond the scope of this introduction, it is important to outline the main features of the three models of sustainability integration I will focus on in this thesis.

The first model of sustainability integration is the *growth-centric model*, in which the soundness of environment and society largely depends on economic growth (O'Riordan, et al., 2001). Economic growth is here the key priority, as improving economic welfare will eventually result in positive spill over effects into the other dimensions. Given its strong belief in the almost involuntary nature of positive economic spillovers, this model thus also accepts strong siloisation between the three dimensions (Fig.1).

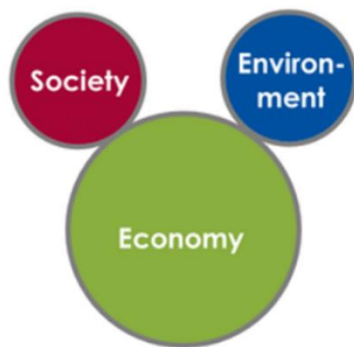


Fig.1: the growth-centric model of sustainable development

The second model of sustainability integration is what I will call the *balanced model*. In this model, the three dimensions of sustainability are not hierarchically related (Fig.2). Instead, this model prioritises the achievement of an overarching balance, where shortcomings in one dimension can be compensated by progress in another. Given this high degree of substitutability, the balanced model thus falls within the broader 'weak' paradigm of sustainability (Arias-Maldonado, 2013). The balanced model is optimistic about the mutual influence of the dimensions, highlighting win-win dynamics rather than trade-offs and advancing a 'balance sheet' approach that is closely related to the Triple Bottom Line framework discussed above. Since the 1990s, the multilateral global

sustainability governance agenda has gradually embraced the balanced model as the main frame for its ambitions – the jury is still out on whether this also applies to its practices.



Fig.2: the balanced model of sustainable development

The optimistic neutrality of the balanced model, especially given its established status as the main term of reference for sustainability governance efforts, has faced harsh criticism from advocates of more hierarchical models of integration. Social critics of this model have argued that three-dimensional sustainability is dependent on the promotion of true equality and rights-based justice (Dower, 2004; Weber, 2017; Bennett, et al., 2019). On the environmental side, a ‘strong’ paradigm of sustainability instead acts as the conceptual foundation, whereby ecological integrity is a pre-requisite for social and economic sustainability (Milne, 1996; Giddings, et al., 2002; Tulloch & Neilson, 2014).

This is the cornerstone of the third model of integration, which I refer to as *ecocentric*. Here, environmental protection is seen as necessary for economic and social sustainability (fig.3). In addition to advocating the instrumental necessity of a hierarchy between dimensions of sustainability, the ecocentric model also rests on the principled prioritisation of ecological integrity and the preservation of natural capital over socio-economic progress (Arias-Maldonado, 2013; Kim & Bosselmann, 2015), which has roots in the intrinsic valuing of the natural world typical of the deep ecology philosophy (Devall & Sessions, 1985). The ecocentric model, which is arguably the most developed critique to the balanced model, is also sometimes depicted as a wedding cake with the environment acting as the foundational layer (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2016).



*Fig.3: the ecocentric model of sustainable development*

Overall, the combination of Anthropocene-driven urgency and co-existence of different and seemingly opposing integration models makes the study of whether and how change towards sustainability integration is happening extremely topical. This is the first key aim of this thesis.

## **1.2 Mind the gap(s)**

The Anthropocene has caught scientists and policymakers unprepared. The unprecedented degree of socio-ecological integration on a global scale constitutes a true revolution, which upends humans' 'traditional' role in nature from one of cogs to that of engine. This has sharply increased the urgency of global action upon integration. The closer scrutiny resulting from this urgency has further revealed how current academic, policy and professional debates are not in line with the new reality. Looking at these debates, I highlight two main gaps in our toolkit to deal with such existential transformations and therefore with sustainability integration. These gaps inform the two overarching research questions of this thesis.

### *1.2.1 The knowledge gap*

The first gap has to do with our limited understanding of how the profound contextual changes brought about by the Anthropocene impact how we perceive and thereby

‘manage’ sustainability integration as a response to those changes. As mentioned earlier, as perceptions inform action, their global impact in an Anthropocenic context is greatly magnified. This knowledge gap is in fact made up of two closely related dimensions: a conceptual dimension, which has to do with the lack of conceptual frameworks available to explain the relationship between contextual change and changes in ideas and institutions around sustainability integration, and an empirical dimension, related to the lack of research on the actual state of this relationship.

To shed light on both dimensions of the knowledge gap, this research probed both the sustainability literature, which focuses on sustainability integration as a specific object of study, and the international relations literature, which has a broader and more conceptual interest in the dynamics and impacts of global phenomena and challenges. One of the key features of the Anthropocene is the unprecedented socio-ecological interdependence, which has transformed the entire planet into one system where natural and human-made phenomena are constantly cause and consequence of each other. This makes the study of international relations even more relevant to investigate sustainability integration.

When seeking to investigate the link between Anthropocenic change and change in human ideas and institutions, the current sustainability literature offers an improved but still incomplete picture. A number of research programmes have already been adjusting to the ‘new reality’. From new sustainability science to resilience theory to reflexivity, ‘Anthropocenic’ lines of research share a focus on interlinked systems, the co-evolution of humans and nature, interdisciplinarity, and multi-level analysis (Biermann, 2014b, p. 16). Scholars have also been discussing some of the key challenges that the complexity of the new context presents to those trying to manage it (Steffen, et al., 2011), particularly when it comes to the integration of the different dimensions of sustainability. Anthropocenic transformations are marked by ‘persistent non-linear uncertainty’ (Biermann, 2014b, p. 37), meaning that their nature and pace can change in unforeseeable ways. In many ways, the Anthropocene uploads to the global level the notion of ‘risk

society' first put forward by Ulrich Beck in the early '90s: for modern societies, risk is no longer just an external variable, but a 'manufactured' output of their own activities (Beck, 1992).

The complex systemic transformations of the Anthropocene also increase interdependence in multiple ways. First, in terms of temporal interdependence. Cause and effect of systemic transformations are often separated by years, decades or even centuries. These time lags make sustainability policy horizons exceed individual ones (Young, et al., 2017, p. 63), and create major intergenerational policymaking challenges, related to issues of trust in and legitimacy of future actors vis-à-vis 'incumbent' ones (Steffen, et al., 2011, p. 856; Biermann, 2014b, p. 38). Second, in terms of functional interdependence. Given the unprecedented strength of socio-ecological interlinkages, governance response strategies in one domain are likely to have repercussions in many others by means of emerging (and therefore previously unknown) feedback systems. Third, in terms of spatial interdependence. Anthropogenic 'socio-ecological globalisation' generates systemic linkages - also known as teleconnections - between distant and seemingly unrelated events (Dietz, et al., 2003, p. 1908; Biermann, et al., 2016; Young, et al., 2017), thereby binding all countries regardless of their individual degree of development.

This new context of globalised interdependence across all dimensions of sustainability further underscores the increased relevance of international relations perspectives. Attempting to integrate the perspectives above within a social sciences backdrop, 'Earth System Governance' has been studying the 'societal steering of human activities with regard to the long-term stability of geobiophysical systems' (Biermann, 2014a; 2014b, p. 59). While Earth System Governance offers a host of analytical inputs for the analysis of the effects and challenges of the Anthropocene, its perspective on governance centres on the more 'operational' level of more concrete institutional arrangements and policies (Biermann, et al., 2012; Burch, et al., 2018). In sum, while a lot has been written about *what* has changed in the Anthropocene, the literature has remained quite silent on *how*

these contextual changes affect how humans think about and act upon sustainability integration.

In the field of international relations, which focuses on the study of international phenomena in a globalised world, scholars have also engaged with issues of sustainability. However, most of their theories prioritise a rather static analysis of global phenomena (Schmidt, 2008) instead of attempting to conceptualise multi-level and cross-cutting global change, and therefore the Anthropocene itself (see e.g. Busby, 2017; Castro Pereira, 2017; Simangan, 2020). Most international relations theories do engage with the current challenges of global governance and their impact on the institutional realm. Some schools of thought, such as neorealism, stress the central role of the state and see sovereignty as the all-defining practice of world society institutions (Keohane, 1988; Donnelly, 2022). Other perspectives have instead emphasised the growing importance of non-state actors (Risse-Kappen, 1995; Risse, 2011), and have called for a reframing of traditional international relations concepts in ‘non-statist’ ways (Mitchell, 1991; Corry, 2006; 2010; Dalby, 2014).

In another crucial debate, ‘economic’ approaches such as rational institutionalism understand world politics from a strongly interest-maximising, agent-centred viewpoint, downplaying the shaping contribution of ideational and normative structures or trying to reduce them to ‘discounting’ facilitators of interest-driven (institutional) collective action (North, 1990; Haastруп, 2022). Their counterpart is represented by ‘reflective’ perspectives such as constructivism, which emphasise the constitutive role of said structures and their key role in informing political change (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Reus-Smit, 2022).

Constructivism is part of the so-called ‘ideational turn’ undergone by political science throughout the 1990s to try to account for (institutional) variance that remained poorly explained by ‘traditional’ approaches (Blyth, 2003) by looking at the role of ideas and norms – that is, prescriptive ideas that are consistently shared by a large part of a group or

community. As mentioned earlier, in the context of Anthropocenic interdependence, what humans think has unprecedented influence across all dimensions of sustainability. This makes a conceptual focus on ideas of great interest. In this thesis, I refer to the process through which individuals form and hold ideas as the act of ‘perceiving’.

While the ideational turn also affected rationalism, rationalist scholars tended to objectify ideas as ‘commodified’ (individual) beliefs, thereby strongly downplaying their societal role (Goldstein & Keohane, 1993; Goldstein, 1993). Instead, constructivists have defined ideas as social systems of representation and representation-producing practices, developed in specific circumstances and with the ability to inform discourses around the meaning of social categories, hence stressing their constitutive power (Laffey & Weldes, 1997). Hence, by defining ideas as contextualised generators of social reality, the ideational turn has been helpful in situating perceptions as a key junction in the process of institutional change that I seek to analyse. Greater emphasis on ideas thus fosters a better understanding of how the interplay between structure and agency drives institutional change.

However, most constructivist accounts still refrain from developing a thoroughly dynamic outlook on how the ‘ideational junction’ is linked to both the contextual and the institutional elements of the process of change. Upstream, there is very little systematic research into the link between contextual change and the development of ideas. Downstream, a gap exists in the ‘standard’ constructivist study of the process through which ideas concretely impact institutions: the process is described in rather ‘direct’ terms, without much elaboration in terms of intermediate stages in the ‘institutionalisation of ideas’. Moreover, in this context there is also little elaboration on the institutions themselves – particularly on how, given their link to ideas, they can be both indicators of ideational change and the locus of further developments.

What emerges from the overview of these debates, is that while both the sustainability and the international relations literature have made important contributions to account for

the impact of the Anthropocene, their conceptual categories have remained compartmentalised. In turn, this conceptual rigidity has also had a constraining effect on the empirical research conducted so far on sustainability integration. On the one hand, the sustainability literature does offer a good picture of what the new context is and of the challenges it poses for sustainability integration but falls short of offering a clear link to the ideational and institutional dimension. On the other hand, the mainstream international relations literature does provide a nuanced discussion of the drivers of institutional change but shies away from linking it ‘upwards’ to contextual change, as well as to specifically address its relevance with regard to sustainability integration.

The ambition to overcome these conceptual and empirical shortcomings and therefore to address both dimensions of the knowledge gap leads to the first two overarching research questions of this thesis.

First, a conceptual inquiry into **how can we study and explain which models of sustainability integration are prevalent in the Anthropocene?**

Second, an empirical investigation into **which models of sustainability integration are prevalent and why?**

### *1.2.2 The institutional gap*

The second gap exposed by the Anthropocene is a much more tangible one, and has to do with the inability of current institutions to contend with the new socio-ecological context. I define this institutional gap as that between existing institutions and the socio-ecological systems they operate in. Institutions are here defined as the concrete frameworks, rules and procedures designed to pursue and implement specific ideas and norms (see chapter 2). In other words, this gap reflects the so-called ‘problem of fit’, which posits that the compatibility between institutions and context affects the effectiveness and robustness of the institutions themselves (Folke, et al., 2007).



The unprecedented degree of ‘socio-natural metabolism’ that characterises the Anthropocene (Arias-Maldonado, 2013) poses a major governance challenge. Entering the Anthropocene entails the loss of fixed external reference points for collective action (Dryzek, 2014): humans can no longer structure their policies around a conception of the environment as a relatively stable framework, since the state of that environment has now become inextricably linked to the ‘traditional’ socio-economic decision making domains (Young, et al., 2017). The much denser human-nature interplay in the Anthropocene has also contributed to a staggering growth of actors, mechanisms and interactions in global sustainability governance, which has triggered agency issues due to the growing dispersion of authority (Pattberg & Widerberg, 2015). It has also generated more structural issues, related to the higher degrees of institutional fragmentation stemming from such a diverse governance landscape (Biermann, et al., 2009). The emergence of new actors and governance solutions also poses normative challenges, related to the legitimacy and accountability of new global sustainability governance institutions (Biermann & Gupta, 2011).

As human action pushes the planet closer to its boundaries, there is an increasingly urgent need for sustainability governance to move past ‘simple’ environmental principles, which assume the study of something that remains ‘around’ us (Biermann, 2014a, pp. 1-2). Instead, governance actors need to take stock of the now inextricable interplay between socioeconomic and biophysical factors, and develop what has been termed a ‘social-ecological systems approach’ (Norström, et al., 2014). Hence, the institutional gap presents an almost existential challenge in the transition to the Anthropocene. Virtually all current global governance institutions, including those dedicated to sustainability, have been developed as ‘Holocenic’, meaning that they operate under the assumption that human actions are somewhat detached from the eco-systemic context wherein they take place. They are therefore largely ignoring the unprecedented integration between human and natural systems that characterises the Anthropocene. In fact, research has shown that

such Holocenic institutions have significantly contributed to pushing the Earth system towards the inception of the Anthropocene itself, which has in turn made them inadequate to address the very governance issues that they had been designed to deal with (Dryzek, 2014, pp. 938-9).

While the importance of bridging the institutional gap through sustainability integration is widely seen as a political priority (Lafferty & Hovden, 2003; Bhaduri, et al., 2015; Boas, et al., 2016; Tosun & Lang, 2017; Raworth, 2017; van Soest, et al., 2019; Vijge, et al., 2020), concrete action has been lagging behind. The lack of integration across sectors in terms of strategies, policies and implementation is often perceived as one of the main pitfalls of sustainable development (Lafferty and Hovden 2003). The insufficient understanding and accounting of trade-offs and synergies across sectors and dimensions – also known as siloisation - have also resulted in incoherent and at times adverse policies (Le Blanc 2015). In other words, it is clear that ‘match[ing] the planet with our politics’ (Burke, et al., 2016) is a very tall order.

### *1.2.3 The Sustainable Development Goals*

The latest and most comprehensive attempt at bridging the institutional gap of the Anthropocene are the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), launched by the UN in 2015.

As I discuss in more detail in chapter 4, the SDGs as an institutional framework constitute the most advanced example of global governance through goal-setting. The SDGs were designed as a multilaterally agreed framework featuring specific targets, indicators and time frames, all of which are expected to steer public and private actors collectively into desired trajectories of sustainability integration (Kanie and Biermann 2017). To do that, the SDGs rely on four main features, whose coexistence distinguishes them from most other goal-based governance frameworks: they are not legally binding, they lack strong overarching institutional arrangements, they are characterised by unprecedented

inclusiveness, and they allow for significant national leeway for their implementation. The promise of the SDGs is to provide a new institutional framework for sustainability integration that overcomes the flaws of its predecessors - notably the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) - and is thereby better equipped to tackle the challenges posed by the growing planetary entanglement between humans and nature (Fukuda-Parr, 2016; UNDP, 2019). To fulfil this promise, the SDGs, defined as ‘integrated and indivisible and balanc[ing] the three dimensions of sustainable development’ (UNGA, 2015, p. 3), unequivocally align with the balanced model of integration. In theory, the SDGs advance integration by profoundly and equally aligning the social, economic, and environmental aspects of sustainability, which confirms their role as the flagbearers of the balanced model. The SDGs’ emphasis on the interactions between different dimensions of development (Van de Pas, et al., 2017; Tosun & Lang, 2017) is also enshrined in the goals themselves, with target 14 of Goal 17 explicitly seeking to increase policy coherence for sustainable development (Tosun & Leininger, 2017). The SDGs also rely on the voluntary development of inclusive and cooperative frameworks at all levels (Yamada, 2017). This, it has been argued, will help incentivise more cooperation among international organisations and institutions and hence improve policy integration (Haas & Stevens, 2017).

In the existing literature, however, the SDGs’ claim to provide a balanced roadmap to bridge the institutional gap of the Anthropocene has been facing significant criticism. A first line of criticism focuses on alleged design flaws and on whether the SDGs can actually promote (balanced) integration. While the network of SDGs and related targets emphasises important linkages and might contribute to creating a fertile environment for integration, their mapping of integration often fails to capture important interactions, such as in the energy-climate change nexus (Le Blanc, 2015). Furthermore, the SDGs’ groundbreaking nature as an innovative goal-based global governance framework has also elicited widespread concerns and criticism. As we further elaborate in chapter 4, such

criticism has targeted the weakening impact of the very features setting the SDGs apart from other global governance institutions. For example, their lack of legal bindingness and their full reliance on national implementation are seen as undermining the influence and effectiveness of the goals to foster sustainability integration (Kanie et al. 2017).

The SDGs' emphasis on integration was also intended to tackle the 'developmentalist' flaws inherent in previous global sustainability governance frameworks. The MDGs, for one, were still hinging on a rather unidirectional North-helps-South approach to sustainable development, which is regarded as largely outdated (Horner, 2020). The SDGs, with Southern countries such as Colombia playing a spearheading role, sought therefore to redress the Northern bias by adopting a broader take on sustainability. Their mission to go beyond unidirectionality was also evident at the procedural level, as the negotiations were unprecedentedly inclusive and designed to blur the traditional North-South divide typical of international multilateral negotiations (Chasek & Wagner, 2016). At the same time, however, these North-South dynamics certainly bolstered the SDGs' emphasis on economic growth – albeit in its greener formulation. This has in turn fuelled doubts about them (still) being more of an economic development agenda reflecting the growth-centric model than the balanced sustainability model they claim to advance (Gupta & Vegelin, 2016; Zeng, et al., 2020).

Building on this, critics have argued that the SDGs prioritise the socio-economic dimensions of sustainability over the environmental one, hence questioning the reliability and feasibility of their balanced ambitions. There is no acknowledgement in the SDGs of the cruciality of ecosystemic integrity for the good functioning of both social and economic systems (Brandi, 2015). Rather, the SDGs are strongly underpinned by the idea that growth is necessary to achieve all pillars of sustainability. In fact, growth as envisaged in SDG 8 is demonstrably incompatible with environmental protection targets (notably climate change and resource use) as those in e.g., SDG 6, 13, 14, and 15 (Hickel, 2015; 2019). Finally, the breadth of the SDG framework, which covers an unprecedentedly wide

range of issues across all three dimensions of sustainability, has also been criticised for its vulnerability to ‘cherry-picking’. Research has shown how for example governments choose to prioritise certain SDGs in line with their pre-existing national development policies (Forestier & Kim, 2020), which fuels concerns that the SDGs might in fact bolster further siloisation rather than advancing balanced integration (Bogers, et al., 2022).

Hence, seeking to shed more light on the role played by the SDGs in the institutional gap, the third overarching research question of this thesis is: **how do institutions such as the SDGs influence the prevalence of different models of sustainability integration?**

## 2. Conceptual Framework

### 2.1 Conceptualising the relationship between context and institutions

To provide an answer to the research questions, the first step was to address the conceptual part of the knowledge gap – that is, the lack of frameworks available to explain the relationship between contextual change and changes in ideas, norms and institutions of sustainability integration (research question 1).

As said earlier, international relations theories, despite having been widely used to analyse globalised international phenomena, have remained underused in the study of sustainability integration in the Anthropocene. This is remarkable, considering that the Anthropocene itself is characterised by a strong increase in the global interdependence between all dimensions of sustainability. Given the complexity of Anthropocenic change, to build the framework I drew on theories that emphasise dynamism and actively advocate cross-fertilisation in both the statist/non-statist and the rationalist/constructivist debates.

#### 2.1.1 *The English School of international relations*

The English School provided the first conceptual source for the development of a framework for the dynamic study of change. The English School sees the international system as historically situated, hence rejecting the notion of ‘absolute’, inalterable international relations. Change is therefore integral to any system, and it affects not only the functional, regime-related level, but also the deeper normative level (Falkner, 2012). For the English School, the key features - and therefore indicators - of historically changing (global) international societies are institutions, which are situated in a two-tiered framework. First, primary institutions, defined as ‘fundamental and durable practices, that are evolved more than designed and are constitutive of actors and their patterns of legitimate activity in relation to each other’ (Buzan, 2004, pp. 161-2). Examples of primary institutions include the ‘Westphalian triptych’ of sovereignty, territoriality and

balance of power, while more recent ones include the market, human rights, and – especially relevant for this research – environmentalism (Falkner & Buzan, 2019; Falkner, 2021). Primary institutions are not monolithic, and can be replaced or complemented by new ones that emerge as the dominant normative discourse at both the international and the world society level changes (Wight, 1979, p. 111; Hurrell, 2002). If primary institutions can be seen as the principles of international society, then secondary institutions constitute its rules. Including international organisations and regimes, they pertain to a more operational governance sphere and, unlike primary institutions, whose evolution is (mostly) independent of deliberate efforts by societal actors, secondary ones are consciously designed.

A considerable swath of English School literature understands the relationship between primary and secondary institutions in rather hierarchical terms, stressing how the former have a constitutive function which informs the merely regulative role of the latter (Reus-Smit, 1997; Holsti, 2004). Other scholars, however, favour a more open approach, which stresses that ‘constitutive’ socialisation can also occur at the secondary level (Buzan, 2005; Spandler, 2015). Additionally, secondary institutions can also help reinforce and propagate their primary source, thereby contributing to establishing a cyclical relationship which further bolsters a dynamic understanding of the international society. For instance, the emergence of the market as a primary institution informed the establishment of secondary institutions such as the World Trade Organisation and the International Monetary Fund, whose practices have, in turn, both consolidated and critically informed subsequent interpretations of the market itself (Leiteritz, 2005). The English School’s understanding of the emergence and co-constitutive evolution of the primary and secondary institutions that define a society rests on normative foundations, in line with the constructivist definition of institutions as aggregations of norms (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 891). Summing up, the English School describes change as follows: norms inform the constant emergence and evolution of primary institutions and -

consequently- secondary institutions, the combination of which at any given point in history is defined as the (global) international society.

While this is a very useful framework to describe institutional change, it presents a key weakness when attempting to explain its sources. English School theorists use ‘history’ as a rather vaguely defined blanket concept, which acts as both the context and the enabler of normative and therefore institutional societal change. Although the English School embraces the constructivist notion that contextual factors (specifically history) can trigger normative and therefore institutional change (Björkdahl, 2002), it provides little information about what history concretely is - that is, how it relates to norms - in the institutional context, and therefore has little explanatory value beyond the descriptive realm. As mentioned, the very high degree of socio-ecological interdependence in the Anthropocene translates into an unprecedentedly strong influence of human ideas and norms on all dimensions of sustainability. It is therefore important to overcome the ‘exogenisation’ of change via history and develop a framework which accounts for these substantive links between context and human ideas, norms and institutions.

### *2.1.2 Discursive institutionalism*

To address this explanatory issue, I begin by delving more comprehensively into the emergence and trajectories of ideas and norms. As discussed in the introduction, I understand norms as prescriptive ideas that are consistently shared by a large part of a group or community. While not all ideas become norms, all norms are born as ideas. This makes any study of normative processes by definition also about ideas. This will help strengthen the understanding of how Anthropocenic contextual (or, in English School terms, historical) change can steer institutional change towards sustainability integration.

The perspectives that appear to be best situated to develop this crucial link can be categorised as discursive (Krook & True, 2010, pp. 122-3). Discursive approaches share some of the analytical features of the English School. They focus on the so-called ‘life cycle’



of norms, which are central in informing the development of institutions. Moreover, they see norms as stemming from debates over their 'internal' definition, which are however not insular but informed by the 'external' environment wherein they take place (Krook & True, 2010, p. 105). In other words, discursive approaches also see normative (and therefore institutional) change as historically situated.

Unlike the English School and 'static' constructivism, however, discursive approaches propose a dualist understanding of ideas and norms. The defining feature of analytical dualism is the interdependence of agency and structure, and therefore of discursive and institutional change. In this light, ideas and norms are elements that are both structuring and socially constructed via the interactions between agents (Reus-Smit, 2001; Wiener, 2007). These interactions, which are also defined by the context they occur in, are not just the outcome of normative structures, but also have a discursive impact on the meanings of the norms themselves, which in turn shape the 'rules' (that is, the institutions) according to which concrete societal practices are conducted (Sandholtz, 2008). This also allows for the re-evaluation of the role of actors in the context of institutional change, since it is actors who, by developing arguments and contesting existing norms, play a key role in shaping them and their eventual impact on societal institutions (Kratochwil, 1989, p. 61).

Analytical dualism is thus helpful to integrate contextual change within a cyclical process wherein normative and institutional elements are both background and foreground of each other. It therefore helps 'see' the Anthropocene and its challenges less as an 'external anomaly' and more as integral part of a complex process of change.

Among the various discursive approaches, I specifically draw on discursive institutionalism, also referred to as 'constructivist institutionalism' (Hay, 2006, p. 56), as the second source to develop the framework. This constructivist 'tag' highlights how discursive institutionalism – like constructivism (see above) – ascribes constitutive power to ideas and norms. Given the unprecedented environmental impact of human

perceptions in the Anthropocene, this is a very important feature. Discursive institutionalism integrates contextual change within cyclical processes wherein ideas, norms and institutions are both background (the context informing the diffusion and institutionalisation of ideas) and foreground, where actors deliberate about the institutional structure, which leads to new ideas (Arts & Buizer, 2009; Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016; Schmidt, 2008). It, therefore, helps conceptualise actors – both individual and collective - not just as a ‘recipients’, but also as agents of change.

### 2.1.3 The cycle of change

The integration of the English School and discursive institutionalism as the main conceptual sources leads to the identification of ideas, norms and institutions as three main interdependent ‘stages’ of institutional change, which will constitute an analytical blueprint throughout this research. I refer to the resulting framework as the cycle of change (Figure 4 – see chapter 8 for more detailed descriptions of the key concepts).

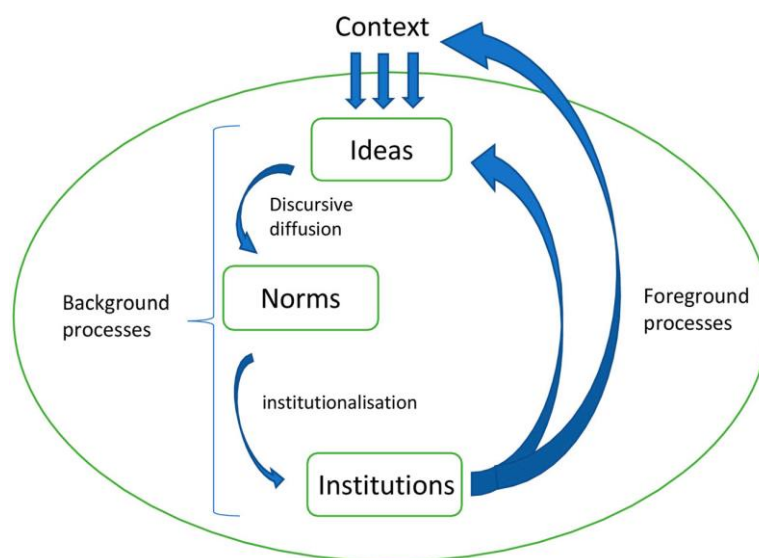


Fig.4: the cycle of change (see chapter 8)

The first stage of the cycle are ideas. This thesis assumes that any contextual change will first affect the ideas of different actors, that is, the subjective systems of representation and

representation-producing practices in specific contexts (Laffey & Weldes, 1997). Ideas can be prescriptive, but they do not yet reflect the consolidation into a concrete norm. For example, the existence of ideas about sovereignty does not coincide with a norm about what constitutes sovereignty.

The second stage in the cycle is when some ideas become norms. This thesis defines norms as the intersubjective ideas that are prescriptive in nature and characterised by a sense of 'ought' vis-à-vis the scope and desirability of certain actions and behaviours (Alger & Dauvergne, 2019; Florini, 1996). This definition of norms is similar to that used by other scholars concerned with studying the evolution or the 'life cycle' of norms themselves (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Those accounts, however, largely overlook the role of contextual factors while theorising the 'origin of norms' (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p.896), and do not elaborate on what happens after a norm has been internalised or institutionalised. Instead, this cyclical approach explicitly anchors ideas and norms both upstream to context and downstream to institutional change, which can in turn alter the context and thereby reactivate the cycle.

This research differentiates between ideas and norms in relation to their diffusion, that is, how many actors in a constituency have adopted an idea or a norm (breadth) and whether the understanding of an idea or a norm is uniform across this constituency (consistency). Ideas, especially those that directly challenge the established order, will generally be narrowly and inconsistently diffused and therefore fail to qualify as norms (Alger & Dauvergne, 2019, pp.6–7). For instance, despite their prescriptive nature and the scientific attention they have received, ideas such as depopulating and limiting economic growth have not become a norm in any country or in international institutions (Alger & Dauvergne, 2019, p. 11). Aside from their different breadth and consistency, ideas and norms are formally similar, and both therefore qualify as perceptions according to our earlier discussion.

The third stage of the cycle are institutions. Once ideas have developed and more concrete norms have been diffused, some may aggregate and become fully institutionalised (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 891). If norms can be seen as the underpinning principles of behaviour, institutions are its concrete frameworks, rules and procedures. Unlike ideas and norms, which evolve more organically, institutions are consciously designed, and therefore retrieve and expand the English School's definition of 'secondary institutions'.

When investigating the relationship between context and governance, this integrated approach blending English School elements with discursive institutionalist ones presents a number of advantages. First, this thesis uses the framework to understand the Anthropocene as a set of contextual changes, which contribute to the formation of new ideas within the existing institutional framework and about the institutional framework. This, in turn, feeds into the ongoing background and foreground 'cycle of change', which can foster a normative transformation and the ensuing emergence of reformed or new institutions. Second, this approach stresses the role of various types of actors as both recipients and agents of change at multiple levels. It is therefore well suited for the analysis of ideational, normative and institutional change in a context featuring an unprecedented number of new actors at all levels. Third, by highlighting the cyclical interplay between the intangible realm of ideas and norms and more concrete institutional developments, it also stresses the interplay between the two gaps which serve as primary drivers of this research: the conceptual gap and the institutional gap.

## **2.2 The cycle of change and the institutional challenges of sustainability integration in the Anthropocene**

With regard to bridging the conceptual part of the knowledge gap, the framework thus provides a solid explanation as to how the Anthropocene, as a major contextual change, can affect perceptions and operationalisations of sustainability integration. As for the institutional gap, while it would be unreasonable to expect a general conceptual

framework to provide detailed operational solutions to such complex problems, a cyclical approach can nevertheless help endogenise contextual challenges and therefore foster more concrete investigations into their impact on sustainability integration processes. With regard to challenges arising from the loss of fixed external reference points typical of the Anthropocene, the cyclical dynamism of the framework is open to the notion that change can occur at all stages, and that it can impact the rest of the cycle in both linear and non-linear ways. Given how one of these key changes is non-linear uncertainty, the framework 'reduces' it to a feature of the cycle instead of seeing it as an external existential threat. With regard to operational challenges, stemming from the proliferation of new actors, mechanisms and interactions, the analytical dualism of the framework emphasises the constant interplay between agents and context. A cyclical approach is also conceptually well placed to analyse issues of governance structure, most notably with regard to architectural fragmentation (Biermann, et al., 2009, pp. 16-19). Through a discursive framework, Anthropocenic structural challenges can be ascribed to the level of institutions, which allows to better contextualise them by linking their more operational side to ideational and normative processes. Finally, normative challenges of accountability and legitimacy can also be fruitfully analysed when applying the framework. The very definition of international society as a 'set of historically changing principles of legitimacy' (Clark, 2007, p. 7) stresses how normative changes are linked to contextual, ideational and institutional ones, and should therefore not be studied in isolation, particularly in an era of radical systemic change such as the Anthropocene.

As for interdependence, the framework helps understand it as part of the contextual changes brought about by the onset of the Anthropocene. It highlights the possibility of 'delays' between contextual changes and ideational, normative and institutional adaptation, as it takes time for new ideas to form, and even more time for them to drive institutional reform. In this light, the cyclical approach reframes what a significant part of the Anthropocene literature defines as institutional challenges or even crises as part of the

normal development of the cycle. It therefore endogenises the gap between the growing contextual integration between the three dimensions of sustainability and the institutions available to deal with it.

Looking at institutions, an analytically dualist approach of the framework also highlights the bidirectional links between them and the other elements of the cycle. It is thus also helpful in contextualising and assessing the impact of specific sustainability integration governance frameworks such as the SDGs. On the one hand, as (secondary) institutions, the shape and content of the SDGs is strongly influenced by the ideas and norms – including the different models of sustainability integration - that have emerged within a specific context. At the same time, the framework also stresses the active role of institutions as ‘foreground’ platforms for discussion and contestation, thereby also enabling the SDGs to act as institutional context that can inform and shape future ideas and policies around integration.

# 3. Research design

## 3.1 Aim of the thesis and research questions

The starting point of this thesis is that the challenging new context of the Anthropocene has a major impact on global (governance) systems and on their ability to cope with the increasing complexity and urgency of sustainability integration. I have exposed two main gaps: a knowledge gap regarding how the new context affects ideas, norms and institutions of sustainability integration and an institutional gap pertaining to the suitability of current governance institutions to deal with the unprecedentedly integrated context.

In chapter 2, I developed a framework not only to help bridge the conceptual part of the knowledge gap, but also to assess developments towards bridging the institutional gap. The primary aim of this work is thus to investigate whether and how change towards sustainability integration is happening. Here, my framework helps highlight how change is not a linear process, but the result of interdependent dynamics between contextual circumstances and multiple stages of change: ideational, normative and institutional. This thesis also investigates how the SDGs, as self-styled state-of-the-art sustainability integration framework seeking to bridge the institutional gap, are actually perceived and implemented.

These aims inform the following research questions, which serve as red threads throughout the thesis:

1. How can we study and explain which models of sustainability integration are prevalent in the Anthropocene?
2. Which models of sustainability integration are prevalent and why?
3. How do institutions such as the SDGs influence the prevalence of different models of sustainability integration?

## 3.2 Methods

Having developed the conceptual framework necessary to address research question 1 (see chapter 2), I then set out to test its validity and ability to help tackle the more empirical questions (research questions 2 and 3). This required looking into a wide range of data sources, ranging from subjective perceptions to policies and initiatives by national and international organisations. To enhance the viability of the findings, this research adopted a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

### 3.2.1 Quantitative methods

To investigate perceptions of sustainability integration (research question 2), including the SDGs (research question 3), this research began with a quantitative approach (chapters 6 and 7). Here, the methodological cornerstone was a large-scale survey. Surveys are widely used to investigate ideas and norms in the field of sustainability (Feola & Nunes, 2014; van der Hel, 2018; Prakash & Bernauer, 2020). However, with few exceptions (van Soest, et al., 2019), they have not been used in the scholarly literature on sustainability integration and/or the SDGs. In light of the conceptual framework, surveys offer a good method to investigate the ideational level of the cycle of change, not only in terms of general descriptive perceptions but also in terms of how these are linked to ideas about sustainability integration norms and institutions. The survey was conducted online between 22 June and 1 October 2021, and 531 professionals participated in the study (508 after data cleaning). This research focused on professionals as individuals who work in an organisation and whose perceptions are hence likely to influence that organisation's policies and programmes, including on sustainability (chapters 6 and 7). Characteristics of the sample are provided in Table 1. The survey consisted of 35 statements. Most statements required respondents to indicate their (dis)agreement using a five-point Likert scale; we also used yes/no, multiple choice, and ranking questions. A first set of statements that helped cluster respondents based on their professional affiliation, seniority, geographical location, and whether they were more affiliated with environmental,



economic or social activity fields. These statements were thus aimed at collecting information about possible contextual factors that, in line with our conceptual framework, might affect ideas, norms and institutions of sustainability integration. Three further sets of statements – also informed by the various stages of our cycle of change - followed: first, statements that simply defined the state of sustainability integration in a descriptive manner; second, normative statements that solicited views by respondents on how they think sustainability integration should be pursued, as well as on how they see their role when it comes to integration; third, operational statements focused on whether and how respondents and their organisations do something to pursue integration – that is, on perceptions on the institutional evidence of integration. This included the SDGs as the most prominent example of integrated sustainability frameworks.

*Table 1: Survey response*

Main professional affiliation	Role within organisation	Geographical location
Government or public administration	Entry-level/junior staff	Africa
International organisation	Mid-career staff	Asia
Civil society organisation	Senior staff	Australia and Oceania
Academia	Executive, owner or head of organisation	Central and South America
Business or private company	No answer	Europe
Other		North America
No answer		No answer
		Total

The quantitative analysis of the survey had the main aim of identifying significant differences between groups in terms of perceptions of sustainability integration and the SDGs (Research questions 2 and 3). After initial frequency analyses to gain an overall understanding and to identify potentially interesting trends, the second step consisted of cross-tabulations and chi-square tests. A chi-square test is a well-established method to measure the association between two categorical variables (Ugoni & Walker, 1995). This sought to distinguish the associations between our different categories. The third step was to conduct an Analysis of Variance and independent samples t-tests between pairs of variables, in order to examine the statistical significance of the difference between two independent population means (Liu & Wang, 2021; Connelly, 2021). Surveys capture by definition only perceptions and do not offer evidence of actual changes in the actions of respondents. Thus, if quantitative analysis was valuable to sketch a broader picture of ideas, norms and institutions of sustainability integration, complementary qualitative research was thus needed to add a layer of complexity and causality to the findings.

### 3.2.2 *Qualitative methods*

To provide more depth to the analysis of trends in sustainability integration (research question 2), this thesis developed two case studies of socio-economic organisations (chapters 8 and 9), which enabled the study of integration by focusing on these actors' approach to environmental concerns. The focus on the environmental side of sustainability integration was also helpful to investigate all three models of integration discussed in this thesis, facilitating a comparative approach between growth-centric, balanced, and ecocentric approaches. Given the interest in investigating developments at both the discursive and operational levels, the methodological approach was predominantly qualitative. The core methodology was a systematic qualitative content analysis of primary documentary sources. The analysis was 'directed'- that is, it refined the development of deductive codes from the application of general contextual considerations to the conceptual framework with grounded observations within the case

study (Mayring, 2000; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). These codes all referred to the research focus on sustainability integration, and included for instance ‘environment’, ‘integration’, and ‘just transition’. Given its focus on contextualised meaning, directed qualitative content analysis was a good methodological fit with the discursive institutionalist component of the framework, which highlights the role of ideas and norms in shaping the meaning of social categories (Research Question 1a) (Laffey & Weldes, 1997).

For both chapters, over 150 documents were analysed, selected based on their negotiated nature and therefore higher degree of normative representativeness and legitimacy. This research also examined over 40 additional non-negotiated documents (mostly reports), which are used by organisations to acknowledge possible future directions and stimulate debate without officially substantive endorsements. These documents were useful to highlight key ideational trends and subsequently test their normative resilience by comparing their content to that of negotiated documents.

To complement the findings, 21 semi-structured interviews were conducted with both in service and retired staff of the organisations this thesis zoomed in on. Interviews added granularity to the content analysis by providing further (anecdotal) information. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence was useful to explore hypotheses and concepts and complement more rigorous findings with vivid elements which add persuasiveness (Enkin & Jadad, 1998; Hoeken, 2001). The findings are also informed by a number of literature reviews. Two reviews laid the foundations of introductory chapters on global goal-setting and planetary integrity, and additional reviews (on sustainability integration models, on the role of international organisations in sustainability integration, and on labour environmentalism) were conducted across the four empirical chapters of this thesis to help build hypotheses and set the conceptual and historical scene for the empirical part of the analysis.

### 3.2.3 *Advantages and limitations*

Specific methodological advantages and limitations will be discussed in more detail in the relevant chapters, but here it is important to mention the overarching ones. The methodological choices sought to minimise bias and maximise the reliability and generalisability of the findings. A mixed-methods approach, synergistically integrating qualitative engagement methods with quantitative outcome-based approaches, allows the investigator to gain both depth and breadth. It thereby yields more complete evidence and fosters a better understanding of complex problems such as sustainability integration (Ivankova, 2015; Ivankova & Wingo, 2018). Combining qualitative case studies with quantitative large-n surveys also increases the generalisability of the findings, as quantitative methods help absorb the inevitable context bias of in-depth qualitative research, while qualitative case studies help sketch a more complete picture of causal dynamics that non-representative statistical samples cannot identify. Furthermore, the choice of case studies deliberately targeted organisations whose stances are representative of a larger set of actors: the International Labour Organisation (chapter 8), an important player within the UN system and an international organisation featuring a tripartite structure where trade unions and employers join governments as equal partners in its main organs, and two of the largest trade union centres (chapter 9), whose agendas and outputs need to be approved by hundreds of national trade union members.

Despite the researcher's best efforts to minimise bias and gather data of the highest quality, the research approach is also prone to a number of limitations. The first limitation has to do with the generalisability of the findings. By combining a global survey with sizable numbers of respondents from all geographical and professional backgrounds with in-depth case studies of organisations with members from across the world, this thesis sought to find answers to the research questions that were as broadly applicable as possible. Nevertheless, the methods and networks meant that the empirical results are biased towards how highly educated, English-speaking actors perceive and operationalise

sustainability integration. This also means that the findings are likely to overrepresent the mainstream and underrepresent radical, subaltern and marginalised perspectives. Furthermore, while the survey was open to all professional categories, its focus on sustainability was bound to attract respondents mainly among professionals with a specific interest in sustainability, thereby creating a bias. As for the case studies, the focus on a limited number of organisations is also prone to questions. Particularly with regard to the International Labour Organisation, although its being part of the UN system does grant the findings a degree of generalisability to a range of other international organisations, there is no denying that further research is needed to be able to draw truly general conclusions about how sustainability integration has evolved on the global stage. This research was carried out under strict time constraints, and fieldwork possibilities were severely limited not only by time, but also by a global pandemic. This was especially impactful in the study of trade unions, where the lack of systematic and comparable online resources forced us in the direction of a sample with a strong North-Western European bias. In sum, this biased but rigorous research can hopefully inspire and inform future endeavours to address the outstanding gaps.

### **3.3 Thesis structure**

**Part II** of the thesis consists of two co-authored review chapters that help introduce some of the key topics addressed by the empirical chapters, particularly with regard to the relationship between the SDGs and (different models of) sustainability integration. In **Chapter 4** (Vijge et al., 2020), we discuss the SDGs as institutions that have a potential influence on sustainability integration (research question 3), zooming in on their novel characteristics. Global goal-setting – especially with regard to the SDGs – is marked by several key characteristics. None of these is specific to this type of global governance, yet all together the characteristics amount to a distinct type of institutional arrangement in global governance. In this chapter we review key literature on goal-setting in global

governance on each of these characteristics to inform on the opportunities and challenges that the novel type of global governance generates. This chapter therefore introduces the features that underpin the unprecedented ambitions of the SDGs, including in terms of fostering sustainability integration.

**Chapter 5** (Kotzé et al., 2022) reviews the state of the art on to what extent the SDGs have the potential to foster a more balanced approach to integration by promoting greater attention to the environmental dimension of sustainability. This is also referred to as planetary integrity, defined as the integration of global environmental protection concerns into laws, policies and practices. Planetary integrity therefore constitutes a crucial component of sustainability integration processes, either as a balanced equal to economic and social sustainability or as a pre-condition in more ecocentric models. This chapter, by elaborating further on the environmental side of sustainability integration, also helps set the scene for the qualitative case studies discussed in chapters 8 and 9, which focus on whether and how environmental concerns are becoming more prominent on the agendas of socio-economic organisations. As mentioned earlier, the SDGs aspired to devote greater attention to the green side of sustainability than their predecessors. This chapter puts this claim to the tests of existing research, and examines the role of the SDGs in mainstreaming planetary integrity in a selection of policy fields, taking specific international, regional, national, and transnational institutions, policies and initiatives as case studies. We find that while the SDGs seem to have been cited as an inspiration or motivation by many actors, there remains questions about additionality, ambition, and coherence. Further investigation into the processes behind the role and influence of global goals as integration frameworks (Research question 3) is therefore warranted.

Having set (some of) the scene, **Part III** of the thesis empirically dives into the key research questions. In **Chapter 6** (Montesano et al., 2023b), we focus primarily on the first main research question. We develop and analyse a survey to look into how professionals understand and implement notions of sustainability integration, using the models

introduced here as reference points to qualify their ideas and norms. We also show how descriptive ideas about the state of the world precede normative diffusion and institutional change, and therefore how the different stages of the cycle of change are also applicable at the subjective/individual level. We also investigate which factors shape ideas, norms and institutions, and zoom in on the links between context and ideas and norms to further test the robustness of the dynamics illustrated by our conceptual framework.

In **Chapter 7** (Montesano et al., *under review*), we examine the relationship between integration governance frameworks, namely the SDGs, and ideas and norms of sustainability integration (research question 3). We look into whether the SDGs play a role in informing how professionals working for different organisations perceive and implement sustainability integration, as well as into the relationship between the SDGs and the different models of sustainability integration. This contributes to answering (part of) both our main research questions, as our findings both shed light on the prevalence of specific sustainability integration models (research question 2) and help better situate the SDGs as integration frameworks (research question 3). We also delve into the links between contextual factors and varying perceptions of the SDGs' role in integration, which highlights the importance of a cyclical understanding of change as that put forward by our framework.

In **Chapter 8** (Montesano et al., 2023a), we zoom in on a more specific case study of sustainability integration and the effects of the SDGs. We choose the International Labour Organisation as an example of an organisation with clear socio-economic priorities and focus on whether and according to which integration model(s) it has been integrating the environmental dimension of sustainability into its discourse and practices (research question 2). We show that change towards integration tends to be stronger at the ideational level than at the more prescriptive and operational level, which further stresses the importance of overcoming a linear approach to institutional change and looking more at the complex interactions between the stages of change suggested by our framework.

Adding to this, we also find that the relationship between contextual governance change such as that brought about by the SDGs and change at the level of a specific actor is not linear, but bidirectional (research question 3). This confirms the importance of looking at processes of integration through a cyclical lens, stressing that actors are not only recipients of change, but also active agents (research question 1).

In **Chapter 9** (Montesano et al., 2023c), we focus on a second case study of trade unions to further elaborate on whether and how socio-economic actors have been integrating environmental considerations into their principles and practices and the role of the SDGs therein. We zoom in on their approach to integration, thereby further elaborating on the main features of different models of sustainability integration and critically reflecting on their relationship with the governance ‘mainstream’. Drawing on the conceptual framework, we also probe deeper into the contextual and internal triggers of change towards integration. Finally, we delve into the relationship between trade unions’ general approach to sustainability integration and their engagement with the SDGs, and discuss how the bidirectional influence identified by our conceptual framework affects the ambitions of the global goals agenda.

To conclude, in **Part IV, Chapter 10** (Conclusion) summarises the key findings of the individual chapters, outlining key overarching trends and discussing theoretical and empirical implications. I also offer suggestions for future research agendas to further build on the conceptual and empirical contributions of this research.



## Part II

# 4. Governance through Global Goals

This chapter is based on: Vijge, M., Biermann, F., Kim, R., Bogers, M., Driel, M., Montesano, F. S., Yunita, A., Kanie, N., 2020. Governance through Global Goals. In F. Biermann & R. Kim (Eds.), *Architectures of Earth System Governance: Institutional Complexity and Structural Transformation* (pp. 254-274). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.<sup>1</sup>

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces in the core institutional mechanism that stands at the centre of the second main question of this thesis – the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These SDGs are part of, and the most prominent example of, a new trend in global governance - the use of broad global policy goals to orchestrate the activities of governments, international organisations, civil society, the private sector, and eventually all citizens of the world. Global governance through goal-setting, such as through the SDGs, works through the joint commitment of all governments to collective policy ambitions.

These ambitions are then enshrined in the form of multilaterally agreed goals that are not legally binding but come with more specific targets, indicators and time frames, all of which are expected to steer public and private actors collectively into desired trajectories (Kanie and Biermann 2017). While governance through global goal-setting has featured in global governance since the second half of the twentieth century, its role has become much stronger in the last two decades (Fukuda-Parr 2014). The Millennium Development

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<sup>1</sup> After the three lead authors, all other authors contributed equally to this publication. Montesano led the section on inclusiveness, and co-led the introduction and conceptualisation.

Goals, agreed by the United Nations in 2000, were a first attempt at comprehensive global steering through goals. But global goal-setting has gained much more importance when the United Nations General Assembly agreed, in 2015, on 17 SDGs to be implemented by 2030. These SDGs stand central in this thesis.

Like other attempts at global governance through goal-setting, the SDGs share four key characteristics (Biermann, Kanie and Kim 2017). First, they are not legally binding and cannot be enforced as law within national or international adjudication. Second, they are marked by weak institutional arrangements that are not supported by international treaty organisations, formal monitoring agencies, strong dispute settlement bodies and the like. Third, they are meant to be highly inclusive, covering all countries and sectors of society. Fourth, they are broadly framed and hence leave much leeway to national implementation and interpretation. While none of these characteristics is specific to this type of governance, the combination of these four characteristics amounts to a unique approach to global governance.

In this chapter, together with colleagues, I review recent literature on these four key characteristics of governance through global goals. We first conceptualise governance through goals as a mechanism of global governance. We then delve into key literature around the four main characteristics of governance through goals, with a view to understanding how they affect the performance of governance architectures. We then distil how these characteristics, taken together, can affect governance architectures, for instance by leading to new actor constellations, by galvanising efforts and by transforming or creating new institutions. Thereafter, we identify future research directions that might help increase understanding of whether and how global goals could effectively deal with the challenges that result from the institutional complexity of global governance architectures.

## 4.2 Conceptualisation

We define global goals here as internationally agreed non-legally binding policy objectives that are time-bound, measurable and aspirational in nature. Notably, in this definition, we exclude legally binding international legal rules and norms such as those often established through multilateral agreements. We also leave out widely proclaimed aspirations of global civil society and other non-state actors, such as those reflected in transnational private regulations. These goals from non-governmental bodies do not enjoy the formal support of governments and inter-governmental organisations; they are rather part of the realm of non-state, transnational governance. Furthermore, while we acknowledge that goals have been a feature of global governance since the first United Nations Development Decade in the 1960s, we focus on the more recent, and much more ambitious, global goals, and especially the SDGs from 2015.

The concrete mechanisms through which global goals function are yet to be examined in detail. There is consensus, however, that a key defining feature of governance through goals is that it does not seek to directly change existing institutional architectures, and that it does not seek to regulate existing institutions or actors by demanding or enforcing behavioural change (see Kanie and Biermann 2017). Rather, governance through goals relies on non-legally binding global public policy goals, generally negotiated under the purview of intergovernmental institutions and organisations, most notably the United Nations. Such goals are hence largely aspirational, but they are typically endorsed by governments and non-state actors around the world, which could enable them to guide actions and policies at global, national and subnational levels.

Although it is unknown to what extent governance through global goals can really lead to immediate and radical governance transformations, many commentators and supporters expect them to have some impacts, for example by triggering incremental but widespread changes when goals are taken up in national and international policies and programmes. Governance through goals can thus have some influence by setting priorities that shape

the international and national allocation of scarce resources, as well as by galvanising action through specific and time-bound targets with which actors track their progress towards goal achievement (Young 2017). As such, governance through goals can trigger and orchestrate, rather than enforce, some of the policy responses to governance fragmentation and institutional complexity that have been analysed elsewhere, such as policy integration, interplay management, orchestration and hierarchisation.

The effects and effectiveness of governance through goals remain contested, however (see discussion in Kanie et al. 2017). While some observers argue that global goals can have significant impacts (Hajer et al. 2015; Stevens and Kanie 2016), others criticise this governance mechanism for its lack of enforcement and compliance mechanisms. Will the goals be effective in the end? In this chapter, we review the body of social science literature that deals with this question. We are less interested in whether goals are actually implemented but rather in the prior, first step: whether goals have any effects on governance systems and processes, and here in particular on whether goals have the potential to affect entire governance architectures, for example by advancing institutional integration between decision-making systems or reducing norm conflicts. While some observers are optimistic that the SDGs of 2015 will help foster institutional integration at the international level (Le Blanc 2015), others doubt such claims, arguing that the goals themselves simply reflect the fragmented structure of global governance (Kim 2016). So far, however, there has been little, if any, empirically grounded research on the effects of governance through goals on governance architectures. Therefore, our review attempts here to lay the foundation for new inquiries into this research domain.

### **4.3 Research Findings**

We now review recent research findings and conceptual contestations on the four key characteristics of governance through goals mentioned above, namely their non-legally

binding nature; the underlying weak institutional arrangements; the inclusiveness of the goal-setting process; and the national leeway in the implementation of the goals.

#### *4.3.1 Non-legally binding nature*

A first key characteristic of governance through goals is that they are not legally binding (Biermann, Kanie and Kim 2017). Both the Millennium Development Goals of 2000 and the SDGs of 2015 were formally established by a non-binding United Nations General Assembly Resolution as part of a broader development agenda. Although some scholars claim that the United Nations General Assembly has quasi-legal competences (Falk 1966), the United Nations Charter clearly deems its resolutions as being only recommendations, as they are not formally signed and ratified by states. These sets of global goals are hence not part of international law but are essentially political agreements (Kim 2016).

Some scholars have argued, therefore, that goal-setting through non-binding agreements is merely a suboptimal, ineffective or even counterproductive strategy. Some even see it as contributing to increasing institutional complexity and fragmentation, with the potential to complicate international cooperation (Elliot 2017). For those global goals that are grounded in international agreements – as is the case with some targets under the SDGs – legal scholars have emphasised the need to create additional mechanisms to ensure that these goals are not just a reflection of, but reach further than the existing fragmented and compartmentalised system of international law (Kim 2016: 17; see also Kim and Bosselmann 2015; Underdal and Kim 2017).

Others have questioned the ability of non-binding goal-setting to influence a wider political arena and to mobilise societal forces in modern systems of multilevel governance (Bodansky 2016; Young 2017). A non-binding status could potentially limit the compliance-pull and legitimacy of globally agreed goals at the national level, because acceptance can be limited to mere executive approval, without the need for governments to seek domestic legislative approval and formal adoption (Bodansky 2016). For example,

domestic courts are not obliged to use the SDGs as a judicial source when resolving disputes.

Furthermore, the non-binding status of global goals might limit the sense of urgency, commitment and acceptance, especially among government officials who are expected to assume key roles in realising the goals (Young 2017: 43; see also Franck 1990; Raustiala 2005; Bodansky 2016). That governments generally attribute some value to the legal status of agreements is emphasised by the strong disappointment expressed by many governments when the outcome of the 2009 Copenhagen conference of the parties under the climate convention proved to be ‘only’ a political agreement. Another example are the continued discussions over the legal status of the subsequent 2015 Paris Agreement (Bodansky 2010, 2016).

In addition, given the lack of legal standing, internationally it could be unclear how new global goals, such as the SDGs, relate to all the earlier agendas, agreements and plans. In the case of the Millennium Development Goals, for example, it has been argued that they disrupted ongoing processes for the implementation of the 1990s conference agendas through cherry-picking of issues, the modification of previously agreed targets and the disruption of nascent initiatives (Fukuda-Parr, Yamin and Greenstein 2014; Langford and Winkler 2014; van der Hoeven 2014).

Yet, while it does seem that lack of legal force limits the effectiveness of global goals, the opposite argument is also found in the literature. Serious questions have been raised, for instance, about the effectiveness of international environmental law (Kim and Bosselmann 2013) and the extent to which it affects state behaviour (Goldsmith and Posner 2005). Bodansky (2016) even argued that some merely political agreements – including the 2009 Copenhagen Accord – have had a greater influence on state behaviour than legal agreements. Proponents of goal-setting add here that its underlying premises differ substantially from those of rule-making (Young 2017: 34). Whereas rule-making creates indefinite behavioural prescriptions formulated as requirements and prohibitions for specified

actors, goal-setting articulates time-bound aspirations, procedures and targets that need to rely on enthusiastic support among a wide range of actors to induce self-governance (Young 2017). The expectation of behavioural constraints that legally binding documents potentially create can even lead to pick-and-choose strategies among countries, resulting in many narrow agreements with only few parties that leave out important countries. The more flexible instrument of goal-setting, however – especially when it provides possibilities for the adaptation to national and local realities – might motivate all governments to make at least some contributions on sensitive topics (Zelli et al. 2010). For example, although the reduction of inequality between and within states was a bone of contention during the negotiations of the SDGs, all countries have in the end agreed to Goal 10 on inequality, including many highly hesitant parties such as the United States (Kamau, Chasek and O'Connor 2018: 184). This would not have been possible if that goal had been legally binding.

Another dimension of 'bindingness' is the precision with which goals are formulated. Although the Paris Agreement included non-legally binding Nationally Determined Contributions, its provisions are formulated in terms that do not create clear individual obligations (Bodansky 2016: 146). Also its provisions on adaptation and means of implementation lack the precision to create enforceable legal obligations (Bodansky 2016). An increasing number of legal norms and provisions can result in the progressive proliferation of normative ambiguity with little effect, whereas non-legally binding commitments might in some cases be more precise and effective (Victor, Raustalia and Skolnikoff 1998). This is what some argue could be the case with the non-binding but sometimes very precise indicators for the SDGs.

Whether global goals as legally non-binding political agreements can have some effect will, hence, depend more on the detail and on additional elements that add alternative dimensions to bindingness that could enhance compliance (Bodansky 2016: 149). An important example is the extent to which accountability mechanisms are in place to



support global goals, for instance through systems of transparency and review. In the case of the SDGs, the Voluntary National Reviews provide such a system. Although it will still take more time for all governments to bring forward their Voluntary National Reviews, in the end these reports may have the potential to serve as a detection mechanism for poor performance. This again could raise the reputational cost of non-compliance. In addition, Voluntary National Reviews could help mobilise and empower domestic supporters and increase a sense of urgency among participants. In sum, with these mechanisms in place, the SDGs could have important effects despite their lack of legal standing.

#### 4.3.2 *Weak institutional arrangements*

A second characteristic of governance through global goal-setting is that it needs to rely on weak institutional arrangements at the international level. By 'weak' arrangements, we mean that global goals do not rely on legal authority or on a formal status within the United Nations hierarchy. This also implies that they lack significant resources to execute their mandate and the capacity to create norms, resolve disputes and enforce compliance with further rules and regulations. Generally, weak institutional arrangements are often associated with claims about the ineffectiveness of global governance that comes from inefficiency, the lack of an overall vision, duplication and conflicts between the mandates and activities of organisations, lack of implementation and enforcement and lack of adequate and predictable funding (Lodefalk and Whalley 2002; Elliott 2005; Biermann 2014). Such criticisms often coincide with negative views on governance fragmentation. Many of the discussions regarding the institutional reform of the global architecture for earth system governance, for instance, revolve around an upgrade in authority of existing organisations or the establishment of an authoritative international organisation dealing with the environment.

Several authors, however, have framed weak institutional arrangements also as a possible way to deal with governance fragmentation. One such way is known as orchestration, a

strategy closely linked to governance through goals. Orchestration relies not on legal authority and enforcement but rather on ‘soft modes of influence’ (Abbott et al. 2015: 223). Orchestrators gain influence through intermediary organisations and can steer actors in desired directions, typically through ‘bottom-up, non-confrontational, country-driven and stakeholder-oriented’ strategies (Biermann, Kanie and Kim 2017: 27). Despite a lack of formal authority, orchestrators are believed to be able to exercise leadership, provided that they are considered as legitimate by intermediary and target organisations and that they are the key focal point and expert within their areas, which grants them political weight.

A prime example of orchestration is the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, which is responsible for the institutional oversight in formulating and implementing the SDGs (Persson, Weitz and Nilsson 2016). The High-level Political Forum was established during the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, replacing the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development that was often seen as a mere ‘talkshop’ with no authority to make or facilitate formal decisions (Ivanova 2013: 219; see also Bernstein 2017). The High-level Political Forum did not gain much formal authority or resources compared to its predecessor (Abbott and Bernstein 2015).

Yet, despite these shortcomings, some scholars perceive the High-level Political Forum as rather influential. The Forum has been granted legitimacy through a formal resolution on its establishment; it has universal membership, high-level representation and participation of not only United Nations member states but also international organisations and non-state actors. The High-level Political Forum is hence regarded by some as a focal point for implementing the SDGs at the global level. It is a forum within the United Nations General Assembly, which may provide it with some political weight (Abbott and Bernstein 2015; Bernstein 2017). Though this points to a potential for success, the High-level Political Forum is bound to face challenges in exercising leadership within an architecture that is still characterised by fragmentation and partial competition among

a plethora of international organisations that all work in the field of sustainable development.

In short, the jury is still out on whether weak institutional arrangements harm or help with the effectiveness of governance. While some see little promise in organisations with weak arrangements, others are more optimistic, provided that the right policy measures – such as purposeful orchestration strategies – are in place.

#### 4.3.3 *Inclusiveness*

A third characteristic of governance though goals is the inclusion of a plurality of state and non-state actors in both goal formation and goal implementation. We distinguish here between procedural inclusiveness – that is, the openness of the process to a wide range of state and non-state actors – and substantial inclusiveness, which relates to the broad range of targets of a given policy. Both dimensions of inclusiveness are related: procedural inclusiveness can shape substantial inclusiveness, because including a wider range of actors in the setting of goals can favour the establishment of goals with broader objectives.

In global goal-setting, the attention to inclusiveness is linked to the search for greater (input) legitimacy in global governance. This, again, relates to the concern of addressing democratic deficits in global governance that result from insufficient participation and accountability (Bäckstrand 2006a; Biermann and Gupta 2011; Keohane 2011; Gellers 2016). Some even see goal-based governance as a way to pursue what they call stakeholder democracy – a type of hybrid governance that responds to the argument that more deliberative input legitimacy results in greater output legitimacy and hence better governance results (Bäckstrand 2006b). Inclusiveness is generally viewed by proponents as a crucial step to more ‘reflexive’ forms of governance. Reflexivity is seen as a form of resilience and deliberation that embodies the institutional ability to be something else (as opposed to do something else) to effectively deal with changing circumstances (Voß and Kemp 2006; Dryzek 2014; Feindt and Weiland 2018). Also empirically, we observe since

the 1990s a participatory turn in global governance that started with the Agenda 21 of 1992 and later evolved into the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, which led to a shift from ‘mere’ participation to multi-stakeholdership. New forms of hybrid governance emerged, including dialogues and public–private partnerships. These play important roles in the governance of sustainability issues (e.g., Glasbergen, Biermann and Mol 2007; Bitzer, Francken and Glasbergen 2008), regimes (Gupta and Vegelin 2016) and interactions between regimes (Visseren-Hamakers, Arts and Glasbergen 2011; Visseren-Hamakers and Verkooijen 2013), even though concerns about their actual effectiveness and equity effects remain.

These mechanisms have been criticised, for example, for lack of participation from marginalised groups, insufficient monitoring and reporting and the biased funding that is generated through strong private sector involvement (Bäckstrand 2006a; Biermann et al. 2012; Bäckstrand and Kylsäter 2014). Studies on the failure of some partnerships suggest, for example, the importance of clear links with intergovernmental organisations, as well as the existence of measurable targets, effective leadership and systematic reviews for the reporting and monitoring of targets (Bäckstrand 2006a; Bäckstrand and Kylsäter 2014; Pattberg and Widerberg 2016).

This importance of effectiveness and measurability has informed the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000: a very concise set of development goals, praised for their clarity and simplicity and hailed as a historic example of global mobilisation to achieve important priorities (Sachs 2012; Solberg 2015).

And yet, the Millennium Development Goals have also faced sharp criticism with regard to their inclusiveness.

First, the Millennium Development Goals were aimed only at developing countries, with industrialised countries envisaged almost as tutors, reflecting a unidirectional and not very inclusive understanding of development (Deacon 2016). Procedurally, the earlier

stages did reflect some inclusiveness, with the United Nations inviting input from non-state actors and eventually publishing ‘We the Peoples: The Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century’, which included a list of global values and priorities. However, the actual Millennium Declaration, and the extraction of the Millennium Development Goals from it, were largely based on input from the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee, thereby attesting to the scarce inclusiveness of a supposedly global goal-setting process (Honniball and Spijkers 2014; Chasek et al. 2016). In addition, there has also been criticism about the strong emphasis of the Millennium Development Goals on measurability, which has caused a certain reductionism and may have led to the exclusion or marginalisation of crucial qualitative elements of comprehensive development (Fukuda-Parr, Yamin and Greenstein 2014: 115). At the same time, the partnerships that were established around the Millennium Development Goals were criticised for their weak review mechanisms and performance measurements (Bäckstrand et al. 2012; Bernstein 2017).

Considering these deficits of the Millennium Development Goals, some have described the strong focus of the SDGs on inclusiveness as a transformative moment in development policy (Stevens and Kanie 2016). Unlike other UN goals, the SDGs emerged from a ‘mould-breaking’ negotiation process that involved the establishment of an Open Working Group, which, in line with the official aim to conduct an ‘inclusive and transparent intergovernmental process on sustainable development goals that is open to all stakeholders’ (United Nations General Assembly 2012: 63), strived to be as open and inclusive as possible. Unlike most United Nations General Assembly working groups, whose meetings are generally closed to observers and lack official and publicly available records, the Open Working Group pursued the full involvement of stakeholders and the gathering of expertise from civil society, the scientific community and the United Nations system. It actively reduced delegation rigidity and set up a stocktaking process – including meetings with civil society – aimed at providing all negotiators with the same terms of reference and at fostering a high level of cohesion and a common sense of purpose (Chasek

and Wagner 2016). In this light, also noting the role played by UN agencies in the UN task force and by the wide consultations with civil society, some scholars have referred to this goal-setting as ‘global social governance’ (Deacon 2016: 118). Instrumental in the procedural success of the ‘largest development dialogue ever held’ (Solberg 2015: 61) has also been the experimental use of new technologies – such as the creation of a global questionnaire – in the consultation phase (Sachs 2012; Gellers 2016), with some scholars arguing that the very future of global participation lies in the application of information technologies (Honniball and Spijkers 2014).

Against this rather optimistic backdrop, however, more critical voices have pointed at some weaknesses in the inclusiveness in global goal-setting, even with the SDGs. First, there is a difference between inclusive invitation and inclusive participation (that is, actual influence on the final outcomes), with the process leading to the SDGs faring better in the former than in the latter (Deacon 2016; Gellers 2016). Second, the combined emphasis on growth (Gupta and Vegelin 2016) and on nationally determined commitments presents the risk of stifling inclusiveness at the later stages of goal implementation, in that it might incentivise a ‘sovereignist’ policymaking reversal away from the concern to improve global governance along ‘social’ lines (Deacon 2016: 129). Third, from a discursive standpoint, it has been pointed out that the SDGs do not constitute a major revolution vis-à-vis the overwhelmingly neoliberal narrative of the Millennium Development Goals. While the SDGs do include more references to Keynesian, feminist and ‘world society’ sustainability elements, they still retain an emphasis on neoliberal tenets such as economic growth. And they do not, as pointed out by critics, include any strong criticism of the existing global trade and financial architecture (Briant Carant 2017).

#### 4.3.4 *National leeway*

A fourth characteristic of governance through goal-setting is that it grants much leeway for national choices and preferences. While global goals provide a roadmap of what ought

to be done, they remain subject to contestation, negotiation and translation at the national level (Fukuda-Parr 2014).

To start with, this again brings in concerns about the legitimacy, fairness and accountability of national goal implementation. For example, the inclusiveness with which the SDGs have been crafted at the global level would imply that such inclusiveness is also important for the implementation of the goals at national and subnational levels, but this is not always the case. So, the national leeway left in the implementation of the SDGs might result in less inclusiveness in some countries than was originally envisaged.

Second, should global goals be nationally implemented without adaptation to national circumstances, the results could be unfair outcomes (Easterly 2009; Fukuda-Parr 2014) and the omission of important priorities for inclusive and equitable development (Kabeer 2010). If countries with different levels of development are held up to the same measures of performance – as was implicitly the case with the Millennium Development Goals – then the special conditions in the least developed countries would make it very difficult for them to meet the goals (Easterly 2009; Hailu and Tsukada 2011). African countries, for instance, have performed poorly in implementing the Millennium Development Goals despite having made significant progress in that period (Easterly 2009). Furthermore, the translation of the Millennium Declaration into an agenda for action has created a dissonance between the Goals' original intent and their implementation (Fukuda-Parr 2010). The Millennium Development Goals distilled complex development challenges into merely 21 quantitative targets, which affected how development was understood and how decisions were made (Fukuda-Parr 2014). Poverty, for example, was narrowly framed as material deprivation with little attention paid to inequality, and it therefore overlooked the multidimensional, intersectional causes of poverty such as race, gender and ethnicity (Kabeer 2010). Even though the Millennium Development Goals had established a clear and communicable focus, the subsequent

measures of progress did not account for whether such progress was equitable or sustainable (Hill, Ghulam and Claudio 2010; Hulme 2010; Kabeer 2010).

Third, however, nationally owned strategies for implementing the SDGs might also foster greater accountability at national and other levels, through the development of appropriate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Such mechanisms, including the national SDGs reports and the Voluntary National Reviews, provide important means through which states could reflect, confront and fill institutional gaps towards goal attainment. As a key feature of governance through global goal-setting, national leeway encourages self-regulation or self-steering (Fukuda-Parr 2014), the translation and adoption of goals into national policies and institutions (Galli et al. 2018) and more integrated institutional arrangements fit to address cross-sectoral issues and challenges. All of this can affect governance architectures discursively and materially. However, while the SDGs somewhat remedy the shortcomings of the Millennium Development Goals, potential pitfalls remain. As Oran Young aptly states, '[i]t is relatively easy to establish a causal connection between the articulation of goals and the establishment of organisational arrangements to promote their attainment. It is another matter to demonstrate such a connection between goal-setting and actual progress toward fulfilling the relevant goals' (Young 2017: 37). Given the politics that animate development policy and practices across scales, there are risks of simplification and selectivity of goals through national implementation (Fukuda-Parr 2016). A recent analysis of Voluntary National Reviews indicates that various efforts are underway to incorporate the SDGs across all levels of governance, from setting up new institutions and engaging with local governments to realigning national plans with the SDGs (Sarwar and Nicolai 2018). Yet very few governments clearly articulate how to execute their respective agendas or how to monitor and evaluate their progress (Sarwar and Nicolai 2018). This may result in 'slippage in ambition and vision' in the processes of moving from goals to targets to indicators, all of which guide the orientation of policies and institutions (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill 2019: 12;



see also Merry 2019). A study on SDGs 12 discusses the divergent framings of what sustainable production and consumption means and how to get there, arguing that quantitative indicators are vital to ensure accountability and avoid the continuation of ‘green growth’ trajectories that overlook planetary boundaries (Gasper, Shah and Tankha 2019). At the same time, quantification may lead to misleading or distorted information with significant policy implications (Merry 2019), leaving the Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators to adopt a pragmatic approach of ‘measuring what we know how to measure’, while addressing remaining challenges (Elder and Olsen 2019: 80).

Fourth, the national leeway might foster important learning processes within countries. Institutional integration requires much re-learning and must transpire through a multi-actor, multi-sector and multilevel process, providing new possibilities to engage with different types of knowledge (Meuleman and Niestroy 2015). For instance, the tendency to simplify global goals may be because of genuine operational challenges in formulating and implementing policies, which can reflect the multiplicity of linkages and foster integration among goals (Elder and Olsen 2019). Some indicators for the SDGs are still not based on established methodologies and standards, and some lack the required data for measurement (MacFeely 2019). Additionally, moving from sectoral to integrated approaches to goal implementation and measurement at the national level is challenging, given that many institutional structures are still arranged in silos (Elder and Olsen 2019). In sum, all these processes at the national level can facilitate social learning both within and across institutions, all in order to create policies that respond to local, national and global aspirations (Patel et al. 2017).

#### **4.4 Governance through Goals and the Performance of Architectures**

We now turn to the final question of whether global goals can affect global governance architectures, and under what circumstances. Drawing on the typology of fragmentation offered by Biermann and colleagues (2009), we assess whether global goals can strengthen

institutional integration and reduce overlaps between decision-making systems, limit norm conflicts and influence the type of actor constellations, all possibly leading to less conflictive and more cooperative or synergistic fragmentation.

With regard to institutional integration, since goals are not legally binding and operate through weak institutional arrangements, their contribution to normative and institutional integration in global governance might seem limited. In the same vein, global goals do not offer much detail on how to reach the goals through specific policies or procedures. In the case of the SDGs, it is left to states to develop their own strategy to achieve the goals. Self-steering is encouraged, which results in the development or adaptation of institutional arrangements at the national level by each state's own preference. Though there are clear benefits to this approach, it also implies – at the global level – that a variety of institutions emerges that are not necessarily integrated.

Yet global goals may still contribute to institutional integration despite their lack of formal authority. As goals can play an important role in creating overarching and crosscutting norms (Biermann, Kanie and Kim 2017), they may serve as a key soft law instrument to orchestrate international agreements and institutions (Kim and Bosselmann 2013; Bridgewater, Kim and Bosselmann 2014). In the case of the SDGs, it has been argued that goals might spur clustering of the agreements within their own area and serve as an overarching set of principles, eventually modifying the application of other norms (Kim 2016). Indeed, it has been observed that the SDGs are already influencing international and national law, for example European trade and investment law (Huck and Kirkin 2018). In this respect, it seems that goals can indeed provide a tool for orchestration through normative guidance; their soft power can lead to more institutional integration in a fragmented system.

A second defining criterion of governance fragmentation is substantial norm conflicts between institutions. Again, global goals may be instrumental here in the creation of overarching norms, as long as broad support for the goals is present. In the case of the

SDGs, obtaining such broad support and legitimacy has been pursued by striving for broad inclusiveness in the establishment of the goals. It has been argued that inclusiveness is key to inform deliberative processes in which different participants develop well-informed opinions and ‘productive tensions’ to drive reflexive reforms (Dryzek and Pickering 2017: 354). This, in turn, could foster the emergence of more flexible and adaptive architectures and facilitate the emergence and consolidation of multilevel and multi-scalar governance solutions that follow principles of institutional variety, polycentricity and analytic deliberation (that is, inclusive dialogues) (Dietz et al. 2003: 1910). In the context of sustainable development, inclusiveness has already been singled out as a key component in the gradual relaxation of strictly sovereignist multilateralism towards what some see as more sustainable, more participatory and less state-centric formats (Eckersley 2004; Bäckstrand 2006b). Global goals can thus be successful in working towards more synergistic types of fragmentation by reducing norm conflicts, as long as the goals themselves have broad support, which in turn can be achieved by an inclusive goal-setting process.

However, even with unanimously agreed global goals, normative ambiguity remains. The SDGs, for example, have been criticised for not providing a clear vision on sustainability (Bernstein 2017). It has been argued that vague institutional elements, such as the ambition of achieving sustainability, coincide with synergistic fragmentation, while more concrete and substantive institutional elements that are necessary for the implementation of goals coincide with more conflictive fragmentation (Fernández-Blanco, Burns and Giessen 2019). Indeed, setting goals that are as numerous and broad as the SDGs is bound to lead to competition for priority (Young 2017). Tension between the goals exists in the form of trade-offs (Langford 2010; Bernstein 2017), and a common global vision on the integration of the goals is lacking (Yamada 2017). Several authors have therefore highlighted the importance of systems to manage priorities (Griggs et al. 2017) and called for prioritisation of goals (Spangenberg 2017). Given that goals

must consider national circumstances, leaving prioritisation and integration to the individual states is a logical choice. However, the adoption of integrated analytical approaches and models at the national level is lagging, posing a considerable risk for continuation of the same 'siloed' approach that has been criticised in the past (Allen, Metternicht and Wiedmann 2018), with conflicts remaining between different issue areas.

A third defining criterion of different degrees of fragmentation is overlapping actor constellations. Global goals can, again, help reduce fragmentation. Notably, the introduction of the SDGs in 2015 brought an unprecedented call for action from a plethora of stakeholders, including civil society, non-governmental organisations and the private sector. The involvement of such a multiplicity of actors at different scales leads to an increasingly polycentric system. Following a recent study by Jordan and colleagues (2018: 19), the effectiveness of such a polycentric system requires the presence of overarching rules or goals 'to provide a means to settle disputes and reduce the level of discord between units to a manageable level'. Especially the private sector is becoming a strong political actor in such polycentric systems, and some UN agencies see its role in achieving sustainable development as indispensable (UNCTAD 2014). The UN Global Compact, for instance, is a key network created to encourage businesses to commit themselves to the Millennium Development Goals, and now the SDGs. So far, almost 10,000 companies have joined the Compact, thereby committing to a set of goals to conduct business that is aligned with the SDGs (United Nations Global Compact 2019). The SDGs have even been called a 'great gift for business' for giving a clear set of long-term global priorities with which the private sector can align their strategies (Pedersen 2018). In this sense, global goals do offer guidance for a new group of actors to join the global governance system and commit to a same set of behavioural norms at the global level, perhaps steering towards more cooperative or synergistic governance fragmentation.

On the other hand, the involvement of the private sector in governing sustainable development has invoked sharp criticism as well. Large transnational companies,

predominantly from Europe and the United States, have been able to represent their sectoral interests during the development of the SDGs (Scheyvens, Banks and Hughes 2016; Weber 2017) and have been given an active role in the form of public–private partnerships. Yet these public–private partnerships do not always lead to the desired results (Scheyvens, Banks and Hughes 2016). It has also been argued that the private sector is effectively pushing for its own corporate interests (Koehler 2015). Indeed, companies tend to engage with those goals that are most relevant to their own business interests (Abshagen et al. 2018), focusing more on ‘doing no harm’ than on ‘doing good’ (van Zanten and van Tulder 2018). Some observe also a lack of attention by business actors for those goals that are predominantly relating to environmental sustainability (Poddar, Narula and Zutshi 2019). Taking all this together, it seems possible that goals offer an overarching set of norms, leading to more normative agreement and institutional integration, be it through soft modes of governance or orchestration. On the other hand, the involvement of particularly powerful private actors and the cherry-picking of goals could also lead to the strengthening of specific complexes around certain goals and not others. This would then result in a more modular global governance architecture, where synergistic fragmentation is present within specific complexes, but cooperative or even conflictive fragmentation is present between complexes.

#### **4.5 Conclusions and Future Directions**

Global governance through goal-setting, as an increasingly influential mechanism of global governance, poses important questions for academic research and policy analysis. For example, we need to better understand how, to what extent and with what effects global goals and their norms are embedded and integrated in existing governance arrangements at global, national and local levels. Also, what further governance reforms are needed to implement and reach the goals at various levels? The concept of orchestration in global governance constitutes an important new research area as well, focusing for

example on the extent to which ‘powerless’ steering may have powerful effects on actors’ behaviour (see e.g. Abbott et al. 2015).

Another important research question is to what extent and how the rhetoric of integration and policy coherence between the SDGs takes shape in governance arrangements at national and subnational levels. While the SDGs are meant to be indivisible and implemented coherently, unavoidable trade-offs and prioritisation between goals need to be dealt with at the national and subnational levels. The question is then how the often-siloed national and subnational governance arrangements give shape to the SDGs, who is involved in prioritising the goals and whether and how the rhetoric of this process of ‘leaving no one behind’ is being realised.

As a form of governance through goals, the SDGs show a level of ambition and comprehensiveness that surpasses all other forms of governance through goals. This makes them ‘one of the most intriguing new global initiatives in sustainable development and environmental policy’ (Biermann, Kanie and Kim 2017: 29). Governance through goals as a mechanism of global governance is not likely to disappear, nor is it likely to become less dominant with the termination of the SDGs by 2030. It will therefore remain of utmost importance, both for the attainment of the SDGs and for any future effort of global goal-setting, to continue critical examination of the various effects of global goals at the global, national and subnational levels.

# 5. The SDGs and Planetary Integrity: Mainstreaming Environmental Concerns into Sustainability Governance?

This chapter is based on: Kotzé, L., Kim, R., Burdon, P., Du Toit, L., Glass, L., Kashwan, P., Liverman, D., Montesano, F.S., Rantala, S., Sénit, C., Tréyer, S., Calzadilla, P. 2022. Planetary Integrity. In F. Biermann, T. Hickmann, & C. Sénit (Eds.), *The Political Impact of the Sustainable Development Goals: Transforming Governance Through Global Goals?* (pp. 140-171). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.<sup>2</sup>

## 5.1 Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with the 17 SDGs at its centre, seeks to strike a balance between ‘people’, ‘planet’ and ‘prosperity’ (see chapter 1). Yet, the precise relationship between these three concerns remains vaguely defined in the 2030 Agenda, as does the place of the ‘planet’ in this plan of action. Implicit in the SDGs is that we can ensure global prosperity and equality only within a stable ecological context. Commentators acknowledge that how countries pursue ecological objectives will directly affect their ‘ability to address the majority of the SDGs’ (Vasseur et al. 2017: 732). The SDGs must therefore, in principle, help secure the basis of human well-being, while maintaining the biophysical capacity of our planet. Although it remains debatable what

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<sup>2</sup> After the two lead authors, all other authors contributed equally to this publication. Montesano co-led the introduction and conceptualisation sections, as well as the sections on the potential for environmental steering by the goals, on design limitations, and on experiences from international governance.

this implies in practice, it is reasonable to assume that the integrity of the earth's life-support systems, or *planetary integrity* in short, must be maintained for long-term sustainability. Then the following questions arise: To what extent have the SDGs advanced planetary integrity, and where can we see positive changes towards planetary integrity in governance efforts that can be attributed to the global goals?

This is the central question in this chapter. We first offer a brief account of the concept of planetary integrity as a global public good that is maintained by keeping the earth system within its ecological limits (Westra, Bosselmann and Gwiazdon 2018). By drawing on an extensive literature survey, we then reflect on a theoretical debate about the actual and potential role of the SDGs in advancing planetary integrity; a debate that, while ranging between optimism and scepticism, is predominantly sceptical about such potential. Next we provide four examples situated at the international, regional, local and transnational levels of governance within which the SDGs aim to steer (see, for a similar approach, Biermann and Kim 2020; see chapter 4 for an in-depth discussion of the SDGs as 'steering' institutions). At the international level we consider key environmental institutions, namely, the United Nations Environment Assembly and the international regimes on climate change and biodiversity, and contrast this perspective with an analysis of the International Labour Organisation, which is not explicitly concerned with environmental matters. Regionally, we shift our analysis to the European Union and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, which offers contrasting perspectives from the Global South and Global North on how regional institutions use the SDGs to pursue planetary integrity. At the national level, we discuss how South Africa, a hugely diverse country and an influential political and economic player in Africa, engages with the SDGs to pursue socio-economic development in the context of planetary integrity. We then focus on the role of transnational corporations, as increasingly influential global actors, in employing the SDGs in their efforts to advance, or hinder, the pursuit of



planetary integrity. We conclude with a summary of our findings, a reflection on theoretical implications, and suggestions for future research.

We do not claim to cover the entire spectrum of perspectives, or that the findings from the international, regional, national and transnational examples we discuss are generalizable. However, we seek to contribute to theory-building on when and how governance through global goals work (Kanie and Biermann 2017), and to make policy-relevant recommendations for the second half of the 2030 Agenda and the discussions for the period after 2030.

## **5.2 Conceptualisation and Methods**

The idea of the Anthropocene suggests that humans are embedded in the earth system and able to alter its vital functions. Human activities are now being exercised on a planet that is not passive, but increasingly hostile and unpredictable, with important consequences for governance and law (Biermann 2014; Kotzé 2020). Our future will be determined as much by the earth system of which we are an integral part as by our choices and behaviour, which, in turn, are shaped by grand development visions such as the SDGs (Stengers 2015). Planetary integrity will therefore have to be maintained to sustain all life on earth. The notion of planetary integrity derives from its root term ‘ecological integrity’, which was initially developed to describe the declining state of biodiversity on a sub-global scale (Hurley and Tittensor 2020; Westra 2005). In this context, ‘integrity’ is a way of thinking about ecological health affected by human activities (Burdon 2020; Kim and Bosselmann 2015).

The concept of planetary integrity is becoming popular at several levels of analysis (Parnell 2018). It is, for example, implied in the notion of planetary boundaries – a conceptual framework that seeks to quantify the ‘safe limits outside of which the Earth system cannot continue to function in a stable, Holocene-like state’ (Rockström et al. 2009: 474; also Steffen et al. 2015). Here, planetary integrity is used, and has been critiqued (Biermann

and Kim 2020b; French and Kotzé 2021), to describe a ‘safe operating space’ beyond which the earth system will behave in unpredictable ways, and to describe a threshold for the ability of ecosystems to support human society (Bridgewater, Kim and Bosselmann 2014). The boundaries include, among others, those for a safe climate, for protecting biodiversity, and to avoid serious pollution.

The safe operating space for humanity is, however, getting smaller, at a rate much faster than initial predictions. Evidence from earth system science shows unprecedented and accelerating levels of global environmental change and associated deepening of socio-ecological injustices between and within generations, which affect humans and non-humans. The signs of decaying planetary integrity are apparent in terms of epistemic frameworks such as the Anthropocene and predictions showing that we are fast approaching global tipping points (Lenton et al. 2020), and possibly even a Sixth Mass Extinction event (Briggs 2017). There now seems to be general agreement that planetary integrity is being impacted in unprecedented ways, and that deliberate and thoroughgoing steering mechanisms, such as through the SDGs, are urgently needed (French and Kotzé 2018). Yet, have the global goals also advanced planetary integrity, and where do we see positive changes towards planetary integrity in governance efforts that can be attributed to the global goals?

This chapter offers a range of perspectives that trace out preliminary answers to these questions. We conducted a systematic qualitative literature survey using *Scopus*. We searched for publications published in English before 2021 that include the SDGs or the acronym in their title, abstract or keywords with reference to the environment in conjunction with governance.<sup>1</sup> This search returned 101 studies, among which we found 15 publications to be particularly relevant for our chapter. This choice of highly relevant publications has informed the core findings of our analysis. We then also drew on other sources that reference, or are referenced by, these publications, which we relied on to guide, elaborate and substantiate our discussion of the literature we surveyed. Very few of

these publications explicitly discuss the actual or potential steering effects of the SDGs in relation to planetary integrity, and where they do, they predominantly focus on the potential instead of the actual steering effects of the Goals. Concrete empirical analysis of the actual steering effects of the SDGs in relation to planetary integrity is therefore still lacking, which points to a clear research gap and the need for future analyses. As a result of this gap, for present purposes, we complemented this theoretical discussion with a meta-assessment that draws on grey literature and the multidisciplinary expertise and perspectives of the authors. These focused discussions offer a snapshot of perspectives from the Global South and Global North, and the multiple complex concerns that lie at the heart of the 2030 Agenda, including views on the potential and actual environmental steering effects of the SDGs in varied contexts.

### **5.3 Research Findings and Practical Insights**

In this section we present key findings of the literature review on the potential and limits of the SDGs in steering societies towards planetary integrity. We understand the steering effects of the SDGs here through the lens of institutionalism. The SDGs reflect the interests, ideas and aspirations of differentially endowed actors (Kashwan, MacLean and García-Lopéz 2019), and they reflect dynamic settlements (Mahoney and Thelen 2009). As all institutions, the SDGs are human creations within socio-economic and political contexts and remain susceptible to continuous manoeuvring by many actors. In our analysis of the steering effects of the SDGs, we are therefore sensitive to the configuration of the purposes that the specific framings and designs of the goals are oriented to serve in the context of planetary integrity. To this end, this assessment specifically looks at whether and in what ways the SDGs have led to changes (positive and negative) in relation to how political, economic and societal actors pursue planetary integrity. We seek to determine whether it is possible to observe actual or potential policy, legal and broader regulatory

framework (normative) changes; institutional changes such as the creation of new governance structures; and discursive changes in and of civil society actors.

### 5.3.1 *The Potential for Environmental Steering by the Goals*

Several studies refer to the SDGs as an important frame for sustainable development (e.g., Racioppi et al. 2020). Yet, these studies do not attribute any primary steering powers to the SDGs, and the goals are not seen as *directly* steering behaviour (De Schutter et al. 2019; Mansourian 2018; Smith et al. 2019). Instead, researchers find rather indirect steering where SDGs act as ‘orchestrators’ (Biermann, Kanie and Kim 2017; Underdal and Kim 2017). One example is when the SDGs facilitate the clustering of international agreements or serve as collective ‘headlines’ (for example, SDGs 14 and 15 for biodiversity). One study concludes that ‘clear lines of sight between the SDGs and their impacts are unlikely to emerge. Rather, the SDGs are likely to have a range of “messy, contradictory and refractory effects”’ (Hirons 2020: 322).

Several factors might complicate the ability of the SDGs to have environmental steering effects. For example, environmental targets under the SDGs often sit in non-environmental goals, with indicators ending up diluting or contradicting the environmental ‘mission’ of the 2030 Agenda as a whole (Elder and Olsen 2019). Some scholars, for example, have argued that the goals for eradicating poverty or economic growth could result in environmental degradation (Liverman 2018; Sexsmith and McMichael 2015). At the same time, most environmental targets under the SDGs were extracted from earlier agreements, which might draw resistance from other bodies or agreements in the same area, and even give rise to conflicting priorities (Elder, Bengtsson and Akenji 2016; Kim 2016). The potential for turf wars in such a setting is real, as is the lack of ambition of the goals (Kotzé and French 2018). Such turf wars could limit the steering effect of SDGs and significantly weaken efforts to pursue ambitious environmental protection through law, policy and governance. Some commentators

hence argue that the goals may help to highlight environmental protection as a concern in achieving sustainable development, but that their rationale and content remains still structurally incompatible with steering towards the more ambitious goal of planetary integrity (Griggs et al. 2013).

### 5.3.2 *Inherent Design Limitations*

Some studies also argue that the SDGs might even have a negative steering effect on planetary integrity in that they could incentivise countries to further subordinate environmental priorities in their developmental plans (Zeng et al. 2020). In other words, doubts about the steering qualities of the SDGs towards environmental protection arise not only from their ability to steer, but also from the fact that they do not seem to prioritise environmental protection in the first place (Craig and Ruhl 2020). The 2030 Agenda's explicit inclusion of the 'planet' as one of its main concerns might signal some focus on a planetary perspective, although the agenda does not refer explicitly to 'planetary integrity', or to 'planetary limits' or 'planetary boundaries' (Elder, Bengtsson and Akenji 2016; Randers et al. 2019). The absence of an overarching environmental or 'planetary' goal is remarkable (Brandi 2015), with environmental protection left to a cluster of environment-focused SDGs down the list at numbers 13, 14 and 15. While including these explicit environmental goals might advance environmental protection, some also argue that Goals 13, 14 and 15 could compartmentalise environmental issues (climate, land and oceans) without an overarching SDG on 'planetary integrity' (Costanza et al. 2015; Kim 2016; Kim and Bosselmann 2015; Young et al. 2017). Therefore, simply based on a textual analysis of the SDGs, the goals do not pursue planetary integrity as such, but do recognise the importance of protecting environmental aspects such as climate, land and the oceans.

Where environmental protection was integrated into several non-environmental goals, the SDGs also adopted some conservative and unambitious perspectives on the tensions between economic growth and environmental sustainability (Adelman 2018;

Eisenmenger et al. 2020; Kotzé 2018). This is evident, for example, in their emphasis on longstanding but dubious claims about decoupling and resource efficiency as technological solutions to the environmental crisis (Elder and Olsen 2019; Fletcher and Rammelt 2017). Governments also rejected as potential core ideas underpinning the SDGs the more transformative objective of looking beyond gross domestic product as an indicator of prosperity (Costanza et al. 2015); the notion of planetary boundaries and the limits this would imply for unrestrained neoliberal development (Elder and Olsen 2019); and the need for robust implementation measures, which are currently considered to be ‘not carefully thought out or systematic’ (Elder, Bengtsson and Akenji 2016: 6). For example, Gasper, Shah and Tankha (2019) show that while the emergence of Sustainable Development Goal 12 (to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns) as a stand-alone goal resulted from pressure by developing countries on industrialised countries, it was in the end business interests that shaped the targets and indicators under this goal. This explains why Goal 12 reflects a narrative of ‘sustainable growth’, which some critics consider a business-friendly, neoliberal approach embedded in sustainable development, and which places much faith in yet-to-be-developed future technological innovations (Adelman 2018).

Several intergovernmental environmental agencies and civil society groups took part in the formulation of the SDGs, which could have increased the ambition of these goals towards environmental protection (Sénit 2020). However, the influence of governments and business organisations prevailed and resulted in unambitious and vague targets of a non-committal nature (Gasper, Shah and Tankha 2019). Similarly, growth as envisaged in Sustainable Development Goal 8 is seen to be inherently incompatible with environmental protection targets, such as those articulated in Goals 6, 13, 14 and 15 (Hickel 2019). Some therefore argue that the SDGs’ focus on sustainable *economic* development is inevitably detrimental to planetary integrity and justice (Kotzé 2018),

which require both limits to economic growth and the removal of ‘developmental’ disparities between the rich and the poor (Kashwan et al. 2020; Lydgate 2012).

### 5.3.3 *A Matter of Window Dressing?*

Some studies point to the dangers of ‘cherry picking’, ‘window dressing’ and ‘greenwashing’ (e.g., Forestier and Kim 2020). On paper, the 17 SDGs are unprioritised and all equal: the goals are at least in spirit a ‘network of targets’ (Le Blanc 2015). However, they do not come as a truly indivisible package, but leave room for governments to strategically prioritise certain goals in their implementation (Forestier and Kim 2020). One study claimed that the goals are all ‘characterised by an absence of any top-down priority setting mechanisms [and] States have the freedom to pursue (or ignore) the goals however they want’ (Hirons 2020: 325). For instance, it has been argued that governments and businesses actively prioritise the social and economic goals over the environmental goals in both rhetoric and practice (Craig and Ruhl 2020). Even the 2030 Agenda explicitly says that environmental threats merely ‘add to and exacerbate’ the list of challenges faced by humanity (UNGA 2015: 5). This ignores evidence that environmental degradation is caused by a narrow focus on economic growth, and it undermines the goals of broad-based development that is at once just, fair and equitable and that can only be achieved in the context of a healthy ecosystem (Adelman 2018).

Studies suggest that instead of promoting a more holistic form of ecologically friendly development, many governments still prioritise economic growth while neglecting environmental protection (Custer et al. 2018). Commentators have shown that among the 169 targets under the SDGs, environmental targets are often less easily trackable and measurable, and require larger and more uncertain investments (Craig and Ruhl 2020). As we show below, the prioritisation of non-environmental goals also results from political–business cycle dynamics: short-term economic growth and ill-conceived ideas of development trump longer-term planetary integrity, and then create a vicious cycle that

further subordinates planetary integrity (Kotzé 2018). All this goes to the heart of concerns about the ontological design and ethical orientation of the SDGs: their focus seems to remain, as one study argues, on ‘growth and use of resources . . . and [it] departs from an individual, not collective, point of view’; and they remain ‘underpinned by strong (Western) modernist notions of development: sovereignty of humans over their environment (anthropocentrism), individualism, competition, freedom (rights rather than duties), self-interest, belief in the market leading to collective welfare, private property (protected by legal systems), rewards based on merit, materialism, quantification of value, and instrumentalisation of labour’ (van Norren 2020: 453; see also Liverman 2018).

These insights in the literature lead one to question whether the SDGs are the *appropriate* vehicle to pursue planetary integrity. Some critics argue that the goals are inappropriate for this purpose and show, for example, that the goals do not acknowledge the centrality of healthy ecosystems to the optimal functioning of the vast majority of social and economic systems (Kotzé and French 2018). In other words, the SDGs fail to recognise that planetary, people and prosperity concerns are all part of one earth system, and that the protection of planetary integrity should not be a means to an end, but an end in itself. Some studies also see the SDGs as essentially anthropocentric and mainly aimed at promoting economic development for (some) humans, despite their high rhetoric to the contrary. These studies argue that the goals are therefore unlikely to help solve the fundamental planetary problems that arise from the specific type of unbridled neoliberal economic development that the SDGs promote (Adelman 2018; Kotzé 2018). A principal concern is that the SDGs remain fixated on the idea that economic growth is foundational to achieve all pillars of sustainable development; as one author argues, ‘the SDGs are not biocentric aiming to respect nature for nature’s sake, enabling reciprocity with nature. They embody linear growth/results thinking which requires unlimited resource



exploitation, and not cyclical thinking replacing growth with well-being (of all beings)’ (van Norren 2020: 431).

In sum, owing to ontological and systemic factors, and limitations in their design and purpose, the available literature does not see the SDGs as having any significant potential to steer governance towards a prioritisation of planetary integrity. Whatever indirect steering effects the SDGs might have in this respect are merely implied through the environmental goals at the bottom of the list of the SDGs. On the one hand, these environmental goals might facilitate discussions about the importance and potential of the SDGs to pursue planetary integrity. They also might inspire future initiatives that eventually drive positive change (Kopnina 2018). Indeed, there is ‘an increased recognition of the importance of the environment in the SDGs’ (Vasseur et al 2017: 732). On the other hand, the findings of our literature survey support the view that the SDGs are not fully geared towards steering, and capable of facilitating, the pursuit of planetary integrity. Zeng et al. (2020) put this in even starker terms, that ‘environmental destruction [has not been] avoided with the SDGs’. We further explore this insight below, with reference to experiences at the international, regional, national and transnational levels of governance in order to determine in more practical terms what the steering effects of the SDGs in mainstreaming planetary integrity have been.

#### *5.3.4 Experiences from International Governance*

We start with experiences from international governance. Here, the United Nations Environment Assembly is often considered to be the world’s most influential international institution for global environmental governance. Considering the centrality of the SDGs to the world’s development vision and the prominence of the Assembly and its pivotal role in global environmental governance, one would expect that the SDGs are a key consideration in the agenda of the United Nations Environment Assembly. Such a consideration is supported by literature on the relationship between international

institutions and organisations and the SDGs, with studies on whether and how international bodies can contribute to the 2030 Agenda, including environmental protection (Cormier 2016). Much scholarly attention has therefore been on the contribution of international institutions, such as the United Nations Environment Assembly (e.g., Ivanova 2021), to environmental protection, although not explicitly as part of the SDGs (Perrez 2020). This reflects public statements and policy documents by these institutions, which all stress their commitment to living up to the challenge of global environmental protection. Yet, it remains unclear to what extent the United Nations Environment Assembly has actually promoted planetary integrity through incorporating the environmental dimensions of the SDGs in its programmes.

At first glance it seems that the Assembly has done rather well. For example, the titles of several meetings of the Assembly embrace concerns of the SDGs, such as the first United Nations Environment Assembly, which focused on ‘SDGs and the Post-2015 Development Agenda, including sustainable consumption and production’; and the fourth assembly on ‘Innovative solutions for environmental challenges and sustainable consumption and production’. The choice of theme for the fifth United Nations Environment Assembly, ‘Strengthening Actions for Nature to Achieve the SDGs’, suggests further attention to the links between the SDGs and planetary integrity. This holds out considerable potential for the Assembly to govern the complex interactions arising from the SDGs, with a view to ultimately promoting environmental concerns as its core mandate (Kaniaru 2014; Rantala et al. 2020). On closer examination, however, it seems that the United Nations Environment Assembly has undertaken only tentative steps towards governing these interactions in pursuit of planetary integrity. Attention to nexus issues that could support broader environmental and societal benefits has gradually increased as has support for cross-sectoral policy coherence (Rantala et al. 2020). For example, the Assembly has emphasised the need to improve links between pollution, climate change, biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation (UNEA 2018), and the need

to strengthen links between soil pollution, land use and the SDGs (UNEA 2017). Another area where the Assembly has much potential to facilitate synergies between the SDGs and environmental protection is sustainable consumption and production, which it considers essential to improve sustainability and to support the achievement of all other goals that relate to Goal 12 (Rantala et al. 2020).

In other areas, again, the Assembly fares worse than expected. For example, an opportunity to address interactions was missed at the fourth United Nations Environment Assembly, which failed to approve a draft resolution ‘Deforestation and agricultural commodity supply chains’, which was intended to halt deforestation (Goal 15) while contributing to ensure food security and nutrition (Goal 2) (Rantala et al. 2020). Therefore, while the United Nations Environment Assembly is a proponent of the SDGs, it mostly uses the goals to facilitate synergies between disparate environmental regimes, and to ‘contemporise’ the work it does through the label of the Sustainable Development Goal. The Assembly has not yet offered anything radically different that would suggest an ambitious change of course towards planetary integrity within the context of the SDGs.

As far as the climate regime is concerned, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recognises the links between the SDGs and climate change. It has done so in its special report on *Global Warming of 1.5°C*, where it highlighted the SDGs as a key consideration in how countries can engage in decarbonised development pathways for sustainable development (IPCC 2018). Chapter 5 of the report, in particular, looked at how climate change might undermine the SDGs, and at possible synergies and trade-offs between responses to climate change and the goals. With the forthcoming Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Sixth Assessment Report also likely to connect climate change to the SDGs, such links are encouraging insofar as influential global scientific climate change assessments at least seem to rely on, and to reflect, the many dimensions propagated by the SDGs, including their environmental dimensions. Interestingly, however, the 2030 Agenda is not a major reference in the Paris Climate Agreement and climate governance

debates, although the co-evolution of the negotiations on the 2030 Agenda and the preparation of the Paris Climate Agreement in 2015 have mobilised some of the core principles of the 2030 Agenda. For example, the SDG-linked notion of ‘co- benefits’ between decarbonisation and economic development, and between decarbonisation and the reduction of inequalities (Deep Decarbonization Pathways Project 2015), has been central to ensuring support for the Paris Climate Agreement by some emerging economies and their corporations. Despite valid concerns that this might merely amount to greenwashing (Johnsson et al. 2020), it at least highlights interactions between key SDGs and climate change in global climate change negotiations. The inclusion of Nationally Determined Contributions and national Long-Term Strategies in the Paris Agreement is also consistent with the centrality of country-specific transformation pathways to reach the SDGs, as some proponents of the 2030 Agenda point out (Kőrösi 2015). Although it is difficult to say whether this is as a direct result of the SDGs, the need to develop decarbonisation pathways that can protect biodiversity has also been put at the centre of climate negotiations (Deprez, Vallejo and Rankovic 2019) – an effort that emphasises possible synergies, but also conflicts, between two directly related SDGs. With respect to climate finance, some financial actors have begun to align their investment portfolios with the Paris Climate Agreement (for example, by aligning Goals 8 and 9 with Goal 13), both as a pilot initiative and long-term learning process aimed at more fully synergising their portfolios with the 2030 Agenda over the long term (OECD and UNDP 2020; Riaño et al. 2020). A redirection of global investment strategies alongside the framework of the SDGs, including, for example, increased investment in renewable energy, could in time promote more sustainable corporate practices that have planetary integrity as a major focus.

Reference to the SDGs is more explicit in the biodiversity regime. For example, the Global Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services emphasises the contribution of biodiversity and ecosystem services to realise all the SDGs (IPBES 2019). The draft texts under discussion for the proposed 2030

framework of the 1992 Convention on Biodiversity also reference the 2030 Agenda and the institutions in charge of this agenda through two entry points. One is the proposed global biodiversity goals for 2030 that will be decided at the 2021 conference of the parties. These will likely include not only goals centred on biodiversity but also on the contribution of biodiversity to reaching SDGs and their targets, such as food security (Convention on Biodiversity 2020). The overall aim of these goals is to anchor biodiversity integrity in the broader development perspectives.

Another entry point is efforts related to facilitate mainstreaming, where the Convention on Biological Diversity could define a collective work programme with other institutions that are responsible for sectors that impact biodiversity conservation (such as the Food and Agricultural Organisation for food systems transformation, and the World Trade Organisation for global trade). To legitimise such a co-defined work programme, which is aimed at strengthening synergies, some studies have proposed that the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development should be the overarching institution for such a process (Kinniburgh and Rankovic 2019).

While the SDGs seem to have shaped discussions around the climate and biodiversity regimes and to have drawn attention to and consolidate support for specific concerns and their interlinkages, many key issues of planetary integrity had been part of negotiations well before the adoption of the 2030 Agenda. In climate governance, for example, negotiations on issues that could create wider environmental co-benefits beyond Sustainable Development Goal 13 – such as land use, land-use change and forestry – precede the 2030 Agenda. In 2011, states set guidelines for activities on land use, land-use change and forestry under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change that should ‘[b]e consistent with the objective of environmental integrity and take into account the multiple functions of forests and other ecosystems’ and ‘[b]e consistent with Parties’ national sustainable development needs and goals’ (UNFCCC 2010). In biodiversity governance, the SDGs are grounded in earlier commitments from several

international agreements and soft law instruments, rather than the other way around. This is reflected, for example, in the Aichi Targets, which form the basis of the targets under Sustainable Development Goal 15, including target 15.1 on conservation and target 15.3 on reversing biodiversity degradation. The post-2020 global biodiversity framework that will define goals for global biodiversity governance up to 2030 further builds on these targets, but also aims to raise ambition, especially those targets under Goal 15 that end by 2020 (for example, targets 15.1, 15.2 and 15.3) (Rantala et al. 2020). While the SDGs can build on previous commitments, some studies highlight the adverse distributional consequences of biodiversity conservation regimes that are concentrated in countries with high levels of economic inequality and poor democratic institutions (Kashwan 2017). This is an instance of potential trade-offs between the centralising tendencies of goal-oriented governance against the potential for process-oriented approaches that offer alternative opportunities to resolve deliberations over the prioritisation of goals.

So far, we have discussed international institutions with an explicit environmental policy mandate. How about institutions that have environmental protection not as their primary task? Are they influenced by environmental components of the SDGs? The limited literature on this issue (the bulk of information is drawn from studies conducted by these institutions themselves) observes here mostly ‘secondary’ steering towards environmental protection by upgrading an institution’s environmental profile to contribute to the overall success of the 2030 Agenda (e.g., IMF 2021; World Bank 2015). Secondary steering refers to change that happens ‘in the name of the SDGs’. For example, one study has shown a trend towards more environmental integration in the International Labour Organisation’s approach to sustainability, in normative and institutional terms (see chapter 8). This trend seems to have accelerated and coincides with the vision of the 2030 Agenda. However, when it comes to environmental protection, the link between the International Labour Organisation and the SDGs is not straightforward. On the one hand, the negotiation and adoption of the goals has left its mark on the evolution of

environmental ideas, norms and institutions within the International Labour Organisation, particularly regarding framing programmes such as Green Jobs and partnerships for sustainability (ILO 2019). On the other hand, the International Labour Organisation sees itself more as a manager than a recipient of the goals, stressing its active and deliberate role in shaping the 2030 Agenda in line with its priorities and in selectively using the goals as a platform to catalyse its socio-economic mandate (ILO 2015; 2016).

In sum, *the literature studies do not support claims that the SDGs reorient international organisations towards planetary integrity*, especially when such organisations are only indirectly concerned with environmental protection, such as the International Labour Organisation. The SDGs at best only seem to have secondary steering effects in this regard. Their impact on international organisations, as far as advancing planetary integrity is concerned, is indirect to the extent that they only offer a loose framework for creating synergies and emphasising the need to pursue environmental protection goals, many of which have already been agreed well before the 2030 Agenda came into being. Considering our earlier arguments about the limited prominence of planetary integrity in the 2030 Agenda and conceptual doubts about the ability of the SDGs to steer towards planetary integrity, expectations related to their impact on international organisations to pursue planetary integrity must be further diluted.

### 5.3.5 *Experiences from Regional Governance*

It is often claimed that the European Union is a frontrunner in regional environmental governance. It is, for example, one of the few major regional actors to have enshrined the concept of planetary boundaries in its legal system (Fernández and Malwé 2019). Some early European Parliament resolutions already featured the idea of planetary boundaries, including one mentioning them as being ‘imperative’ for the 2030 Agenda (European Parliament 2013a), while the 7th Environment Action Programme, titled ‘Living Well, within the Limits of Our Planet’, includes references to planetary boundaries and

ecological limits. More recent studies by European Union agencies, such as the European Environment Agency, further apply the concept and develop the idea of a ‘safe operating space for Europe’ (European Environment Agency 2020). The Environment Action Programme also directly links its ambitious vision of ecological limits with the SDGs: the goals constitute ‘politically binding environmental commitments’ (European Parliament 2013b: paragraph 13), and both the European Union and its member states are to ensure that such commitments are implemented (Corrado et al. 2020). The Environment Action Programme further calls on the European Union to ensure that its post-2015 approach to development, including its reliance on the SDGs, reflects an integrated understanding of sustainable development. It specifically mentions environmental concerns such as climate change and biodiversity (European Parliament 2013b: paragraph 106.i).

Likewise, a 2016 European Commission communication explicitly links the need to transform European Union production and consumption to achieve a ‘low- carbon, climate resilient, resource efficient and circular economy’ to SDGs 8 and 12 (European Commission 2016: 2). More recently, the European Union Circular Economy Action Plan and the Bioeconomy Strategy of 2018 have showcased the growing awareness of the importance of an integrated approach to production and consumption when addressing environmental impacts (Sanyé-Mengual et al. 2019). The European Union Commission’s Directorate- General for International Partnerships also explicitly links European Union development initiatives to the SDGs (European Commission 2020a). For example, with reference to Goal 13, it stresses European Union assistance to partner countries to transition to low-carbon sustainable development. All this shows that the SDGs have played a role in orienting the European Union’s environmental laws and policies towards the pursuit of planetary integrity – at least on paper.

While these are all positive signs that could advance planetary integrity under the guidance of the SDGs, the European Union’s goals- inspired sustainability roadmap still sees economic growth as a key enabler, in stark contrast to scientific evidence about the



incompatibility of economic growth and long-term environmental protection (Hickel 2021). For example, for Goals 14 and 15, there are about new initiatives that would follow the SDGs, only a cursory mention of earlier programmes, such as Biodiversity for Life, which was launched in 2014.

Nevertheless, environmental concerns linked to the SDGs seem to become more central in Brussels. For example, the Juncker Commission published in 2019 a reflection paper titled 'Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030' (European Commission 2019), which mentioned the SDGs as an agenda for the European Union to address interdependent challenges. The paper emphasises 'ecological debt' as the greatest challenge to ensuring sustainability for future generations, and explicitly mentions planetary boundaries as the ecological limits that must shape socio-economic systems (European Commission 2019: 10). In its text on Sustainable Development Goal 15, the link between the 2030 Agenda and planetary integrity discourse is especially strong. The von der Leyen Commission later launched the European Union Green Deal as an umbrella for a range of policy initiatives to make Europe a climate-neutral continent. One such initiative is the European Union 2030 Biodiversity Strategy (European Commission 2020b); another is a new industrial strategy (European Commission 2020c). In some of these initiatives, links to the SDGs are explicit, and the initiatives are often presented as an integral part of the European Union's efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda (European Commission 2020b: 19), highlighting some convergence between global and European sustainability agendas.

Across the Atlantic, the Latin America and the Caribbean region is important in leading up to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Here, many countries and regional governance bodies were involved in the negotiations on the SDGs (Nicolai et al. 2016). As a response to the United Nations' call for regional cooperation in implementing the 2030 Agenda, the members of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) established a forum on sustainable development in 2016 (ECLAC 2016). This forum is open to stakeholders but remains a state-led regional institution that seeks to

contribute to the 2030 Agenda by, among others, strengthening coordination and cooperation, sharing best practices and providing political guidance and reviewing regional progress. The forum also seeks to foster the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development in a holistic and cross-sectoral manner, including environmental protection and the promotion of living well in harmony with nature. Since its creation, the forum has recognised in several of its meetings the environmental dimensions of the SDGs (UNEP and Centro de Pensamiento Estratégico Internacional 2020). For instance, it has been noted that development policies ‘must take into account the environmental dimension’ and that policy-making should ‘promote structural progressive change towards sustainable development in order to protect ecosystems and biodiversity’; ‘break the link between production and pollution’; ‘move towards low carbon economies’; ‘detoxify the air, soil and water’ and promote a shift towards sustainable use of natural resources (ECLAC 2017, 2018). Governments also stressed that the ‘2030 Agenda, more than having environmental goals, was environmental as a whole, because progress could not be made on health or industrialisation without taking the relevant environmental considerations into account’ (ECLAC 2018: 41). While all these references indicate some efforts of the forum to integrate the environmental dimension of the SDGs into regional policies, these are still limited and do not include specific commitments (UNEP and Centro de Pensamiento Estratégico Internacional 2020). Critics also question to what extent this might lead to a form of socio-economic growth that respects planetary integrity in Latin America and the Caribbean, especially when environmentally destructive investment policies continue being prioritised (Ray and Gallagher 2016). The forum, for example, still prioritises economic issues, while stressing the need for economic growth (ECLAC 2017, 2019), which will presumably be based on the extraction-based model prevailing in Latin America and the Caribbean (Silva 2012).

The Forum of Ministers of Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean contributes to the integration of environmental priorities into the implementation of the 2030 Agenda

(UNEP 2016; UNEP and Centro de Pensamiento Estratégico Internacional 2020). In 2016, the forum revised and updated the Latin American and Caribbean Initiative for Sustainable Development to support the 2030 Agenda (UNEP 2016). The Initiative for Sustainable Development includes priority areas, goals and purposes for actions linked to environment-related SDGs, such as water management (Goal 6); energy (Goal 7); and climate change (Goal 13). The forum also agreed to promote the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and its mainstreaming in sectors such as agriculture, mining and energy (UNEP 2016, 2018).

Yet, despite such alignment of policies with environment-related SDGs, some studies doubt the benefits in relation to advancing planetary integrity in the region. For example, Hirons' (2020: 327) study on the interplay of the goals and mining argued that 'the prospects for the SDGs contributing positively to efforts to address environmental and social issues in ASM [artisanal and small-scale mining] are poor'. With reference to Goal 12, the Initiative for Sustainable Development refers to the need to improve resource efficiency and sustainable patterns of consumption and production to support economic growth (UNEP 2016). But in a region where national economies heavily rely on natural resources extraction and exports (Silva 2012; UNEP 2017), sustained economic growth inevitably leads to an increased demand for these resources while amplifying environmental degradation (UNEP and World Conservation Monitoring Centre 2016).

In 2016, the Organisation of American States adopted the Inter-American Program for Sustainable Development 2016–21 (Organisation of American States 2017a). It defines strategic actions to ensure that the work of the organisation's secretariat is aligned with the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and that its objectives are guided by the SDGs (Organisation of American States 2017a). The programme supports actions in focus areas, such as sustainable management of ecosystems (Goal 15); integrated water resources management (Goal 6); and sustainable energy management (Goal 7). While the Organisation of American States has agreed on an institutional policy instrument that

integrates environmental concerns, and while its members have reaffirmed their ‘inalienable prerogative to defend Mother Earth, the planet, and life with consistent policies and practices’ (Organisation of American States 2017b: 95; original in Spanish), the declarations and resolutions adopted by its General Assembly since 2016 show that no significant actions have been taken to establish an ambitious regional scheme towards safeguarding planetary integrity.

In sum, the SDGs seem to be more central in regional governance bodies as compared to international organisations. Our analysis suggests that it is especially the European Union that has most significantly advanced in linking its governance agenda with the 2030 Agenda and developing environment- focused policies because of the SDGs. In the Global South, Latin American and Caribbean institutions seem to be rhetorically committed to integrating the SDGs’ concerns into regional policies, but they fall short on more concrete action plans (Lucci, Surasky and Gamba 2015; Páez Vieyra 2019; UNEP and Centro de Pensamiento Estratégico Internacional 2018) While both of these regional institutions seem to actively recognise the importance of the SDGs and their environmental goals, which have been incorporated into some regional policies and plans, *the actual environmental steering effects of the Goals seem to be limited, while efforts to strengthen environmental protection in the face of unconstrained socio-economic development remain a challenge.* We therefore doubt whether the SDGs as such will suffice to drive radical change towards planetary integrity in a developed European region where economic development remains a key priority, and in the Latin American and Caribbean region, which continues to face numerous environmental conflicts and developmental challenges.

### 5.3.6 *Experience from National Governance*

We now turn to national governance. Here we focus on the example of South Africa, a highly unequal country with many socio-economic challenges such as poverty, unemployment and low and unequal levels of access to water, sanitation and adequate

housing. These must all be addressed within the context of a fragile ecological system. Some progress has been reported: for example, access to electricity has increased from 36 per cent at the end of apartheid to 95 per cent by 2017 (Bekker et al. 2008; Government of South Africa 2019). This contributes to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 7, which in turn helps realise other goals (Fuso Nerini et al. 2018; Santika et al. 2019). However, South Africa's economy still heavily depends on coal, which supplies most of South Africa's electricity; this is contrary to the clean energy objective of Goal 7 and the goal of combating climate change (Goal 13). While climate change is receiving more attention in South Africa (as evidenced by stronger climate policies), the Integrated Resource Plan 2019 provides that coal power will still account for 59 per cent of South Africa's electricity supply by 2030, while wind and solar power will supply only 25 per cent. Although this increased share of renewable energy – which today is less than 2 per cent – is promising and can contribute to the achievement of Goals 7, 12 and 13, it remains insufficient. Importantly, the reliance on coal will bring adverse impacts on health (Goal 3), water (Goal 6), and life on land (Goal 15). Coal-based electricity generation also adds to climate change (Goal 13) and ocean acidification (Goal 14). In short, climate and energy-related governance in South Africa is not yet consistent with advancing planetary integrity, despite the SDGs. Although this must be seen in the context of the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities that direct the climate policies and governance of many Global South countries, South Africa's progress on Goal 13, in particular, has been described as 'stagnating' (De la Mothe Karoubi et al. 2019). The country's Nationally Determined Contribution under the Paris Climate Agreement has also been rated as 'highly insufficient', as it would contribute to a global temperature increase of three to four degrees Celsius (Climate Action Tracker n.d.). In turn, the South African government highlights that climate change is complicating efforts to address the country's socio-economic challenges (Government of South Africa 2019; Mugambiwa and Tirivangasi 2017). This experience is in line with the broader observation that climate

change may exacerbate socio-economic risks and vulnerabilities, particularly in developing countries (El Bilali et al. 2020; Islam and Khan 2018; Reyer et al. 2015).

Even though South Africa's 2012 National Development Plan preceded the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the government still reports that it has a '74 per cent convergence' with the SDGs (Government of South Africa 2019: 5). While the National Development Plan includes a chapter dedicated to environmental sustainability and refers to many ecological challenges, the focus of the National Development Plan is on socio-economic development. For example, the plan argues that to address poverty and inequality (the country's main challenge), 'the economy must grow faster and in ways that benefit all South Africans' (National Planning Commission 2012: 24). This focus is reiterated in the latest 2019–24 Medium-Term Strategic Framework, a five-year plan through which the National Development Plan is implemented. The centrality of the National Development Plan in the South African policy context is clear. For instance, in assessing progress on the SDGs generally, the government uses the National Development Plan as a starting point (Government of South Africa 2019). Also, when considering progress on the environmental goals and climate change, the government refers to 'policies, strategies and programmes, with the National Development Plan as the overarching policy' (Statistics South Africa 2019: 155). While the government highlights policies towards the more environment-oriented SDGs, most of these predate the SDGs. Only four out of 12 energy- and climate-related policy documents published since 2016 mention the SDGs, with only a few containing explicit links to the goals (for example, the Draft Post-2015 National Energy Efficiency Strategy). Most of these policy documents, however, are meant to be in line with the National Development Plan. Thus, while they are relevant to the SDGs, the goals themselves have not shaped these policy measures. Furthermore, as suggested above, most economic growth measures are not necessarily consistent with safeguarding planetary integrity. Rather, the government has attempted to

‘align the implementation of the SDGs with its domestic development agenda’ (Haywood et al. 2019: 557).

Importantly, *there is not much evidence that the SDGs had any significant steering effects to advance planetary integrity in South Africa*, a country that still focuses on economic growth in order to achieve its main objective of addressing poverty and inequality. This appears to be consistent with experience elsewhere. Some research has shown, for example, that countries of varying income levels prioritise those SDGs that are consistent with their earlier development policies (Forestier and Kim 2020), and that the SDGs serve to ‘legitimis[e] development goals and policies that have already been decided on’ (Horn and Grugel 2018: 74). The general trend is that many countries prioritise the socio-economic goals over the environmental goals (Randers et al. 2019); as Forestier and Kim (2020: 1269) concluded, poverty eradication and economic growth were ‘by far most widely prioritised’ by developing and developed countries alike.

### 5.3.7 *Experiences from Transnational Governance*

While research exists on the more general steering effects of the SDGs in relation to corporate actors, here we specifically interrogate the environmental steering effects of the SDGs in the transnational corporate sector. Here we ask the question: Do the SDGs have any steering effects in relation to transnational corporate actors as far as the promotion of planetary integrity is concerned? Some studies find that some companies go beyond the growth-paradigm in their operations through innovative sustainability business models (Coscieme et al. 2019). Yet, many companies still seem to support the view that prioritises ‘productive functions of ecosystems over non-productive life supporting functions such as, in particular, biodiversity and climate stabilisation’ (De Schutter et al. 2019: 2). Accordingly, business leaders are encouraged to understand that ‘the firm exists as part of, and because of, the socio-ecological system, and competitive advantage is found

through the combination of internal competencies and from the full consideration of external drivers' (Sullivan, Thomas and Rosano 2018: 245).

Amidst such concerns, the SDGs seem to have sparked a renewed push for corporate participation in the 2030 Agenda. Networks like Businesses for 2030 (United States Council for International Business 2020) and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development's SDGs Business Hub (World Business Council for Sustainable Development 2020), for instance, seek to showcase best practices and to support the integration of the SDGs into corporate practices. The United Nations Global Compact, with over 5,000 companies participating, provides tools and information to 'drive business awareness and action in support of the SDGs' (United Nations Global Compact 2020). Its Action Platforms on issues such as Sustainable Ocean Business and Decent Work in Global Supply Chains aim to foster collective action and underline how business activities need to operate within planetary boundaries.

Generally seen, research suggests that, on balance, integration of the SDGs into the business sector is growing (Dahlmann et al. 2020; Williams, Whiteman and Parker 2019). Since 2017, the share of companies publishing sustainability reports in line with Goal 12.6. has nearly doubled (United Nations 2020), and over 85 per cent of the world's 500 largest corporations include the SDGs in their annual reporting (United Nations Global Sustainability Index Institute 2019). Goal 13 was found to be the most frequently referenced goal (88 per cent), whereas Goal 15 (51 per cent) and Goal 14 (32 per cent) lag behind (World Business Council for Sustainable Development 2019), drawing a less optimistic picture of corporate engagement in pursuing planetary integrity. Scholars therefore stress the urgent need to transform traditional business models to better protect the global environment (Coscieme et al. 2019; De Schutter et al. 2019; Scheyvens, Banks and Hughes 2016; Shrivastava 2018).

Despite a growing integration of the SDGs into sustainability performance assessments of corporations, studies have criticised the insufficient contribution of the goals to 'helping



companies diagnose the proximate and systemic causes of poor performance’ (Fleming et al. 2017: 98). Of even greater concern is the widespread perception that businesses engage in so-called ‘SDG washing’, that is, using the SDGs to increase social legitimacy while concealing only modest sustainability efforts or malpractices (Dahmann et al. 2020). Moreover, one survey indicates that international businesses rather engage with the SDGs internally (along their value chain), than externally (in collaboration with partners), and they are keener to address targets under the SDGs that mitigate negative externalities than those directed at generating positive externalities (van Zanten and van Tulder 2018). Specifically, high engagement was found with SDGs 5, 8, 12, 13, 16 and 17. Slight or no contributions, in turn, were found regarding Goals 11, 14 and 15. While this points to a worrying trend in corporations’ inability to address social, environmental and economic targets collectively, it also suggests that corporations only marginally engage with those SDGs that relate more explicitly to planetary integrity (such as Goals 14 and 15). On a more positive note, some studies indicate that non-state transnational sustainability governance can also complement state efforts; but this is also dependent on an internationally agreed framework and regulation of, and cooperation with, state actors to increase accountability and long-term sustainability effects (Chan et al. 2019; Kumi, Yeboah and Kumi 2020). In that sense, the presence of SDGs as a common denominator or normative guiding framework might contribute to providing a shared vision for corporations, enabling a collective drive towards integrated sustainability governance that respects planetary integrity.

In sum, our analysis suggests that *the extent to which corporations rely on the SDGs to bolster their efforts in pursuit of planetary integrity remains a mixed bag*. Overall, corporations seem to be more receptive towards embracing the SDGs generally, which is positive. But the environment-focused SDGs apparently play only a peripheral role in steering corporations towards the integration of planetary integrity concerns into their activities. This is worrisome considering, on the one hand, that corporations remain major

drivers of ecological destruction, and on the other hand, that corporations can also be hugely influential in initiating and driving transformative change in pursuit of planetary integrity (e.g., Wright and Nyberg 2015). More fully embracing the environmental dimensions of the SDGs could offer corporations a valuable opportunity to drive such positive transformations.

#### **5.4 Conclusions and Future Directions**

The SDGs are clear on the need to protect the planet. However, the extent to which the goals could mainstream planetary integrity into laws, policies and practices, and to steer towards planetary integrity, remain debatable. Some studies argue that the SDGs are incapable, or only marginally able, of doing so; yet other studies contend that the goals may still help mobilise resources and galvanise action in pursuit of planetary integrity.

Based on the findings from our analyses, the balance of evidence leans towards the critics, which leads us to conclude that the SDGs have not (yet) become a significant transformative governance force aimed at the advancement of planetary integrity through the process of goal-setting. Therefore, *on balance, we find that the steering effects of the SDGs with respect to planetary integrity are rather indirect and not too significant.* At best, the SDGs seem to have played a role in the orchestration of disparate environmental policies and regimes, but they surely did not manage to radically change the course of global governance to advance planetary integrity. While we observe some political and institutional changes as a result of the SDGs, and while the goals seem to have been cited as an inspiration or motivation by many actors, numerous doubts remain: about additionality (whether changes we observed would not have materialised without the goals); about ambition (whether the goals call for something drastically new and sufficiently ambitious); about coherence (whether the goals are themselves coherent enough to be able to foster a push towards planetary integrity); and about implementation

(whether the means of implementation in the goals actually have the ability to improve their steering effects).

What explains this lack of impact remains unclear; and these are all issues that require further research. Is it the design of the SDGs themselves? In other words, had the SDGs been differently designed (or agreed through a different process), would we see a more (or even less) impactful set of global goals? Here we can think of design elements such as the number of goals, the structure of the goal framework (for example, the non-hierarchical structure), the coherence between the goals, the specificity or measurability of the targets, the language used in the text, and their reliance on neoliberal economic development-oriented sustainable development as their core orientation. Furthermore, one may argue that sustainability on a planetary scale is only achievable under an overarching Planetary Integrity Goal that recognises the biophysical limits of the planet, as we have shown above. Some scholars have also raised questions about the relationship between the nature of the negotiations of the goals, targets and indicators and their impact, especially on mainstreaming environmental concerns (Gasper, Shah and Tankha 2019).

Yet, no matter the design of SDGs, they are only non-binding and aspirational. Any form of ‘governance through goals’ is inherently not an effective alternative to ‘governance through rules’ (Kanie et al. 2019), although these approaches could, and arguably should, usefully reinforce one another. Furthermore, the SDGs are a mere reflection of the existing normative framework of international law (Kim 2016). Any ‘governance through goals’ approach under the SDGs banner must be sensitive to the problem of path-dependency: Do the goals have a realistic chance to be something truly transformative if they are merely a collection of earlier commitments, reflecting already agreed language? While we remain doubtful of the transformative potential of the goals, we are hopeful that global institutions such as the High-level Political Forum can help mainstream environmental concerns of a planetary nature at global, regional, national and transnational levels, if further

strengthened with the necessary resources and authority (Abbott and Bernstein 2015; Stevens and Kanie 2016).

Clearly more research is needed to understand the impact of the SDGs on planetary integrity and the extent to which they, and their successors, could contribute to steering human development in a way that pursues and respects planetary integrity. For one, the lack of empirical data and the concomitant critical research gap that we have identified in this chapter dealing with the actual ability of the SDGs to steer in relation to planetary integrity must be addressed. This could be done, for example, by documenting conditions under which the SDGs are operating and comparing these to identify necessary or sufficient conditions for the SDGs to make a positive impact. Causality is always difficult to prove between the SDGs and any changes we see, especially in the environmental domain. To overcome this hurdle, we need both more in-depth case studies and large-*n* quantitative data analysis, as well as medium-*n* comparative analysis in between.

Finding out how, when and why the SDGs could put the planet at the centre of concern will be a key challenge in the years to come. This epistemic endeavour will be rewarding for generating specific and generalizable insights on how and why global goals work or do not work. Only an advanced understanding of the mechanisms through which the SDGs have impacts on planetary integrity will lead to policy-relevant knowledge that could help guide a post-2030 goal-setting process, and enable actors such as states, regional organisations, institutions and corporations to decide on whether to adopt and to pursue in a dedicated manner post-2030 global goals, and if so, in what form and through what process.

## Note

1 Search string ( ( TITLE ( “sustainable development goals” ) ) ) OR TITLE ( “sdgs” ) AND ( ( TITLE-ABS-KEY ( “environment\*” ) ) ) AND ( ( TITLE-ABS-KEY ( “governance” ) ) ).



## Part III

# 6. Balancing or Prioritising for Sustainable Development? Perceptions of Sustainability Integration among Professionals

This chapter is based on: Montesano, F. S., Biermann, F., Kalfagianni, A. & Vijge, M. J., 2023. Balancing or prioritising for sustainable development? Perceptions of sustainability integration among professionals. *Sustainable Development*, 1–16.

## 6.1 Introduction

The recognition of the Anthropocene, defined by the unprecedented impact of human practices on the earth system (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000), entails a profound paradigmatic shift towards the reconceptualisation of the planet as an interdependent and integrated social-ecological system. Since the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (also known as Brundtland Report), the dominant understanding of sustainable development has been that it consists of three dimensions: economic, social, and environmental (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987; Purvis, et al., 2019). Overcoming the ‘siloesation’ of these three dimensions of sustainable development and their integration has since then been a central governance challenge and political priority (Bhaduri, et al., 2015; Tosun & Lang, 2017; Raworth, 2017; van Soest, et al., 2019; Vijge, et al., 2020). Many terms for overcoming the silos of environmental, economic and social policies are used, often with overlapping meanings, ranging from “environmental policy integration” to “mainstreaming”, “nexus” approaches, “policy coherence”, or “integrative environmental governance”

(e.g., Visseren-Hamakers 2015; Ahmed, et al., 2022). After the launch of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 (UNGA, 2015), these new goals have become the central global normative framework for sustainable development, or ‘sustainability’ (Biermann, et al., 2022); they are also presented as a new mechanism to integrate the three dimensions of sustainability (Tremblay, et al., 2020; Zheng, et al., 2022). We use here the concept of “sustainability integration”, which we define as “the simultaneous and interdependent consideration and operationalisation by actors of the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental” (see Introduction and chapter 8).

The notion of sustainability integration has found many divergent interpretations and operationalisations in both public and academic debate (Lafferty & Hovden, 2003; Bhaduri, et al., 2015; Boas, et al., 2016; Tosun & Lang, 2017; Raworth, 2017; van Soest, et al., 2019; Vijge, et al., 2020). Yet despite these different views, few scholars have so far examined how professionals in the field actually perceive and operationalise sustainability integration. We define professionals here as individuals who work in an organisation and whose perceptions are hence likely to influence that organisation’s policies and programmes, including on sustainability integration. Perceptions inform the political and institutional context, where subjective ideas gradually evolve into norms and then practices (Hay, 2006; Schmidt, 2008; Alger & Dauvergne 2019; see also chapters 2 and 8). In other words, whether and how sustainability integration is to inform governance depends on perceptions about the relationship between the three sustainability dimensions. This is the focus of our chapter.

Different from chapter 1 and 3 of this thesis, we have used in the publication underlying this chapter perceptions as an overarching concept that encompasses both ideas and norms (see Chapter 1 and 2 of this thesis for a more thorough discussion of these concepts). While the study of perceptions is part of a widening study programme in both constructivist international relations research (Yee, 1996; Barnett & Finnemore, 1999;



Nielson, et al., 2006; Park & Vetterlein, 2010, p. 3; Müller, 2012) and broader sustainability research (Vogel, et al., 2020; Salovaara, et al., 2021), in the study of sustainability governance, this process has barely started (see Introduction).

This chapter contributes to this research field by asking: *how do professionals understand and operationalise notions of sustainability integration? Which factors shape their perceptions and practices?*

We address these questions drawing on a comprehensive global survey that we conducted among over 500 professionals in different sectors, at different levels, and in different geographical regions. The chapter proceeds as follows. In section 2, we outline the main theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of the survey design. In section 3, we explain our methodology, survey design, distribution and response, and analysis protocol. In section 4, we present the key findings about how respondents' perceptions and operationalisation of sustainability integration vary. Section 5 reflects on these variations. Section 6 concludes and discusses the wider implications of our findings for (the future of) sustainability governance.

## **6.2 Research Design**

### *6.2.1 Conflicting conceptualisations of sustainability*

We first discuss different conceptualisations of sustainability that we expect to find, to different degrees, in the perceptions of professionals. The relationship between the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development has been subject to different interpretations, most of which can be ascribed to one of two models.

The first model is what we call the 'balanced' one. In this view, the three dimensions of sustainability are not hierarchically related. This view thus falls within the 'weak' paradigm of sustainability with a less principled defence of natural capital (Arias-Maldonado, 2013). This model is optimistic about the mutual influence of dimensions,

highlighting win-win dynamics rather than trade-offs. It prioritises the achievement of an overarching balance, whereby shortcomings in one dimension can be compensated by stepping up efforts in another. For example, ‘responsible’ or ‘green’ economic growth, often backed up by the ecological modernisation paradigm (Mol, 2002), is seen here as a powerful tool to improve social and environmental conditions. This model is also closely related to the so-called Triple Bottom Line, an accounting framework that expands corporate reporting to consider not only financial sustainability, but also contributions to social welfare and environmental protection (Elkington, 1997). This ‘balance sheet’ approach has also long been the mainstream in global sustainability governance, as evident from the United Nations’ own definition of the SDGs as ‘integrated and indivisible and balanc[ing] the three dimensions of sustainable development’ (UNGA, 2015, p. 3).

The second, alternative model is what we call the ‘ecocentric’ one. The conceptual foundation is here rooted in a ‘stronger’ paradigm of sustainability, whereby environmental protection is seen as necessary for social and economic sustainability (Milne, 1996; Giddings, et al., 2002). Ecocentric integration therefore moves from a principled prioritisation of ecological integrity and the preservation of natural capital over socio-economic progress (Arias-Maldonado, 2013; Kim & Bosselmann, 2015), which also has roots in the intrinsic valuing of the natural world typical of the deep ecology philosophy (Devall & Sessions, 1985). The ecocentric model is sometimes depicted as a wedding cake with the environment acting as the foundational layer (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2016) (see Fig.1). Given its subordination of human activities to the finite carrying capacity of the planet, this model is often seen as a critique of the mainstream, growth-friendly win-win interpretation of sustainability integration.

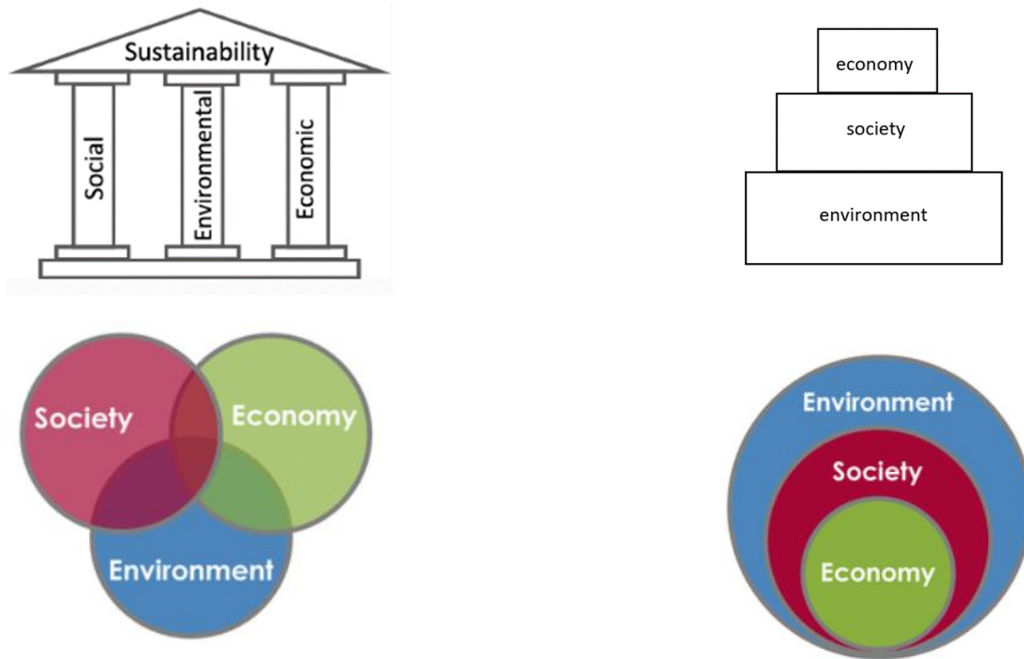


Fig.1: horizontal (top) and vertical (bottom) visualisations of the balanced (left) and ecocentric (right) models of sustainability integration.

### 6.2.2 The importance of perceptions to advance integration

In light of these two contrasting integration models, the question arises how professionals relate to either model, and whether this relationship has changed over time.

This question is not only a practical one, but also one of broader theoretical relevance. In political science, constructivist and discursive scholars have been spearheading a ‘turn to ideas’ stressing the importance of perceptions to analyse institutional changes that are poorly explained by traditional rationalism. Here, as well as further on in this thesis (chapters 7 and 9), we use perceptions as an overarching concept encompassing ideas and norms (see chapter 2). Scholars have highlighted the bidirectional links between subjective and intersubjective understandings, on the one hand, and the institutional and policy context on the other (Blyth, 2003; Schmidt, 2008). Perceptions are thus no longer seen as mere reflections of contextual circumstances or – at most – predictors of future perceptions (Schmidt, 2008; Arts & Buizer, 2009). Rather, they also actively shape current

politics and institutions (Geels, 2004; Williams, 2004; Hay, 2006; Gofas & Hay, 2009; see also chapters 2 and 8).

Perceptions are therefore an essential explanatory concept to understand decision-making processes and policy changes (Swinkels, 2020; Khamkaji & Radaelli, 2022), and the complex interplay between different perceptions has been shown to affect how organisations engage with innovations and transitions (Häggman, 2009). Awareness of the impact of perceptions on policies and governance, including in the field of sustainability, is also starting to underpin more quantitative research into practitioners' perspectives (Haroon, et al., 2021). By focusing here on professionals, we emphasise the link between individual perceptions and the operationalisation and implementation of sustainability integration at the organisational level. In other words, ideas about sustainability integration affect the politics of and the policies for sustainability integration.

We derive two further important conceptual premises. First, by emphasising that change is a complex layered process where perceptions can trigger deeper and more widespread normative and institutional developments, our perception-based investigation allows us to shed light on the *levels* of change. These levels do not only apply to intersubjective dynamics, but also to subjective perceptions, as professionals can form different views about the different layers of change. To investigate this, we identify three levels of such subjective perceptions: *descriptive*, focusing on how professionals perceive the actual state of sustainability integration; *normative*, whereby a prescriptive element is added about how professionals see the scope and desirability of certain behaviours or processes towards sustainability integration; and *operational*, about their views on the concrete implementation of sustainability integration principles. Second, the need to focus on the interplay between context and perceptions led us to include further independent variables, such as the impact of demographics and professional affiliations and priorities on perceptions of sustainability integration.

In short, we expect that the development and institutionalisation of sustainability integration, as well as its form, are also dependent on how and to what extent it is engrained in contextualised individual and collective perceptions among professionals.

### **6.3 Methodology**

In order to study the perceptions of professionals we developed a comprehensive online survey as our primary methodological tool. All respondents to this survey were professionals, identified and contacted through their affiliation to a particular organisation or professional network; the survey thus focused on perceptions of individuals in their professional capacity. As evident from the SDG negotiations, representatives not only from governments and international organisations, but also from all sectors of civil society, business, and academia have been increasingly active in trying to advance their version of sustainability. Given the ever-expanding playing field of sustainability debates across multiple settings, our focus on how professionals position themselves regarding the meaning of sustainability integration and the ensuing sampling criteria were deliberately very wide.

Surveys are widely used to investigate perceptions and preferences in the field of sustainability (Feola & Nunes, 2014; van der Hel, 2018). The turn to ideas in political science has also led to surveys being increasingly valued as a tool to investigate the role of perceptions in environmental and sustainability politics (Prakash & Bernauer, 2020).

#### *6.3.1 Survey design*

Our survey consisted of 35 statements. Most statements required respondents to indicate their (dis)agreement using a five-point Likert scale; we also used yes/no, multiple choice, and ranking questions. Following a first set of statements (Q 1-8) that helped to cluster respondents based on their professional affiliation, seniority, geographical location, and whether they were more affiliated with environmental, economic or social activity fields,

we offered three further sets, drawing here on a framework designed to analyse competing discursive paradigms (Pal, 1995).

The three sets of statements were as follows.

1. First, we offered statements that simply defined the state of sustainability integration in a descriptive manner (Q 25-30).
2. Second, we included normative statements that solicited views by respondents on how they think integration *should* be pursued (Q 31-35), as well as ‘role’ statements focused on how respondents see their role when it comes to integration (Q 9-11).
3. Last, operational statements focused on whether and how respondents and their organisations *do* something to pursue integration at the operational level – that is, on perceptions on the *evidence* of integration. This includes the SDGs as the most prominent integrated sustainability framework (Q 12-24).

For each of the above categories, the statements aimed at investigating whether perceptions align with balanced or more ecocentric integration. See Appendix 1 for an overview of the 35 statements.

The questionnaire was fine-tuned following tests amongst colleagues and experts outside academia. Further tests were conducted by automatically generating answers and conducting simulated analyses in the Qualtrics environment.

### 6.3.2 *Distribution of responses*

The survey was conducted online between 22 June and 1 October 2021. Requests to participate in the survey were sent to over 5000 professionals working for a wide range of organisations, relying on snowballing techniques through access points in various national and international networks. In line with our broad definition of professionals, as well as with the cross-cutting nature of sustainability integration debates, the selection of

access points was not restricted to organisations with an explicit sustainability mission. Given our network, most of those who participated to the survey via academic access points are likely to be professionals with an *explicit focus* on sustainability. This also applies to respondents whom we invited via access points in the UN Major Groups, the UN Global Compact and other stakeholders. Other access points we found in networks not expressly dedicated to sustainability, but still including professionals in fields that are relevant to sustainability. Examples include the integrated Civil Society Organisations (iCSO) system, as well as government officials from ministries, consultants and public affairs professionals, and education professionals.

A total of 531 professionals participated in our study, which we reduced to 508 after data cleaning. In terms of respondents, our survey sample – while statistically not representative - was very diverse. We had a strong prevalence of respondents from civil society (41.1%) and academia (22.2%), which is probably due to our use of the public database of the iCSO system with more than 4000 members and to our professional network. In terms of seniority, a large majority of the respondents (almost 78%) were either senior officers or executives. This high presence of leaders adds weight to the expert nature of our survey and, given their managerial tasks, increases the generalisability of our findings to the broader organisational level. Geographically, despite a strong European bias (43.3%), the overall distribution of respondents was reasonably even, with about 57% coming from the Global North (Europe, North America, and Australia and Oceania) and 43% from the Global South (Africa, Asia, and Central and South America). Australia and Oceania are included in the Global North as manual checks revealed that a vast majority of those respondents came from Australia or New Zealand. The detailed distribution of the sample is provided in Table 1.

*Table 1. Survey response.*

Main professional affiliation	Role within organisation	Geographical location
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Government or public administration	23	Entry-level/junior staff	30	Africa	73
International organisation	49	Mid-career staff	69	Asia	93
Civil society organisation	209	Senior staff	156	Australia and Oceania	16
Academia	113	Executive, owner or head of organisation	234	Central and South America	30
Business or private company	87	No answer	19	Europe	220
Other	25			North America	71
No answer	2			No answer	5
				<b>Total</b>	<b>508</b>

### 6.3.3 *Analysis protocol*

To reduce measurement errors and total survey error (Groves & Lyberg, 2010), we cleaned survey data by removing duplicates and incomplete (<80% answered questions) questionnaires. We scanned the responses to identify possible interpretation problems and developed edit rules to correct for cases of clear misinterpretation or mistakes by the respondents. An edit rule is a restriction of the values in a data file, or a form of ‘deductive correction’ - that is, data that does not satisfy an edit rule will likely contain errors (UNECE, 2008).

New aggregate variables were created to refine the respondents’ priorities according to the economic, social and environmental classifications of Rockström and Sukhdev (2016). For instance, we created a new overarching environment variable which included ‘Life on land’, ‘Life below water’, ‘Climate action’ and ‘Clean water and sanitation’. We also aggregated the priority variables based on the three dimensions of sustainability with the



SDG-based ones to create ‘strengthened’ priority dummy variables. Respondents were assigned a ‘1’ only when they indicated the same priority in both variables.

We quantitatively analysed the survey responses in several steps with SPSS Statistics 28. We first conducted a frequency analysis to gain an overall understanding and to identify potentially interesting trends. The second step consisted of cross-tabulations and chi-square tests. A chi-square test is a well-established method to measure the association between two categorical variables (Ugoni & Walker, 1995). This sought to distinguish the associations between our different categories. The third step was to conduct an Analysis of Variance and independent samples t-tests between pairs of variables, in order to examine the statistical significance (with  $p \leq .05$ ) of the difference between two independent population means (Liu & Wang, 2021; Connelly, 2021). See Appendix 2 for an overview of the results of the t-tests.

#### 6.3.4 *Limitations*

As any large-n study, ours also has methodological limitations. First, the study is based on a non-representative sample of respondents. Although we made considerable effort to obtain a diverse sample, professionals who are more concerned about sustainability issues may have been more inclined to participate. This might have led to an overrepresentation of outspoken perspectives on integration, particularly regarding perceptions about professionals’ own role in the pursuit of sustainability. Some categories are also overrepresented in our sample, such as European and highly educated professionals working in academia or civil society organisations. On the other hand, businesses are relatively underrepresented, whereas – especially in contexts where governance structures are weak – businesses often play a shaping role in issues of sustainability. These biases do not take away from the validity of the findings, but do impact their generalisability. Future research into the more underrepresented categories would help correct the bias. The diversity of our sample is also prone to ‘lumping’ criticism, as perceptions of professionals

are all assigned the same weight whereas they might in fact have very different influence on both other perceptions and future developments. However, the impact of this on our aims and conclusions is limited, given our focus on mapping links between perceptions rather than on ascertaining their actual impact (which a survey cannot do). Furthermore, it is true that not all perceptions might be equal in terms of direct impact on sustainability integration. What the executive of a big multinational company thinks about sustainability is likely to wield greater short-to-medium term influence than what an intern at an NGO does. However, as evident from countless discussions, initiatives, and regulations, sustainability has become a very broad and urgent item on the agendas of virtually all sorts of actors.

Our survey approach was also less likely to reach subaltern and marginalised groups, which might lead to a bias in favour of mainstream approaches to integration. We did not collect information about the gender of respondents; but given the overrepresentation of senior professionals in our sample it is probable that the perceptions we measured also contain a 'male bias'. Furthermore, the survey was available only in English, which might have discouraged professionals with limited skills in that language. Second, the survey approach necessarily reduced complexity. Multifaceted normative and political questions had to be translated to simple statements to be included in the survey. Also, the approach and the types of questions we asked prevent causal inferences. Finally, surveys capture only perceptions and do not offer evidence of actual changes in the actions of respondents. Complementary qualitative research would thus be needed to add a layer of complexity and causality to the picture we sketch.

## 6.4 Results

### 6.4.1 *Perceptions on sustainability integration*

We first sought to identify how professionals perceive sustainability integration, focusing on mapping the prevalence of the two models of integration at different perception levels.

We observed, first, overwhelming support among professionals for the general descriptive proposition that the three dimensions are interdependent, thus demonstrating support for the balanced model. Over 95% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed on the interdependence between the three dimensions of sustainable development, and over 72% added that new global sustainability governance frameworks such as the SDGs have been fostering this integrated understanding. Regarding possible adversarial relations between the three dimensions, only when asked about the negative effects of economic growth on environmental protection did a majority of respondents (58%) agree or strongly agree that this is the case. When asked about the negative effects between all other possible combinations, no more than 18% agreed, indicating the strong prevalence of agreement that the win-win balanced model is feasible.

Second, in terms of normative objectives, balancing was again the most preferred integration model. Over 79% of respondents stated that all three dimensions of sustainability are equally important, and over 92% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that all three dimensions should be promoted simultaneously, thereby indicating very strong convictions regarding the feasibility of balanced integration. Some ecocentric views, however, were also present. Most respondents (64.5%) agreed that environmental protection must be promoted even if this negatively affects economic growth, but only 29% said the same about prioritising the environment over social welfare. This shows again that the clear-cut ecocentric approach to integration is less widely spread.

More professionals believed that they have a role in the general promotion of sustainability (94%) than in the promotion of environmental protection (85%). This suggests that a “broader”, more balanced understanding of integration is more prevalent than one that prioritises the environmental dimension, although a vast majority of professionals are committed to both. This response was evenly spread across professional priorities, and differences between respondents regarding their economic, social or environmental priorities were not statistically significant. That environmental concerns were far from exclusive to environmental actors further suggests, again, that most respondents prefer the balanced model of integration.

Third, we assessed the extent to which professionals perceive that there is balanced integration of the three dimensions of sustainability in their work environment, that is, whether environmental, economic and social aspects are balanced in operations of their organisations. Over 88% of respondents agreed here that balanced integration is indeed occurring in their organisation, and over 82% suggested that such internal integration has even increased over the past five years. As for the external integration with other organisations, a large majority (81%) claimed to work regularly or very often with other organisations on sustainability matters. Only 57% stated that they are stepping up their engagement with professionals outside their field. In light of the influence of context on perceptions discussed in the conceptual framework, but also given the findings in both the cognitive psychology and organisational studies literature on how exposure to different views and interprofessional collaboration helps understanding and solving complex problems (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013; Green & Johnson, 2015), we can expect external interactions to be relevant in how professionals form their views on sustainability integration. Hence, this comparatively lower value is likely to add to the challenges of overcoming siloisation. Table 2 below provides an overview of the responses.

*Table 2. Overview of perceptions on sustainability integration*

STATEMENTS	RESPONSE (%) <sup>3</sup>				
	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Descriptive perceptions</b>					
Economic growth, social welfare and environmental protection are interdependent: each one influences the other two.	66.1	26.2	2.0	1.6	0.8
Economic growth often has a negative influence on environmental protection.	20.3	35.2	21.5	13.4	4.9
Social welfare policies often have a negative influence on environmental protection	3.5	10.6	28.5	37.8	14.4
Environmental protection often has a negative influence on economic growth	4.1	13.2	19.5	40.4	18.9
Environmental protection often has a negative influence on social welfare	2.2	7.5	20.7	39.6	25.0
The Sustainable Development Goals help my organisation understand how economic growth, social welfare and environmental protection are interdependent.	27.4	39.8	16.9	5.9	2.2
<b>Normative perceptions</b>					
Economic growth, social welfare and environmental protection are all equally important.	44.5	31.9	6.1	11.4	2.2
We must promote environmental protection together with economic growth and social welfare.	59.1	30.3	3.1	3.5	0.8
We must promote environmental protection even at the cost of economic growth	29.7	32.1	17.9	14.2	2.0
We must promote environmental protection even at the cost of social welfare	9.3	18.5	26.2	34.3	7.3
The Sustainable Development Goals incentivise my organisation to promote environmental protection	25.8	38.4	19.9	5.9	1.2
It is my organisation's responsibility to promote sustainability	63.4	29.7	3.5	1.4	0.8

<sup>3</sup> Response: strongly agree (1); agree (2); neither agree nor disagree (3); disagree (4); strongly disagree (5)

It is my organisation's responsibility to promote environmental protection.	53.3	30.7	8.9	3.7	1.4
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It is my organisation's responsibility to contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.	64.0	26.0	4.7	2.4	0.8
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**Operational perceptions**

My organisation integrates economic, social and environmental considerations into its objectives and initiatives.	49.6	39.0	7.3	1.4	1.0
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In the last 5 years, my organisation has increasingly integrated economic, social and environmental considerations into its objectives and initiatives	48.0	34.6	10.8	2.2	0.0
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In your work, how often do you interact with people from other organisations? <sup>4</sup>	56.9	23.6	12.2	5.1	1.2
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In the last 5 years, I have interacted more frequently with people working in a field different from mine	24.4	32.7	23.6	14.0	2.6
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Studying the links between internal and external integration and other variables, a few trends emerge. First, respondents who stated that integration of the three dimensions of sustainability is occurring within their organisation were significantly more likely to also agree with the normative need to pursue such balancing. However, while respondents who reported an increase in internal integration were significantly more likely to agree with the need for balancing, this was not the case when they were asked whether environmental protection is more important than growth. Interestingly, organisational and international factors were both significantly linked to variations in internal integration, while national policies were not. This might hint at the role of both supra- and sub-national factors in promoting sustainability integration beyond 'traditional' government initiatives.

Second, the picture is more complex when it comes to external integration, that is, sustainability integration in collaboration with external organisations. Here, variations in

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<sup>4</sup> Response: very often (1); regularly (2); occasionally (3); rarely (4); never (5)

respondents' professional interactions with other organisations hardly related to different perceptions of integration. The only significant exception was that external integration correlates with greater internal integration. A variation in respondents' interactions with professionals working in different fields was more often linked to diverging perceptions on balanced integration. At the descriptive level, having such interactions was linked with more negative understandings of both the impact of social welfare on environmental protection and of environmental protection on economic growth, and thus closer to an ecocentric model of integration. However, respondents who *strongly* agreed with the statement that they have more external interactions, also had more affinity with balanced integration. Respondents who reported more external interactions outside their field also showed greater support for balanced integration; yet they also expressed more often ecocentric views about the specific need to prioritise the environment over social welfare. Perceptions of their role in promoting sustainability were also significantly stronger, and they also indicated a significantly stronger role in advancing environmental protection.

This ambivalence between balanced and ecocentric integration is in line with the even distribution of environmental concerns across professional priorities. In operational terms, respondents who had growing interactions outside their field also reported more balanced integration within their organisation. They also reported significantly greater engagement with other organisations, while respondents indicating greater engagement with other organisations did not report significantly higher levels of interactions outside their field. Furthermore, the more professionals engaged with actors outside their field, the more they held positive views about balanced integration frameworks such as the SDGs. Overall, *we find that engagement with other fields influences the understanding of sustainability integration more than engagement with organisations in the same field.*

#### 6.4.2 *How deep are perceptions on integration?*

To further understand how professionals perceive sustainability integration, we also examined the depth of such perceptions – that is, whether (differences in) professionals’ perceptions change as they move from descriptive towards more normative understandings of integration.

We found here that diverging normative views about how integration *should* look like do indeed influence how professionals perceive and operationalise integration. Professionals agreeing on the importance of balancing had different views on other levels of integration compared to others. This finding is reinforced by the fact that correlations between normative and operational perceptions were more significant than those between descriptive and normative ones. This not only hints at how questions aimed at investigating concrete change drew more varied responses and were less prone to socially desirable answers. By underscoring the significance of the link between normative and operational perceptions, these findings further validate our conceptualisation of change as a layered process, where perceptions influence concrete institutional developments (see 2.2).

At the descriptive level, significant differences in bivariate response patterns were consistent only regarding respondents’ general understanding of integration, that is, whether all three dimensions of sustainability are interdependent. Respondents who strongly agreed with this idea also tended to agree normatively more with the importance of integration. This was supported by statements about their active role in the promotion of integration, and more frequent mentions of organisational change in the direction of integration and in line with the SDGs. We observed the same patterns also with respondents who ‘merely’ agreed with the interdependence of the three sustainability dimensions. However, differences between them and the rest of our sample were insignificant. We also found a correlation between greater confidence in the role of the SDGs in promoting a balanced understanding of integration and more balanced



perceptions at all levels. Furthermore, responses about how one sustainability dimension affects another were not correlated with more hierarchical perceptions elsewhere. Overall, this corroborates our previous findings about the prevalence of the balanced model among respondents' perceptions.

The higher significance of normative perceptions is evident when we look at the role that professionals saw for themselves. Professionals who agreed on the importance, rather than merely the existence, of balanced integration were significantly more likely to see a strong role for themselves in promoting sustainability. The same applies to their perceived role in promoting environmental protection and the SDGs. Once again, we observe here the ambivalence between overarching support for balancing sustainability as opposed to prioritising environmental concerns. Professionals who agreed on the existence of balanced integration were often not significantly more likely to engage in internal integration or to ascribe greater impact to the SDGs. This was instead the case with respondents who normatively argued in favour of pursuing balancing.

We also found that professionals who feel that a balanced integration of the sustainability dimensions is important were significantly more likely to see a role for themselves in also promoting such integration. In most cases, however, respondents' ranking of the three sustainability dimensions did not significantly affect their views on other integration issues. For example, respondents who agreed with the prioritisation of environmental protection over economic growth or over social welfare were not significantly more likely to also agree about having a role in the promotion of sustainability. This suggests that the balanced integration model has a stronger normative relevance than the ecocentric one, and - in line with our framework - is therefore more likely to inform institutional and organisational change.

We also observed paradoxical dynamics between the balanced and the ecocentric models of integration. For example, professionals who perceived economic growth as harmful for environmental protection were more likely to value balanced integration, and

professionals who actively argued for the need to prioritise environmental protection over economic growth were equally more likely to favour balancing. In other words, perceptions in favour of a stronger (greener) approach to integration are not necessarily incompatible with combining this approach with balanced elements.

#### 6.4.3 *Explanatory factors*

We now report on the factors that correlate with the variation that we found in the perceptions of professionals, and we further investigate the bidirectional link between perceptions and context. We have two main observations here: first, the organisational affiliation, professional seniority and geographical location of professionals matter, and second, sustainability priorities matter less.

##### **Demographics matter**

We found, first, that the types of affiliation of respondents mattered. Business professionals, for example, argued significantly more often than others that there are win-win relationships between the three dimensions of sustainability. Differences were larger when respondents were asked to assess the impact of economic growth and social welfare on environmental protection than the other way round, thus indicating that opinions tend to be stronger when the environment is “at stake”. Conversely, while academic professionals felt most often that the three dimensions of sustainability are interdependent, they also seemed to favour a more hierarchical normative approach to integration, agreeing the least with questions on whether the three dimensions of sustainability are equally important and should be jointly promoted. Professionals from international organisations, civil society and businesses were here the most positive about win-win balancing.

Somewhat surprisingly, when asked whether the environment should be prioritised over the economic and social dimensions of sustainability, government officials tended to agree more than others. Conversely, when it came to the question of whether the environment

is more important than social welfare, professionals from government and international organisations were significantly less ecocentric than civil society, businesses and academia. It is also interesting to note that businesses reported a significantly stronger role for themselves in promoting environmental protection compared to other categories. This, given their strong belief in the win-win relationship between economic growth and environmental protection, further indicates their affinity for balanced integration. The trends mentioned above were also visible in terms of concrete evidence of change towards integration. Academics appeared to be less engaged with balanced integration than international organisations, civil society, and businesses. When asked about which factors incentivise their institution to integrate, international factors were mentioned significantly less often by academics than by international organisations and civil society. Academics and government officials also perceived the influence of balanced frameworks such as SDGs on integration, communications and other tangible changes as less significant than businesses and international organisations (and in some instances civil society).

Second, we found that respondents' seniority within their organisation influenced their perceptions and operationalisation of sustainability integration. Mid-career respondents were significantly more negative than senior ones about the impact of economic growth on environmental protection, thereby displaying a less optimistic view on win-win integration. Differences were even starker in normative questions, which also corroborates our earlier findings on the higher impact of normative perceptions vis-à-vis descriptive ones. Senior and executive respondents were significantly less ecocentric than their junior and mid-career counterparts with regard to the importance of simultaneously promoting the three dimensions of sustainability. Adding to these less ecocentric views, more senior respondents also tended to disagree more with the idea that environmental protection should be pursued even if this damages economic growth. Mid-career respondents also tended to consider themselves less responsible for promoting

sustainability and environmental protection, as well as for contributing to the achievement of balanced frameworks such as the SDGs. This degree of responsibility was – rather strikingly - not only lower vis-à-vis the more senior respondents, but also vis-à-vis the junior respondents. Follow-up research would be needed here to ascertain the potential factors behind these trends – for example about whether mid-career professionals tend to be more pessimistic about change than either junior or senior staff.

Third, respondents' location influenced the way they perceive sustainability integration. In particular, there were significant differences between respondents from the Global North (North America, Europe, and often Australia/Oceania) and those from the Global South (Africa, Asia, and Central and South America). To begin with, North American professionals were the least likely to support that the three dimensions of sustainability are interdependent. Respondents from Australia/Oceania and North America were also more negative than others about the impact of economic growth on the environment, while respondents from the Global South were more negative about the environmental impact of social welfare policies.

Normatively, professionals from the Global South agreed significantly more often than those from the Global North that the three sustainability dimensions are equally important and that they should be pursued simultaneously, and that the SDGs have a role in fostering more awareness of sustainability integration. However, professionals from Asia also argued that environmental protection should be pursued even at the expense of economic and social objectives, which appears to contradict their stated more balanced approach. Then again, professionals from Asia also saw environmental protection as a top priority relatively less often than respondents from other regions. This aligns with our previous findings about greening as a possible form of balanced integration (see 4.1). On the other hand, respondents from the Global North perceived the role played by balanced frameworks such as the SDGs in promoting environmental protection as significantly less impactful than those from the South.

What these seemingly contradicting findings have in common are the generally ‘weaker’ opinions expressed by respondents from the Global North about both balanced integration in general and about the pursuit of ‘green’ sustainability in particular. This adds to the overall impression that professionals in the Global North have weaker preferences than those in the South.

As for their own role, professionals from the Global South seemed to see a significantly higher responsibility for promoting sustainability and environmental protection than those from the Global North (and particularly North America), and they report more efforts towards balanced, win-win integration. There were significant differences not only in (progress towards) internal integration but also in external interactions. While Europeans and North Americans reported more frequent interactions outside their organisations, Africans and Asians indicated more often that their interactions outside their field increased in the last 5 years. Coupled with the fact that respondents from the Global South indicate international factors more often as integration triggers, this seems to indicate that global balanced integration frameworks such as the SDGs might be more influential in those regions. Despite this rather complex preference distribution, professionals in the Global South seem to value environmental protection at least as much as the other two dimensions. Considering that historically some of the staunchest opposition to revising the traditional model of economic development in favour of more environmentally-oriented interventionism came from the Global South, the perceptions we observe here are remarkable.

### **Sustainability priorities matter less**

We also found that the priorities of professionals regarding the three dimensions of sustainability are fairly evenly distributed, with social priorities scoring only slightly higher (31.3%) than environmental (27%) and economic (25%) ones. The lowest priorities were even more equally distributed, ranging from 28.1% (social) to 29.3% (environmental).

The distribution among priorities around the 17 SDGs offers some interesting insights: climate action was by far the most recurring priority, while the other “environmental” SDGs ranked at the bottom: life below water and life on land respectively scored lowest and second-lowest, and clean water and sanitation was a priority for just over one tenth of the sample. The other priorities, however, were fairly evenly distributed across the three dimensions. There thus seems to be a relative disconnect between general priorities and more specific priorities, with balance in the former but stronger opinions about environmental concerns in the latter. Yet environmental concerns are not exclusive to environmental actors, and this distribution confirms this. Additionally, given the stark difference in prioritisation between climate action and the two environmental goals, it also appears that the former is interpreted as more of an ‘umbrella’ capturing environmental sustainability in general, while the other two are seen as more mission-specific and have therefore been prioritised by fewer organisations.

Overall, their professional priorities around the three dimensions of sustainability did not significantly affect how professionals perceive the need for sustainability integration, with the exception of professionals who prioritised the social dimension but were less enthusiastic about integration. For example, these professionals are less likely to support balanced interdependence in sustainability, to be incentivised by the SDGs and to see their role as the promotion of environmental protection. Generally, they see also less organisational change towards balancing, in terms of both internal and external integration.

In terms of SDG-specific prioritisation, respondents who indicated at least one environmental SDG headline as a main priority said more often to have a role in the promotion of both sustainability in general and environmental protection more specifically than those who did not. They also reported greater internal integration, and in general were significantly more positive about the influence of the SDGs than respondents who did not indicate any environmental headline as a top priority. This alignment with

balanced integration from professionals with environmental priorities points further in the direction of possible ‘green balancing’, whereby environmental concerns are not exclusive to environmental actors and environmental actors are open to non-ecocentric integration. Respondents who indicated at least one social SDG headline as a main priority also agreed more often to have a role in the promotion of sustainability. They also gave balanced integration more prominence at the normative level. Particularly given the size difference between the two samples (462 respondents with social priorities vs 46 without), these results could also be reverse-interpreted, thus highlighting how professionals with no social priorities tend to be less positive about integration and about the role of the SDGs in promoting it. This appears to partially contradict our findings related to priorities in the three sustainability dimensions, where respondents with social priorities tended to be less engaged in integration, though differences there were considerably less broadly significant. Social priorities therefore offer a mixed picture: they are linked to some significant differences, but the ‘sign’ of their relationship with either model of integration is not consistent – at times balanced and at times hierarchical.

Generally, however, in terms of respondents’ aggregate and SDG-specific priorities, significance levels were very low, with few exceptions. Professionals who prioritise environmental protection were more likely to see the three dimensions of sustainability as interdependent, and indicated at the same time economic growth as a greater danger to environmental protection. They also reported a stronger perceived role in the pursuit of sustainability and environmental protection. However, strengthened environmental priorities were not linked with significant normative preferences for either balanced or ecocentric integration. In terms of the evidence of integration, respondents with strong environmental priorities were also more likely to indicate higher internal but not external integration. Professionals who prioritise social welfare, however, were less likely to agree on a balanced understanding of integration, while respondents with economic growth as

a strengthened low priority displayed more ecocentric normative perceptions, particularly with regard to the need to prioritise environmental protection over economic growth.

## 6.5 Discussion

We now discuss the most striking trends emerging from our study, as well as theoretical and policy implications.

First, we often observed contradictory dynamics between the two main models of either balanced or ecocentric sustainability integration. Importantly, whether professionals prioritise any of the three sustainability dimensions of environment, social or economic does not correlate with whether they support balanced or rather ecocentric integration. Additional evidence points at what we could refer to as *a bidirectional environmental balancing*, where environmental concerns are not exclusive to environmental actors and environmental actors on their part are open to balanced integration. Given the overall prevalence of the balanced model among professionals, this appears *to further strengthen the mainstream, win-win interpretation of sustainability integration against more critical perspectives that call for stronger environmental priorities*. More cynical observers might also see this trend as yet another catalyst of greenwashing.

Second, the high degree of variation in perceptions associated with demographic factors underscores the importance of context. Although our research design does not allow for strict causal inferences, *perceptions and operationalisation of different models of sustainability integration appear to be at least partially affected by the circumstances in which professionals work*. In turn, different perceptions also affect the implementation of different models of integration, which will impact the future context of the professionals themselves. That most Global South professionals seem supportive of balancing and engaging more with balanced governance frameworks such as the SDGs, further stresses the importance of simultaneously probing the black box from two sides – that is, context and perceptions – to design and implement successful global sustainability agendas.



Third, our findings illustrate the layered and bidirectional nature of processes of change. We found that how professionals perceive and operationalise sustainability integration differs strongly, and that this is considerably more frequent when we look at their normative rather than merely descriptive views. This attests to the importance of understanding and mapping the origins and distribution of norms (Alger & Dauvergne, 2019). Whether the more prevalent balanced model of integration is to be further implemented, or whether its ecocentric counterpart is to make headway, also depends on which descriptive understandings on the relationship between the three dimensions are going to gain an 'ought' element (Florini, 1996).

This shows the need of more research on the role of perceptions in sustainability governance. More specifically, it underscores the importance of refining the understanding of subjective perceptions by looking at their different levels: perceptions about the state of something can differ from their views about how something should be and about how they should engage with it, as well as about how they are concretely dealing with something. Our findings also have implications for the concept of sustainability integration. The interplay between perceptions and contextual factors points towards much greater complexity in how people view integration than that offered by the juxtaposition of the two 'standard' balanced and ecocentric models. This study could therefore serve as a steppingstone towards more in-depth research into how different kinds of actors conceptualise and operationalise sustainability concerns.

Fourth, our findings have implications for the prospects of sustainability governance. The prevalence of the balanced model of sustainability among professionals suggests that the mainstream of current global sustainability governance is still strong, and frameworks such as the SDGs are influential on people's views at all levels. Hence, those advocating a more ecocentric approach to sustainability integration would need to find a way to make this model more visible and more capable of shaping perceptions and policy. A tall order, to say the least. On the other hand, the lack of a linear binary relationship between the two

models could complicate the overcoming of siloisation and any form of further integration. Furthermore, the aforementioned divergences in perceptions and operationalisation of sustainability integration highlight how sustainability itself remains a contested concept, which in turn underscores the challenges to designing and implementing effective policy frameworks for sustainability integration. The criticism attracted by the SDGs, as well as the sluggish progress in their implementation (see e.g. Horton, 2015; Allen, et al., 2018), suggest that more effort is needed to devise governance solutions that fit with how perceptions emerge and diffuse.

## **6.6 Conclusion**

We studied here how professionals understand and operationalise sustainability integration, as well as which factors are linked to these perceptions.

First, it became clear that among professionals, a balanced model of sustainability integration, which weighs the three dimensions of sustainability as equally important, is more prevalent than an ecocentric one that prioritises the environmental dimension. This seems to reflect the mainstream in global sustainability debates. Future developments in sustainability integration and governance are therefore more likely to move from confirmation or contestation of the balanced model rather than an ecocentric one. We also find more variation in the normative and operational perceptions of integration among professionals – how integration should happen – than what they see as actual integration in their daily lives. This is in line with our discursive conceptualisation of change as a layered process; descriptive ideas about the state of the world affect the emergence of more prescriptive perceptions that may then result in concrete institutional change. The more homogeneous distribution of descriptive perceptions we observed is thus not only expected, but also a precondition for any future normative and operational developments.

Second, our study shows how context and perceptions are intertwined. For one, there is a strong link between where professionals are based and what type of work they do, and their perceptions of sustainability integration. Professionals in academia are less aligned with the balanced model than other professional categories; members of the business community, on their part, were most favourable about balanced integration. Mid-career professionals were least favourable about balancing, while respondents from the Global South tended to be less hierarchical than those from the Global North, as well as more open to balanced sustainability frameworks such as the SDGs.

Finally, despite the prevalence of balancing, we also find a complex interplay between balanced and ecocentric understandings of sustainability integration. Professional priorities are rather ambivalently linked to perceptions, and environmental concerns are not exclusive to environmental actors while environmental actors were open to non-ecocentric integration. This highlights the importance of mapping and understanding how people think to better grasp the dynamics and outcomes of policy processes in the sustainability domain and beyond.

# 7. Do the Sustainable Development Goals Foster Sustainability Integration?

## Evidence from a Survey Among Professionals

This chapter is based on: Montesano, F. S., Biermann, F., Kalfagianni, A. & Vijge, M. J., 2023. Do the Sustainable Development Goals Foster Sustainability Integration? Evidence from a Survey Among Professionals. Under review by *Environmental Science & Policy*

### 7.1 Introduction

As discussed in chapter 1, one core function of the SDGs is the integration of the environmental, social and economic dimensions, or ‘pillars’, of sustainable development. Notably, the United Nations has defined the SDGs explicitly as ‘integrated and indivisible and balanc[ing] the three dimensions of sustainable development’ (UNGA, 2015, p. 3), and within the academic community the SDGs are widely seen as the most ambitious attempt at ‘sustainability integration’ (Tosun & Leininger 2017).

Academics and practitioners widely agree that such integration of the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability is urgently needed, reinforced by recent debates that reconceptualise the entire planetary system as one where ‘human’ and ‘natural’ can no longer be considered separate (Biermann, 2014). Yet, while the importance of sustainability integration is beyond doubt, concrete policy action has been lagging (Le Blanc 2015). At the theoretical level, considerable advancements have been made towards a better understanding of integration across sustainability dimensions (see, e.g., Visseren-Hamakers 2015). Sustainability integration is also increasingly used to inform policy assessments (Van Cauwenbergh, et al., 2007), and it has been rising as a

political and policy priority in global governance – all processes that eventually culminated in the launch of the SDGs in 2015. However, the question arises whether the SDGs can really live up to these expectations and bring about sustainability integration across levels.

In particular, despite some literature on the role of SDGs in fostering sustainability integration (e.g., Griggs et al., 2014; Stafford-Smith et al., 2017), few scholars have investigated how sustainability *professionals* actually perceive and operationalise this relationship and the role of the SDGs. This research gap is especially remarkable given how subjective understandings, such as of professionals, shape norms, institutions and practices (see chapters 1, 2 and 8).

This chapter contributes to this debate by analysing the role of the SDGs in shaping how sustainability professionals perceive and implement sustainability integration. Do professionals – whom we define as individuals who work in an organisation and whose perceptions are hence likely to influence that organisation’s policies and programmes – see the SDGs as vehicles to foster a *balanced integration* of the environmental, economic and social dimensions of sustainability? Or do certain sustainability priorities still weigh more than others? Which factors affect the perceptions of the role of the SDGs in sustainability integration among professionals?

We answer these questions based on a survey that we conducted among over 500 professionals from different sectors, career levels and regions. We proceed as follows: section 2 discusses the SDGs’ ambition to provide a frame to pursue integration, maps some tensions that our analysis will address, and unpacks the central concepts underpinning our research, namely sustainability integration and perceptions. Section 3 presents our methodology, survey design and analysis protocol. Section 4 presents the findings on how respondents’ perceptions vary, and section 5 addresses some discussion points emerging from the findings. Section 6 concludes and reflects on the wider implications of our findings for sustainability governance.

## 7.2 Conceptual framework

Here we lay out our conceptual framework, arguing, first, that sustainability integration has been interpreted in a variety of often conflicting ways, and second, that these conflicting interpretations urgently require an in-depth analysis of the perceptions of sustainability professionals, that is, how professionals across organisations and geographies position themselves regarding the meaning of sustainability integration.

### 7.2.1 *Different interpretations of sustainability integration*

The concept of sustainability integration dates back several decades. Its core tenet is that the environmental, social and ecological sustainability dimensions are interlinked, can influence each other, and should be dealt with in an integrated manner. Already in the 1960s and 1970s, the critique of economic development from both the environmental and the social side (Purvis, et al., 2019) spurred the emergence of what we here refer to as ‘balanced’ integration: a situation where the three dimensions influence each other in a positive and reinforcing manner and where all three dimensions have equal importance. The notion of balanced integration has been steadily gaining traction in global governance. Notably, the report of the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development stated the need to promote the integration of the three dimensions as interdependent and mutually reinforcing (UN, 2002), and the definition of the SDGs as ‘integrated and indivisible’ (UNGA, 2015, p. 3) has consolidated the balanced approach as a central element in discourses on global sustainability governance. The idea of balanced integration, however, has also met some criticism. Critics have argued to revise the enduring growth optimism that is part of some interpretations of the balanced approach (Barbier, 2011; Milne & Gray, 2013), while others have stressed the importance of prioritising ecological integrity as the pre-condition for all life on earth and hence as being more important than the other two dimensions (Giddings, et al., 2002; Kim & Bosselmann, 2015).

The SDGs, on their part, conceptually follow the balanced approach. In theory, the SDGs advance integration by equally aligning the social, economic, and environmental aspects of sustainability. Their core ambition is hence to offer a new framework for sustainability integration that overcomes the flaws of its predecessors – notably the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – and can better tackle the challenges posed by the planetary entanglement of humans and nature (Fukuda-Parr, 2016). Compared to the MDGs, the SDGs reflect a greater awareness of the changed context, stressing, as stated by UNDP, that ‘[they] must be implemented in an integrated way to help countries tackle complex challenges and lay out a more sustainable future’ (UNDP, 2019).

The SDGs place thus a stronger emphasis on the interactions between environmental, economic and social policies (Van de Pas, et al., 2017; Tosun & Lang, 2017). This is explicitly stated in the SDGs themselves, namely in target 14 under Goal 17, which calls for more policy coherence for sustainable development. Substantial research has been conducted to map these interactions and interlinkages (Nilsson, et al., 2016; Costa, et al., 2017; Allen, et al., 2018). Some scholars have also studied how external factors such as income differences affect cross-goal interactions (Lusseau & Mancini, 2019).

However, there is no universal agreement among scholars and observers that the promotion of integration through the SDGs is entirely positive. Some critics point to alleged design flaws and question whether the complex design of the SDGs will ever allow the goals to advance integration. While the SDGs emphasise linkages, they might fail to capture important interactions, such as in the energy-climate change nexus. This might further attest to the challenge of ‘breaking the silos’ of sustainability (Le Blanc, 2015).

Other critics have questioned the kind of integration that the SDGs promote, targeting their lopsided prioritisation of the three dimensions of sustainability. For example, the 2030 Agenda states that environmental threats (only) ‘add to and exacerbate’ the challenges faced by humanity (UN 2015, p.5), which might support some national priorities, where ecological integrity is systematically seen as mere instrument to achieve

economic and social objectives (Brandi, 2015; Custer, et al., 2018). Largely, the SDGs follow the idea that growth is needed to achieve all three pillars of sustainability, and the growth that is envisaged in SDG 8 is often seen as incompatible with the environmental protection targets on climate change or resource use in SDG 6, 13, 14, and 15 (Hickel, 2015; 2019). Critics also fear that the environmental targets are diluted across ‘non-environmental’ goals, and the ensuing impact on the SDG’s actual ability to foster environmental sustainability (Elder & Olsen, 2019; Zeng, et al., 2020). Finally, the breadth of the SDG framework has also been criticised for its vulnerability to ‘cherry-picking’. Research has shown how for example governments choose to prioritise some SDGs in line with their national development policies (Forestier & Kim, 2020). This leads to concerns about the possibility of cherry-picking also at the individual or organisational level. For example, those with environmental priorities might ‘green’ their definition of integration, arguing that the pursuit of their environmental agenda will still advance ‘SDG integration’.

The SDGs’ emphasis on far-reaching policy integration was also meant to tackle the older problems of developmentalism. The MDGs were still based on a unidirectional development assistance approach to sustainable development (Horner, 2020). The SDGs, spearheaded by Southern countries such as Colombia or Costa Rica, were designed to redress the developmentalist bias by adopting a broader take on sustainability. Their mission to go beyond unidirectionality was evident also at the procedural level, with the negotiations being unprecedentedly inclusive and designed to blur the traditional North-South divide that was so far typical of international negotiations (Chasek & Wagner, 2016). At the same time, these North-South dynamics bolstered the SDGs’ emphasis on growth – albeit in its greener formulation. This in turn fuelled doubts about the goals being more of a development agenda than a sustainability one (Gupta & Vegelin, 2016; Zeng, et al., 2020).



### 7.2.2 *Different perceptions of sustainability integration matter*

In short, there are multiple interpretations of ‘sustainability integration’, ranging from a balanced view that weighs all dimensions equally, to conflicting prioritisations where either economic growth, ecological integrity, or social justice is seen as more fundamental. This multitude of views in the interpretation and implementation of sustainability integration shows the utmost importance of analysing the perceptions of key actors in the field. Such perceptions can inform the political and institutional context, where subjective ideas gradually evolve into norms and then practices (Hay, 2006; Schmidt, 2008; see also chapters 2 and 8), and this at different levels (Hay, 2016). In this chapter, we use perceptions as an overarching concept encompassing ideas and norms (see Introduction and Chapter 6). Influenced by the evolving flow of ideas, norms and practices around them, individuals also adapt their perceptions about the actual and desirable shape and content of those ideas, norms and practices. At the same time, the perceptions of individuals about external developments are intertwined with their perceptions about their own engagement with those developments. Such perceptions can thus influence the evolution of the same ideas, norms and practices. By focusing here on professionals, we further emphasise the link between individual perceptions and organisational implementation, which is a crucial indicator of the impact of the SDGs.

Loosely inspired by a framework on competing discursive paradigms (Pal, 1995), we classify perceptions here by two variables. First, we classify perceptions by their nature, distinguishing between descriptive perceptions (about the state of something) and prescriptive perceptions (about a desired state). Second, we classify perceptions by their object, that is, whether they are external perceptions (about external actors or processes) or internal perceptions (about one’s own actions).

By combining these two variables as a matrix, we identify four main levels of perceptions:

1. *Descriptive external perceptions* pertain to questions such as ‘what *does x* look like?’

2. *Prescriptive external perceptions* answer ‘what *should* x look like?’ questions.
3. *Prescriptive internal perceptions* pertain to role-related questions such as ‘what should I do about x?’
4. *Descriptive internal perceptions* refer to ‘what am I *actually doing* about x?’ questions.

We operationalise these four levels by applying them to perceptions of sustainability integration and of the SDGs (see table 1 below).

Table 1: Definition and operationalisation of perception levels

	Descriptive/External	Prescriptive/External	Prescriptive/Internal	Descriptive/Internal
<b>General definition</b>	What does x look like?	How should x look like?	What should I do about x?	What do I do about x?
<b>Sustainability integration</b>	What is sustainability integration?	How should sustainability integration be pursued?	What should I/my organisation do about sustainability integration?	What am I/my organisation doing to pursue integration?
<b>SDG</b>	Do the SDGs incentivise the understanding of integration?	Do the SDGs incentivise the promotion of certain views of integration?	Is the promotion of the SDGs my/my organisation’s responsibility?	Have there been concrete changes in line with the SDGs?

This chapter seeks to assess the actual perceptions of sustainability professionals about ‘sustainability integration’ across different organisations and geographies, following this classification of the descriptive, prescriptive, external, and internal dimensions of their perceptions.

### 7.3 Methodology

To assess perceptions of sustainability integration among sustainability professionals, we chose a survey as our main methodological tool. Surveys are widely used to investigate perceptions and attitudes in the field of sustainability (Feola & Nunes, 2014; van der Hel, 2018; Prakash & Bernauer, 2020). However, with few exceptions (van Soest, et al., 2019), they have not been used in the scholarly literature on the SDGs.

The survey was conducted online between 22 June and 1 October 2021. Requests to participate in the survey were sent to over 5000 experts and professionals working for a wide range of public and private organisations, relying on snowballing techniques through access points in national and international networks. 531 professionals participated in this study (508 after data cleaning). Characteristics of the sample are provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Survey response

Main professional affiliation		Role within organisation		Geographical location	
Government or public administration	23	Entry-level/junior staff	30	Africa	73
International organisation	49	Mid-career staff	69	Asia	93
Civil society organisation	209	Senior staff	156	Australia and Oceania	16
Academia	113	Executive, owner or head of organisation	234	Central and South America	30
Business or private company	87	No answer	19	Europe	220
Other	25			North America	71
No answer	2			No answer	5
				<b>Total</b>	<b>508</b>

The survey consisted of 35 statements, most of which required respondents to indicate their (dis)agreement on a five-point Likert scale; we also used yes/no, multiple choice, and ranking questions. A first set of statements investigated the relevance of context by clustering respondents based on their professional affiliation, seniority, and geographical location. Other statements clustered respondents by their sustainability affiliation following the three dimensions of sustainability and by their prioritisation of more specific issues based on the headings of the 17 SDGs. These statements were designed to test whether these factors affect how people perceive and operationalise the SDGs. The rest of the statements aimed at mapping the perceptions of respondents on sustainability integration in general and on the role and impact of the SDGs more specifically, using the four perception levels introduced above as a framework. Please refer to Appendix 1 for an overview of the statements.

The questionnaire was fine-tuned through tests amongst colleagues and respondents outside academia. Further tests were conducted through automated simulations in the Qualtrics environment.

As for the analysis protocol, we first cleaned the data to reduce measurement errors and thereby the total survey error (Groves & Lyberg, 2010). We removed duplicates and incomplete (<80% answered questions) questionnaires, and manually checked the responses to identify interpretation problems. We then developed edit rules to address cases of misinterpretation or accidental response selection. To better investigate the relationship between perceptions on the SDGs and different priorities, we created new aggregate variables based on the economic, social, and environmental classification of Rockström and Sukhdev (2016). For instance, we created a new overarching environment variable which included 'Life on land' (SDG15), 'Life below water' (14), 'Climate action' (13) and 'Clean water and sanitation' (6). We also aggregated the priority variables based on the three dimensions of sustainability with the SDG-based ones to create 'strengthened' priority dummy variables.

The quantitative analysis of the survey was conducted using SPSS Statistics 28. The first step was a frequency analysis to gain a descriptive understanding of the ‘presence’ of the SDGs among our respondents. The second step consisted of cross-tabulations and chi-square tests. A chi-square test is a well-established method to measure the association between two categorical variables (Ugoni & Walker, 1995). The third step was the conduction of an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and independent samples t-tests between pairs of variables, in order to examine the statistical significance of the difference between two independent population means (Liu & Wang, 2021; Connelly, 2021). We then compiled a table to better visualise clusters of significant bivariate variations.

Before presenting the findings, a few methodological caveats are in order. Our study is based on a non-representative sample of respondents. Although considerable effort was made to obtain a diverse sample, we expect that respondents who are more concerned about sustainability and better informed about the SDGs were more inclined to participate. Furthermore, the survey was only available in English, which might have discouraged non-native speakers we reached out to, even though we expect this bias to be small given our focus on professionals. Additionally, our approach and the types of questions does not allow for causal inferences. Our focus was on correlation and on explanatory factors rather than on strict relationships between dependent and independent variables. This limited the role of the SDGs as research variables. Finally, surveys capture by definition only personal opinions and views and do not measure real behavioural change with accuracy. Complementary qualitative research will be needed to add a further layer of complexity and causality to the picture we sketch.

## **7.4 Results**

We now present the key findings of our research, organised around the main insights that we gained.

#### *7.4.1 SDGs have some influence on perceptions of sustainability integration but are less often translated into concrete action*

Our first goal was to gain a better general understanding of how sustainability professionals perceive the SDGs. First, a vast majority of professionals (> 95%) stated that they were familiar or very familiar with the goals. A large majority (72.9%) described the SDGs as important in fostering a balanced understanding of sustainability that integrates the environmental, economic and social dimensions. 90% also agreed or strongly agreed that their organisation has a role in contributing to the achievement of the SDGs. A majority of respondents said they regularly or very often refer to the SDGs in their internal (56%) and external (53%) communications. About 53% also said that their organisation's sustainability strategy regularly or very often refers to the SDGs. In terms of perceptions about concrete actions, about 75% of respondents agreed that the SDGs play a role in how their organisations integrate the three dimensions of sustainability into their objectives and initiatives.

However, when asked about the impact of the SDGs on their external policies and interactions, almost half of the respondents said this influence of the SDGs was neutral or even negative; this casts doubt on the more concrete influence of the SDGs. Also, 7.1% of respondents stated that their organisation lacks a sustainability strategy. Regarding even more tangible changes, a majority of respondents said that their organisation has not changed their budget in line with the SDGs, even though two thirds confirmed that at least one employee has SDG-specific tasks in their organisation. This difference suggests that many of these 'SDG employees' lack access to dedicated budget lines, which weakens the concrete influence of the SDGs.

#### *7.4.2 Relationships between perceptions of sustainability and of the SDGs*

Using our analytical framework (see Table 1), we then looked at the relationships between the perceptions on the SDGs among professionals and on sustainability integration more generally. To begin with, we observed that a higher familiarity of professionals with the

SDGs positively correlates with greater influence of the SDGs on integration practices. Professionals who said to be ‘very familiar’ with the SDGs also perceived a stronger role for themselves in sustainability integration than those who were only ‘familiar’ with the goals.

Professionals who viewed the SDGs as important to foster their understanding of how the three dimensions of sustainability are interdependent tended to have different perceptions of integration from those who did not. To begin with, such professionals agreed more often with the need for a balanced understanding of sustainability integration. Yet they also, somewhat paradoxically, stated that it is important to prioritise environmental protection over social welfare (but, surprisingly, not over economic growth). Those professionals who saw the SDGs as important also perceived more own responsibility to promote both sustainability broadly and environmental protection more specifically. These professionals also reported greater change in their organisations towards balanced integration, both internally and regarding outside interactions, and they indicated a greater impact of internal, national, and international factors on their integration practices.

Professionals who stated that the SDGs influence how they *should* implement changes towards the achievement of sustainability integration and of the goals themselves, also had perceptions of integration that differed from other professionals who ascribed a less prescriptive role to the SDGs: they argued more often that the relationship between the three dimensions of sustainable development were interdependent and balanced. They did not view the interactions between these dimensions in conflicting terms and tended to favour a balanced view of integration. Yet, as above, also here we find seemingly contradictory perceptions that combine views in favour of a balanced sustainability integration – that environmental, social and economic dimensions are equally important – with views that favour the prioritisation of the environment above social welfare, but not, again surprisingly, above economic growth. They also agreed more often about being

responsible for promoting both sustainability and environmental protection. Furthermore, when asked about their perceptions about their own organisations' concrete actions, these professionals also reported changes towards the pursuit of balanced implementation of the SDGs.

Regarding the influence of the SDGs on how professionals perceive what they themselves should do about sustainability integration, we found that professionals who felt that they should act on promoting the SDGs tended to indicate greater support for both balanced and hierarchical integration that favours environmental protection and ecological integrity. This is the same 'contradiction' that we observed above. In terms of perceptions about their own actions, these professionals also reported greater organisational change towards balanced integration, as well as a greater influence of internal, national and international factors in change towards integration.

Concerning the influence of the SDGs on how professionals perceive what they actually do about sustainability integration, we found that professionals who reported concrete operational changes that are aligned with the SDGs also had significantly different perceptions of integration than those who did not report any changes. Those who reported concrete changes tended to follow a more balanced understanding of integration. Interestingly, they also agreed more often that economic growth damages the environment, which might reflect their organisation's stronger commitment to change and to the SDGs. As above, a stronger perceived concrete influence of the goals went hand in hand with a prioritisation of environmental protection over social welfare, but not over economic growth. Professionals who reported a greater real change in their organisation towards integration reported a greater influence of international factors on this increasing integration as well.

To further consolidate this finding, we examined whether professionals who reported greater concrete action towards sustainability integration also perceived the SDGs as more influential, which suggests that the SDGs have indeed played some role in shaping



sustainability integration. Specifically, greater efforts towards sustainability integration within organisations in the last five years correlated with a greater perceived role of the SDGs among professionals. On the other hand, those professionals who indicated high levels of actual and concrete sustainability integration within their organisations did not also mention a greater perceived impact of the SDGs, reinforcing our findings of an overall low influence of the SDGs on *concrete actions* towards sustainability integration.

We then looked into factors that might affect how the SDGs themselves are perceived.

#### 7.4.3 *The influence of categories of professional affiliation*

Professionals in academia tended to agree less often than all other professionals that the SDGs help promote an understanding of the interdependence between the three dimensions of sustainability. They were also less positive than everyone else about the SDGs' actual promotion of environmental protection. Considering the general scepticism in the sustainability literature about the environmental focus of the SDGs, this finding is not surprising. Although not statistically significant, professionals working for international organisations were most likely to state that they have a role in promoting the SDGs, while academics and businesspeople were the least. Looking at the perceptions of professionals about what their organisations concretely do with regard to integration, academics saw international agreements, treaties and UN programmes significantly less often as influential factors than professionals working for international organisations and civil society. Academics (and government officials) also reported in almost all cases less influence of the SDGs on integration, communications and other tangible changes than businesses and international organisations (and in some instances civil society). Especially interesting was the case of more interactions outside the field of expertise of professionals. Here, differences between professional categories were not significant when we asked about a variation in actual integration in the last five years; differences became significant,

however, when respondents were asked about the role of the SDGs in promoting such integration, with academics being the least positive group of professionals in that regard.

#### *7.4.4 The influence of professional seniority*

We found that the level of seniority of professionals influenced their perceptions of sustainability integration. Senior respondents reported a stronger impact of the SDGs on their understanding of integration than junior and mid-career professionals. Senior and executive respondents also stated more often that the SDGs incentivise their organisations to pursue environmental protection, hence once again confirming the links between the goals and both balanced and hierarchical models of sustainability integration. Professional seniority was not linked, however, to statistically significant variations in respondents' perceptions of their own role; yet mid-career respondents were the least likely to say that they are responsible for contributing to achieving the SDGs. Differences in response patterns were very significant across seniority levels regarding the perceptions of concrete SDG-related change. Here, senior and executive professionals always reported a greater influence of the SDGs than their junior colleagues. Differences across seniority levels were also significant when respondents were asked about the role of the SDGs, with juniors and mid-career assigning the weakest role to the goals. Overall, this finding seems to indicate that the SDGs are still largely a matter for senior management, and that they have little influence at lower levels of organisational hierarchies. Whether this stronger engagement of senior professionals also leads to actual change or is more related to external expectations and public reputation – for instance through the influence of the international actors – remains a subject for more in-depth qualitative research.

#### *7.4.5 The influence of geography*

We found, in addition, clear variations among professionals in different world regions. Respondents in Africa and Asia stated more often than others that the SDGs foster

awareness of balanced integration. The same holds for professionals from Latin America, even though the relationship is not significant here. Respondents from the Global South also assigned significantly more importance to the SDGs as a prescriptive tool to promote environmental protection. This confirms the confusing convergence throughout our analysis between mainstream balanced views on integration, on the one hand, and parallel views that advocate targeted prioritisation of specific dimensions. However, a common thread is the weaker agreement with any form of integration indicated by respondents from the Global North compared to those from the Global South.

Importantly, professionals from the Global South reported significantly higher levels of their own perceived responsibility for the promotion of the SDGs than those from the Global North (and particularly North America). Professionals from the Global South reported also more organisational changes in line with the SDGs than their counterparts in North America and Europe. Likewise, respondents from the Global South indicated international factors more often as triggers for sustainability integration, and Africans and Asians stated more often that international interactions have increased in the last 5 years. That integration frameworks such as the SDGs appear to be more influential in the Global South might indicate that they have some success at countering the unidirectional developmentalist problems of the MDGs, but also suggests the enduring influence of the more growth-oriented approach to development typical of the United Nations system and traditional development agencies and actors, such as the World Bank.

#### *7.4.6 The influence of organisational priorities*

We had classified all respondents according to whether their organisations prioritise environmental, economic or social dimensions of sustainability; we did this following both these three broad categories and a more fine-grained classification based on the SDG headings. In terms of these organisational priorities, we found little correlation between general priorities of organisations based on the three dimensions of sustainability and

perceptions of their professionals of whether the SDGs would foster the integration between these dimensions. When using the 17 SDG goal titles as priorities, we observed that professionals from organisations with stronger social and environmental priorities more often described the SDGs as incentivising awareness of balanced integration, compared to those professionals who came from more economically oriented organisations. When we then combined ‘general’ and SDG-based priorities, however, all significant correlations were gone.

Looking at whether professionals saw the need for taking actions because of the SDGs, our findings were mixed. Professionals from organisations with social priorities said less often that the SDGs are important to promote environmental protection; conversely, and expectedly, professionals from organisations with environmental priorities said that more often. Professionals from organisations with both social and environmental SDGs as their priorities tended most often to value the SDGs as a tool to promote environmental protection. When combining the three dimensions of sustainability and the SDGs, professionals from organisations with social priorities again said less often that the SDGs are influential for promoting environmental protection, while those with environmental priorities said that more often.

When it comes to how professionals perceive their own role, those from organisations with environmental priorities, and less so those with social priorities, indicated stronger own responsibilities to contribute to achieving the SDGs. However, respondents from organisations with stronger social priorities believed less strongly that they have a responsibility to promote the SDGs.

Looking at contextual factors, professionals from academia were the only type of professionals who indicated environmental priorities more often than other types of professionals, particularly from government. However, this was significant only when we asked about general priorities, and it did not occur when asking to indicate priorities using the titles of the seventeen SDGs. We also found no significant correlation between

geographical location and priorities. Considering the instead very strong correlation between geography and different perceptions of the SDGs, this finding points further towards the relative lack of impact that priorities have on perception of integration.

Finally, in terms of what professionals and their organisations actually do, respondents with general social priorities said less often that the SDGs have triggered any concrete organisational change, while respondents who prioritised social and environmental SDGs believed more in the impact of the SDGs. Combining general and SDG-based priorities, respondents with environmental concerns said more often that the SDGs have driven concrete change within their organisations, while respondents with social priorities tended to do this significantly less often.

As visualised in Table 3 below, we therefore conclude that priorities are rather inconsistently correlated with varying perceptions of the SDGs. This was especially the case with social priorities, but the complete absence of significant correlation between perceptions of the SDGs and economic priorities also does not hint at priorities being a major shaping factor. Although there was some consistency between environmental priorities and greater perceived SDG impact, this applied to both balanced and hierarchical integration. This is consistent with our previous findings, but also suggests that priorities do not matter that much in shaping how people think about the role of the Goals in fostering a kind of integration.

Table 3: correlation between priorities and perceptions of the influence of SDGs at different levels: positive (+), negative (-), or not significant (0).

Priorities		Perceived influence of the SDGs			
		Descr./Ext.	Prescr./Ext.	Prescr./Int.	Descr./Int.
General	Economic	0	0	0	0
	Social	0	-	0	-

	Environmental	0			0
SDG titles	Economic	0	0	0	0
	Social				
	Environmental				
General + SDG	Economic	0	0	0	0
	Social	0			
	Environmental	0			

## 7.5 Discussion

Our findings confirm, first, the tensions between the ambition of the SDGs for a balanced sustainability integration and their actual prioritisation of socio-economic goals. On the one hand, respondents who believed more strongly in the relevance of balanced sustainability integration also believed more strongly in the role of the SDGs, which suggests that the SDGs might indeed stimulate a balanced view of sustainability integration.

On the other hand, however, many respondents whose views were seemingly in line with balanced sustainability integration also agreed on contradictory views around the prioritisation of specific sustainability dimensions. This might fuel existing criticism about the lopsided nature of the SDGs. This was especially evident regarding the prescriptive function of the SDGs, where affinity with the SDGs often correlated with stronger views on the importance of a balanced integration *and* more environmental protection at the same time.

More generally, professionals from environmentally-oriented organisations found the SDGs generally more important than professionals with other priorities. The convergence of seemingly conflicting perceptions of both environmental priorities and the need for balanced sustainability integration, while bolstering the SDG's claim of being greener than

previous governance frameworks for sustainability integration, aligns with critical views that the SDGs are internally contradictory, as they call for balanced sustainability integration while allowing for pre-existing priorities to be simply ‘copy-pasted’.

Furthermore, our analysis underscores the significance of contextual factors. Looking at variations linked to professional affiliation, we found a rather lukewarm view of integration frameworks such as the SDGs among academics and occasionally government officials. Conversely, we found that the SDGs had more appeal at the international policy level and as catalysts for some economic and social actors. Particularly in the case of businesses, these more welcoming perceptions of the SDGs may contribute to the risks of selective SDG implementation, cherry-picking and greenwashing (see e.g. Johnsson, et al., 2020). Additionally, professionals from academia have been the only professional category to indicate environmental priorities more often than other respondents. Given how academics were also consistently the least positive type of professional vis-à-vis the SDGs, combined with the widespread (environmental) scholarly critique of the SDGs, this result supports doubts about the green credentials of the goals and might indicate a disconnect between critical scholarly views of the SDGs and how other professionals perceive them.

As for the correlation between professional seniority and perceptions of sustainability, our research indicates that senior professionals – compared to their more junior colleagues – perceive the SDGs as having greater positive influence on their organisations’ sustainability integration in both approach and practice. While existing research to explain these findings is limited, our findings do align with the greater openness to change by more senior staff suggested by previous studies. Because organisational change initially tends to have less impact on the upper echelons, more senior employees may welcome change more than those in more junior positions (Jones, et al., 2008). In addition, managers and executives tend to identify more with their organisation, which often leads

to more positive perceptions about their organisation's image and policies (Klebe Treviño, et al., 2008) (Weinzimmer & Robin, 2016).

Finally, as for geographical factors, we found a sharp difference between respondents from the Global South and the Global North in terms of how they support the concept of balanced sustainability integration and the SDGs. Our evidence suggests a greater willingness from professionals in the Global South to support the SDGs as a way to bridge the enduring North-South rift in conceptualising development and sustainability. One of the main aims of the SDGs was to overcome the developmentalist bias of the Millennium Development Goals (Horner, 2020). The greater openness and confidence in the SDGs in the Global South could thus confirm that the goals indeed succeed in this direction. Our findings also indicate that the Global South has considerably opened up to the notion of balanced sustainability, thereby no longer relegating the environmental dimension to a less central role. At the same time, however, the disposition of professionals in the Global South towards the SDGs may also suggest that the goals may support a growth-oriented development agenda. Furthermore, professionals in the South assigned significantly more importance than those from the North to national actors in driving balanced sustainability integration. This fits the Southern emphasis on state sovereignty in the debate around the 'right to development'. This is seen by Southern actors as crucial to stem Northern interferences and foster a broader take on sustainability.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

This study delved into how professionals perceive and operationalise the relationship between the SDGs and sustainability integration, as well as which factors might affect the perceived scope and scale of the role of the SDGs in it.

First, we found that most sustainability professionals who participated in our study were familiar with the SDGs and agreed that the goals should play a role in fostering sustainability integration. However, a more granular analysis revealed considerable



differences in views when professionals were asked about whether the SDG's role extended to concrete operational change. Furthermore, although respondents consistently stated that the SDGs support a balanced model of sustainability integration, many also often believed that the goals should promote 'green' – and therefore more hierarchical – sustainability. Studying in more detail the relationship between SDGs and integration, we found that this convergence between theoretically conflicting models of integration recurred at all levels of perception, both regarding how professionals saw their own role and the role of their organisation and the SDGs more generally. In general, those professionals who saw an impact of the SDGs on sustainability integration also showed higher support for balanced integration. At the same time, we also observed positive correlations between greater perceived influence of the SDGs and a more hierarchical approach to integration. This was especially the case in terms of prescriptive perceptions, where professionals who perceived the SDGs as influential not only showed stronger support for the pursuit of both balanced and hierarchical integration, but also reported greater internal responsibilities for the pursuit of both types of integration. The complex interplay between balanced and hierarchical perceptions on integration could also partially explain the difficulties in overcoming siloisation.

Second, we found that demographic factors significantly influence how respondents perceive the influence of the SDGs. Variations in professional affiliation, seniority and geographical location were all consistently linked to diverging responses. This suggests that context shapes perceptions and points at the importance of paying greater attention to the role of such factors when designing policy frameworks. Geographical divides were especially stark, which underscores the contested nature of what 'sustainability' is supposed to look like according to actors in the Global North and the Global South, and the ensuing need for deeper and more constructive scholarly and societal debates to inform discussions about future global sustainability governance initiatives.

Third, we found that organisational priorities have little impact on perceptions of professionals about the impact of the SDGs on sustainability integration. Although there was some correlation between environmental and social priorities of an organisation and greater perceived impact of the SDGs among professionals of that organisation, the consistency and direction (positive or negative) of this correlation were far from systematic. The fact that different priorities are not significantly linked to varying perceptions on the role of the SDGs is in line with the aforementioned convergence between the SDGs and preferences for both balanced and hierarchical approaches to integration. This strengthens the stated mission of the goals towards sustainability integration, but also fuels doubts about whether the SDGs accurately reflect the different facets of sustainability, as well as about the vulnerability of the goals to cherry-picking practices. It also exposes a disconnect between some scholarly criticism about the goals and the distribution of perceptions about them across professional fields.

In sum, our findings illustrate the complexity of the relationship between the SDGs and subjective perceptions of sustainability professionals about the role and relevance of goals in sustainability integration. Unlike what the official mission of the SDGs states, professionals do not appear to share the same linear understanding of the goals as governance frameworks for the promotion of clear-cut balanced integration. This highlights how important it is to delve more into the origins, nature and shaping factors of professionals' perceptions about, and hence the implementation of, current and future sustainability objectives and frameworks.

# 8. Can the Sustainable Development Goals Green International Organisations? Sustainability Integration in the International Labour Organisation

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## 8.1 Introduction

The 2030 Agenda with its 17 SDGs constitutes a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere. The SDGs are, according to the UN General Assembly, ‘*integrated and indivisible and balanc[ing] the three dimensions of sustainable development*’ (UNGA, 2015: 3; see also Biermann, Kanie and Kim, 2017).

With the UN leading this call for more integrated global governance, international organisations are seen as important actors in implementing the SDGs, complementing and coordinating efforts at the national, sub-national, and local level. In the last two decades, the mandates of many international organisations have significantly expanded (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Hooghe, et al., 2017; Tallberg & Zürn, 2019;), and many have

developed sizable environmental programmes (Kaiser & Meyer, 2017; Biermann, et al., 2009). Furthermore, most international organisations have committed to implementing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Such commitment goes beyond statements and documents; for instance, several international organisations (36 within the UN system and 14 outside) have become ‘custodians’ of specific SDG indicators and are hence responsible for their effective monitoring and implementation (UN Economic and Social Council, 2018).

But what is the reality behind these commitments? Have international organisations really responded to the new call for greater sustainability integration, or are their new commitments towards integration only a shallow facade? Furthermore, if substantive change has taken place, can it be seen as conditional or unconditional? And equally important: has the political agreement on the SDGs in 2015 acted as an institutional catalyst for any change?

This chapter addresses these questions with an in-depth study of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). With 187 member states and a secretariat - the International Labour Office- with 40 field offices and some 2700 staff, the ILO is one of the most established organisations in the UN system. It features a unique tripartite structure, in which unions and employers join governments as equal partners in its main organs, notably the executive Governing Body and the legislative International Labour Conference. It has also been rather successful at expanding its networks and agenda to preserve its role in advancing social and economic justice through the setting of international labour standards (Hughes & Haworth, 2011). Alongside its predominantly socio-economic mandate, the ILO seems to also open up to other concerns, including environmental ones. This process is at the centre of our chapter. We investigate sustainability integration focusing on the integration of the environmental dimension into the economic and social dimensions of the ILO’s work– a process we also refer to as ‘greening’. The ILO’s

engagement with the SDGs, evident from its 'custodianship' of fourteen indicators across five goals, also helps assess the role of the SDGs in these processes.

The chapter proceeds as follows. Section 2 develops an analytical framework to analyse sustainability integration through three lenses: ideas, norms, and institutions. We also present our research design and methodology. Section 3 applies the analytical framework to the case of the ILO, and analyses whether sustainability integration can be discerned within the ILO's ideas, norms and institutions. Section 4 discusses what role the SDGs play in this process. Section 5 concludes and reflects on the wider implications of this study.

## **8.2 Analysing Changes in International Organisations**

The analytical framework we use to analyse changes in international organisations such as the ILO primarily draws on discursive institutionalism, also referred to as 'constructivist institutionalism' (Hay, 2006: 56). This is an analytically dualist perspective stressing the interdependence of agency and structure and hence of contextual and institutional change. Unlike other forms of (neo-)institutionalism, discursive institutionalism thus studies institutions moving from a dynamic constructivist ontology that integrates institutional and ideational path dependency (Hay, 2006).

Most literature on sustainability-oriented change in international organisations hardly focuses on how the changing context – such as the SDGs – can impact institutional change. Discursive institutionalism instead integrates contextual change within cyclical processes wherein ideas, norms and institutions are both background (the context informing the diffusion and institutionalisation of ideas) and foreground, where actors deliberate about the institutional structure, which leads to new ideas (Schmidt, 2008; Arts & Buizer, 2009; Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016). It therefore helps conceptualise an international organisation such as the ILO not just as a 'recipient', but also as an agent of change.

Analytical dualism thus integrates different perspectives on the independence of international organisations. Its emphasis on structure, on the one hand, acknowledges the constraining influence of member states and other external actors (Bøås and McNeill, 2004). Its recognition of agency, on the other hand, highlights how ‘there is more in international organisations than the power of their member states’ (Park & Vetterlein, 2010: 10). While a broader theoretical discussion is beyond the scope of this chapter, the integration of these elements into our conceptual framework leads to the identification of ideas, norms and institutions as three main interdependent ‘stages’ of institutional change. We describe this as a cycle of change (Figure 1).

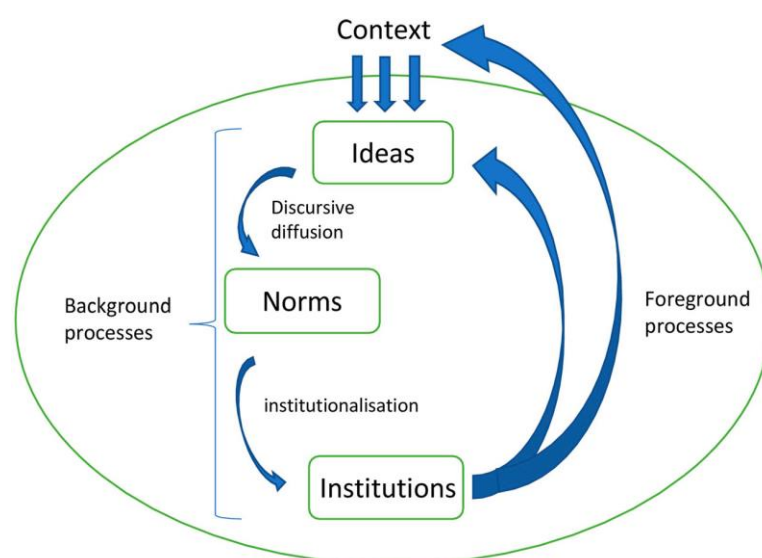


Fig. 1: The cycle of change

### 8.2.1 Ideas

The first stage of this cycle are ideas. We assume that any contextual change – such as the agreement on the SDGs – will first affect the ideas present in an organisation, that is, the subjective systems of representation and representation-producing practices in specific contexts (Laffey & Weldes, 1997). Ideas can be prescriptive but they do not yet reflect the consolidation into a concrete norm. For example, the existence of ideas about sovereignty

does not coincide with a norm about what constitutes sovereignty. To study ideas as they emerged and developed within the ILO, we have analysed over thirty ILO documents, selected because of their topical relevance (mainly reports of the Director-General and reports submitted by ILO departments as input for the International Labour Conference). While reports do undergo a negotiation and review process where all ILO member groups (governments, workers, and employers) are involved, their primary aim is to stimulate debate during the International Labour Conference. ILO members therefore ‘use’ reports to acknowledge possible future strategic directions of the organisation without formally endorsing the substance. Such endorsement is only given through adoption by the International Labour Conference. According to our framework, reports thus indicate ideas.

### 8.2.2 *Norms*

The second stage in the cycle is when some ideas become norms. We define norms as the intersubjective ideas that are prescriptive in nature and characterised by a sense of ‘ought’ vis-à-vis the scope and desirability of certain actions and behaviours (Florini, 1996; Alger & Dauvergne, 2019). We differentiate between ideas and norms in relation to their diffusion, that is, how many actors in a constituency have adopted an idea or a norm (breadth) and whether the understanding of an idea or a norm is uniform across this constituency (consistency). Ideas, especially those that directly challenge the established order, will generally be narrowly and inconsistently diffused and therefore fail to qualify as norms (Alger & Dauvergne, 2019: 6-7). For instance, despite their prescriptive nature and the scientific attention they have received, ideas such as depopulating and limiting economic growth have not become a norm in any country or in international institutions (*ibid.*: 11). Importantly, our understanding of norms is discursive rather than legal or operational (Krook & True, 2010), and therefore not synonymous with ‘standards’ or ‘rules’.

This discursive element is also helpful to clarify our distinction between norms and ideas. Some ‘mainstream’ constructivists tend to conflate both concepts into an overarching ‘normative life cycle’, where the production of documentary sources constitutes an indicator of the evolution of norms from ‘internal’ to ‘external’ (Finnemore 1996; Park & Vetterlein 2010: 19-20). Our framework instead isolates ideas explicitly to increase definitional clarity and operationalisability.

Diffusion helps operationalise this distinction. For instance, a document signed by a Director-General does have prescriptive value as an idea; yet its diffusion is still limited if all key actors in that organisation (such as member states, staff, and in the ILO’s case also employers and workers) have not officially approved it, and it can thus not be seen as a ‘norm’ in our conceptualisation.

To study whether and how initial (environmental) ideas have become more widely accepted norms within the ILO, we have analysed all 101 negotiated documents issued by the International Labour Conference between 2010 and 2019. This conference brings together delegates from governments, workers and employers of all ILO member states to discuss social and labour questions and to adopt new international labour standards. It also adopts the ILO’s budget and elects its Governing Body. Documents adopted by the conference include - in ascending order of importance - resolutions, recommendations and conventions, the latter being binding and becoming part of national law once ratified. These documents result from complex processes involving many actors and are issued by a body which enjoys a high degree of legitimacy. Moreover, resolutions, recommendations and conventions are usually adopted by large majorities or even unanimously. They therefore reflect high levels of both breadth and consistency in the adoption of a norm. The ILO also publishes the proceedings of discussions during the International Labour Conference. Although these do provide a wealth of insights into the processes of normative diffusion, a detailed procedural analysis would considerably broaden the scope of this chapter, which instead focuses on *substantive* evidence of change



at all levels. We therefore restricted our selection of output to formally adopted documents, using resolutions, recommendations and conventions as substantive normative proxies for the outcomes of the discussions reported in the proceedings.

### 8.2.3 *Institutions*

The third stage of the cycle are institutions. Once ideas have developed and more concrete norms have been diffused, some may aggregate and become fully institutionalised (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998: 891). If norms are the *principles* of governance within an international organisation, institutions are its concrete *rules* and *procedures*. Institutions encompass all that relates to the concrete administration and implementation of an international organisation's mandate and strategy. Unlike ideas and norms, which evolve more organically, institutions are consciously designed. They are outcomes of deliberate implementation processes that follow normative diffusion. This again emphasises the importance of agency in processes leading to the formation of an institutional structure. Moreover, institutions are not only products of norms and ideas, but also platforms where actors deliberate about their content and thus inform new ideas. An international organisation is thus not only structure, but also agent of both internal and external change. In the case of the ILO, such agency lies with its officials and its tripartite constituents who, in different configurations, can catalyse or hinder change. Given our methodological focus, we could not systematically study which specific actors within the ILO drove or hindered specific changes, as this is not often revealed in formal documents. Rather, we understood their agency as integral part of that of the ILO as a whole. Nonetheless, where the information was sufficient and reliable, we included the 'politics of change' in our analysis as well.

To study institutions, we looked at three main sets of indicators. First, we studied strategic and budgetary documents (chiefly the biennial Programme and Budget). Second, we analysed concrete initiatives such as the ILO's Green Jobs Programme or multilateral

partnerships, focusing on their emergence, their changing scope and scale, and their impact on for instance national legislation. Third, we looked at structural changes, mostly related to the bureaucratic organisation of the ILO (see Table 1 below for an overview).

To investigate the role of the SDGs, we divided our findings in pre- and post-2013. We take 2013 as a potential moment of change as this is when, following the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development, negotiations started for the new and more integrated 2030 Agenda. Our choice of 2013 instead of 2015 (the year of the official launch of the SDGs) as empirical watershed also emphasises how ideational and normative developments begin before measurable institutional changes emerge. Also, tangible changes in an international organisation such as the ILO result from processes lasting over many years; ideas, norms and institutions that emerged in 2013 thus cannot be directly ascribed to the SDG negotiations per se. Furthermore, change can be the result of many more contextual (and internal) factors than those we focus on in this chapter (see e.g. Vetterlein, 2007). Yet, the launch of the SDG negotiations in 2013 still marks an important global contextual change against which ILO developments can be investigated; not just as outcomes but also as informing inputs.

Methodologically, we relied on directed qualitative content analysis of the documents, that is, we refined the development of deductive codes from the application of general contextual considerations to the conceptual framework with grounded observations within the case study (Mayring, 2000; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). These codes all refer to our focus on integrating sustainability, and include for instance ‘environment’, ‘integration’, and ‘just transition’. Given its focus on contextualised meaning, we find directed qualitative content analysis to be a good methodological fit with our discursive institutionalist focus, which highlights the role of ideas and norms in shaping the meaning of social categories (Laffey & Weldes, 1997). In addition, we conducted ten confidential exploratory interviews with ILO officials - both in service and retired - from various departments and programmes.

	IDEAS	NORMS	INSTITUTIONS
<b>Short definition</b>	Subjective systems of representation in a specific context	Highly diffused ideas about appropriate behaviour	Concrete rules and practices within an arrangement (e.g. an organisation)
<b>Indicators</b>	Speeches; reports; unratified documents	Documents representing the official position of the whole organisation (e.g. resolutions, conventions, treaties)	Strategy documents; budget; organisational structure; concrete initiatives and programmes;

*Table 1: summary of concepts and operationalisation*

### 8.3 Sustainability Integration in the ILO

How did environmental concerns affect the evolution of ideas, norms and institutions within the ILO?

#### 8.3.1 *The Evolution of Integrative Ideas*

##### **Sustainability Integration in the ILO before 2013**

At the level of ideas, the ILO took the first steps towards integrating environmental sustainability in the 1970s. This process started with first attempts at linking the discourse around occupational safety and health with the growing attention to environmental issues across the UN system. Already in 1972, an ILO report included first references to links between economic development and environmental protection. In 1975, another report corroborated this stating that the ‘working environment’ and the ‘general environment’ are closely linked (ILO, 1972a; 1975). In the 1990s, ideas began to emerge about a ‘green’ role of the ILO and its tripartite constituents, such as a proposal to integrate environmental considerations into all ILO activities (ILO, 1990).

While these early examples indicate greater sustainability integration in the ILO's understanding of its mandate, this remained strictly instrumental: environmental concerns were seen as important only as functionally relevant for achieving the ILO's socio-economic priorities. Instrumental change is therefore associated with 'shallow' socialisation, and remains conditional to the pursuit of a stable mandate. 'Deeper' socialisation, instead, requires change to be unconditional, reflecting a fundamental change of interests and a new 'social identity' (Bearce & Bondanella, 2007: 706).

Unconditional change would thus see the ILO present environmental concerns as self-standing goals that are *integral* to its mandate rather than *means* to achieve it. Yet, greater awareness among officials and constituents of the integrated nature of sustainability in the 1990s paved the way for rather ground-breaking ideas within the ILO (interview #3, 3 October 2019). A milestone report on 'Environment and the world of work' introduced first notions of 'decoupling' economic growth from environmental degradation (ILO, 1990: 50). It also pioneered the idea that the ILO's social justice mandate is inextricably linked to the pursuit of integrated sustainability (*ibid.*: 4). The evolution of the concept of 'decent work' also began in the 1990s. A 1999 report outlined four strategic objectives: employment promotion, social protection, social dialogue, and fundamental principles and rights at work; all to ensure that work responds to the social justice requirements 'in this period of global transition' (ILO, 1999: v). These objectives were later formalised in the Decent Work Agenda (ILO, 2008), which in turn became fundamental in the development of the ILO's approach to integrated sustainability (ILO, 2013).

In the 2000s we see further developments towards integrating environmental concerns. First, the understanding of decent work became more closely related to considerations of environmental protection, influenced by the outcomes of the 1992 and 2002 global summits in Rio and Johannesburg (ILO, 2007a). Second, awareness of the links between work and environment became deeper, with reports also considering how environmental *policies* can affect (decent) work (ILO, 2007a; 2008). Crucial in this respect is the

promotion of a ‘socially just transition to green jobs’, which are defined as ‘decent jobs that contribute to preserving and restoring the environment’, in both traditional and emerging sectors (ILO, 2007a: 7; 2008: 34-39). The juxtaposition of social justice priorities to the pursuit of green jobs also foreshadowed further development of the ‘just transition’ paradigm as the ILO’s foremost tool to pursue fully integrated sustainability (ILO, 2015; 2017c).

Third, there was growing criticism towards the so far largely positive view of economic growth as advocated by the neoliberal model of globalisation. Critical engagement had already started in the 1990s, when the ILO stepped up its cooperation with institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund calling for greater attention to social justice (Hughes & Haworth, 2011). Although growth remained central, ILO reports now argued for the redefinition of a successful enterprise along more integrated lines, stating that long-term economic success can only be achieved by responsibly combining human, financial, and environmental resources (World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalisation, 2004; ILO, 2007b). Another report even mentioned that it would be necessary to overcome blind ‘faith in the magic of the market’ if sustainable development is to be achieved (ILO, 2007a: 19).

### **Sustainability Integration in the ILO after 2013**

Since 2013, the greening of the prevalent ideas in the ILO has accelerated in both scope and scale. To begin with, the relative weight of environmental concerns in ILO discourse has markedly increased. Before 2013, explicit mentions of environmental sustainability were tightly linked to socio-economic aspects. After 2013, several documents have defined the pursuit of environmental sustainability first as a necessity, and later even as an opportunity to achieve its socio-economic goals (ILO, 2017c; 2018). In 2019, a report defined ‘environmental integrity’ as ‘the foundation for social peace and cohesion, economic prosperity and a future of work that provides full and productive employment and decent work for all’ (ILO, 2019a: 36). Today, the Decent Work Agenda formally

integrates environmental sustainability, which is even defined as *part* of social justice, rather than just a *means* to achieve it (ILO, 2017a: 1; 2019a). This shows the influence of the more progressive stakeholder groups in the International Labour Office and among ILO constituents in emphasising the link between social justice and the environment, and possibly laying the foundations for more fundamental changes to the nature and scope of the organisation's mandate (interview #1, 2 September 2019).

Unsurprisingly, greening has also affected ideas about the links between work and the environment, with the former now seen as 'intimately' connected to the latter (ILO, 2013a; 2019b: 17). The growing importance of full integration is clear in the mention of how the three dimensions of sustainability are connected via 'nested interdependencies' (ILO, 2019a: 36).

The process is also linked to the development of the just transition paradigm as the ILO's benchmark for integrated sustainability. First, the landmark *Report on Sustainable Development, Decent Work and Green Jobs* consolidates the initial integration of environmental considerations into the Decent Work Agenda, stating that its four objectives are to be fully integrated with the three pillars of sustainable development (ILO, 2013b). Unlike before, however, this is now directly applied to the idea of just transition, which is defined as one 'towards a world of work that respects and contributes to environmental sustainability' (ILO, 2013b: 335). This greening mirrored the original development of the just transition concept by trade unions (Stavis & Felli, 2015). Sustainability integration also became more concrete, with mentions of coherence across all three development policy portfolios (environmental, economic, and social) as a key principle of just transition and with calls on socio-economic actors to work on adaptive environmental measures to protect development as a whole (ILO, 2015; 2018; 2019a: 39). While they remain marginal, these calls signal some willingness within the ILO to move towards a new idea of the environment as integral rather than instrumental component of the ILO's social justice mandate (ILO, 2019a).

Additionally, reformist ideas have become more present. The importance of decoupling is now linked to the need for reformed economic development to redress the systemic imbalances at the planetary level caused by the current approach to growth, which is both socially and environmentally unsustainable (ILO, 2018). Similar ideas also appear in the 2019 Report on SDG 8, which links decoupling to the need for the ILO to support simultaneous progress towards *all* the SDGs that have to do with environmental sustainability.

However, even in its new integrated formulation, just transition remains a *means* to sustain socio-economic progress (ILO, 2017b). Self-standing environmental goals that are not linked to the mandated pursuit of social justice face strong resistance from most ILO officials and constituents. With the exception of one chapter in the 2019 Report on SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), the ILO's approach to sustainability integration remains strictly instrumental.

### 8.3.2 *The Evolution of Integrative Norms*

#### **Sustainability Integration before 2013**

Did these trends at the level of ideas affect the evolution of norms? The first signs of normative diffusion of integrated environmental concerns in the ILO can be seen between the 1970s and the 1990s. Spurred by the evolution of the discourse around occupational safety and health towards clearer links between the world of work and environmental protection (ILO 1972a; 1975), the International Labour Conference issued the first resolutions and recommendations advancing more integrative norms, stressing the interdependence between the working environment and the general environment (ILO, 1972; 1977; 1990) and mentioning the need for the organisation to take environmental concerns into account when pursuing socio-economic development (ILO, 1989; 1990a).

Between the 1990s and the 2000s, further normative diffusion of ideas of integrated sustainability is evident in resolutions stressing the importance of actively pursuing

‘broad-based’ sustainability (ILO, 1998: 1) because of the interdependent and mutually reinforcing nature of the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability (ILO, 1990a; 1998; 2007; 2008). Additionally, the Decent Work Agenda explicitly called for mobilisation to achieve its integrated strategic objectives and sustainability (ILO, 2008: 3).

Yet, perhaps unsurprisingly given the longer timeframe of diffusion processes, the greening of ILO norms was significantly slower and shallower than its ideas. Environmental concerns were largely absent from negotiated outputs of the International Labour Conference before 2013. Documents such as the 2008 Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalisation refrain from mentioning environmental considerations when discussing the interdependence with socio-economic justice (ILO, 2008). This points to the reticence of the ILO’s constituents to any changes in the normative interpretation of the organisation’s mandate, whereby the ILO’s contribution to sustainability should be limited to ‘areas within its competence’ (ILO, 1990a: 3).

### **Sustainability Integration after 2013**

Since 2013, however, the normative diffusion of environmental ideas started to accelerate and become more visible. In 2013, ILO constituents agreed for the first time to have a conference committee on sustainable development, with an explicit emphasis on environmental issues. Six years later, the Centenary Declaration on the Future of Work included ‘environmental and climate elements’ among those contributing to the ‘transformative changes’ in the world of work (ILO, 2019: 3). While a more explicit reference to climate change and environmental destruction had to be given up during the negotiations (interview #1), the fact that there was sufficient support from all constituents to keep the current wording is significant. Between 2013 and 2019, however, the diffusion of self-standing environmental concerns remained limited, with few operationalisable measures and priorities for such concerns (e.g. ILO, 2015a).



Nevertheless, there has been growing emphasis both on the role of decent work in achieving sustainability in all its dimensions and on environmental factors as drivers and consequences of socio-economic change (ILO, 2013; 2017a). This coincided with a much greater normative output since 2013 on the interdependence between the three pillars of sustainability. Greener ideas about sustainability integration have now become part of the normative framework of just transition, along with more links between sustainability and the Decent Work Agenda (ILO, 2016). Since 2017, just transition has become even more embedded in the ILO's understanding of its mandate. It has become a 'guiding principle' for socio-economic progress (ILO, 2017c: 8), and a necessary benchmark for the realisation of the 'fundamental principles and rights at work' constituting one of the four objectives of the Decent Work Agenda (ILO, 2017d: 5). The very discussion on the ILO's 'decent work' mandate is now much more strongly influenced by integrated sustainability and the role of social dialogue to achieve it (ILO, 2018b). This process culminated in 2019, when the Centenary Declaration stated that the ILO must ensure 'a just transition to a future of work that contributes to sustainable development in its economic, social and environmental dimensions' (ILO 2019: 3).

While this brings unprecedented depth to the normative diffusion of environmental concerns in the ILO, the approach remains instrumental. These norms never mention the need to add an environmental pillar to the Decent Work Agenda (ILO, 2016), but maintain that 'just transition' remains only a *means* for sustainable *economic* and *social* progress (2017c: 8) and stress how integrated sustainability offers *opportunities* for the ILO to advance decent work (2017d; 2018b).

Unlike ideas, current norms lack any reference to transformative views about sustainable socio-economic development. Up to 2019, no International Labour Conference document explicitly mentions decoupling or critical perspectives on economic growth. Furthermore, with the exception of one mention in the Safety and Health in Agriculture Convention (ILO, 2001, art.12.c), no legally binding normative document since the 1989 Indigenous

and Tribal Peoples Convention (ILO 1989, art.7.3) mentions the environment, integrated sustainable development, or the 2030 Agenda.

### 8.3.3 *The Evolution of Integrative Institutions*

Is this instrumental approach of the ILO a barrier to any substantive institutional change?

#### **Sustainability Integration before 2013**

Until a decade ago, institutional developments lagged behind the changes of ideas and norms that we described. This was largely due to the resistance to any institutionalisation of environmental sustainability by ILO constituents who remained concerned that this would undermine the organisation's core mandate (interview #3). In 1982, the ILO joined the ambitious System-wide Medium-Term Environment Programme, which sought to improve environment-minded cooperation and efficiency in all the programmes and budgets of UN agencies. Despite this, in 1990 the International Labour Conference cut out all the operational proposals mentioning environmental issues.

In 1992, reluctance to diluting the ILO's mandate led many constituents – especially employers and some member states – to fiercely oppose sending a tripartite delegation to the Rio Summit, the first major UN conference seeking an integrated approach to sustainability. In the end, the prospect of political gains given the high profile of the conference softened the staunchest antagonists such as the United States, and led to the first breakthrough, with the ILO engaging directly with environmental themes. This initial optimism even allowed the launch of the exploratory 'interdepartmental project on environment and the world of work' in 1994-95. This project aimed to assist ILO members in the implementation of the Agenda 21 (the outcome of the Rio Summit) and deployed an innovative 'Tripartite-Plus' approach involving civil society and local communities. Despite overall promising results, the project was 'brutally terminated' at the end of the biennium, largely due to constituents' (especially workers' and employers') fears that

institutionalising civil society participation would weaken their tripartite role (interview #3).

In the early 2000s, the stronger visibility of climate change as a global issue fostered the gradual institutionalisation of the links between social and environmental change, which coincided with the first demands for a just transition by trade unions. In 2009, several UN agencies, including the ILO, launched the Green Jobs Initiative. The initiative is a collaboration between ILO, UN Environment, the International Trade Union Confederation and the International Organisation of Employers, and was important in bringing together state actors, workers and employers under the same environmental umbrella. This paved the way for more widespread acceptance of environmental considerations in the ILO. In 2009, the ILO launched its own Green Jobs Programme. In its early years, the Programme faced considerable internal scepticism from numerous constituents. Consequently, most of the Programme's early efforts were focused on sensitising local partners by stressing how the move towards a green economy would provide 'win-win' socio-economic outcomes. In other words, environmental concerns were framed strictly as instrumental in achieving the ILO's mandate.

### **Sustainability Integration after 2013**

From 2013 onwards, environmental concerns became more prominent in the ILO's institutional framework.

At the strategic level, the integrated understanding of just transition was first mentioned in the 2016-17 Programme and Budget, and in 2018-19 it was upgraded to a 'cross-cutting policy driver' requiring 'fundamental and permanent significance across the four dimensions of the Decent Work Agenda' (ILO, 2017d: 3). The draft version of the 2020-21 Programme and Budget further elevates just transition to a full-fledged integrated outcome with its own budget line.

In terms of initiatives, the normative diffusion of just transition facilitated the greater institutionalisation of the Green Jobs Programme. First, it contributed to reducing internal scepticism vis-à-vis the very notion of green jobs, as most units and departments began to explicitly refer to the role of green jobs in furthering decent work. Nowadays, the green jobs 'frame' has been mainstreamed across the entire organisation. Second, the growing support to the just transition paradigm among all constituents led to greater external openness to the programme, which began to be seen as a key source of know-how and assistance to pursue socially sustainable transitions (interview #8, 28 January 2020). The growing interest in integrated sustainability also helped the idea of green jobs to contribute to the institutionalisation of sustainability at the national level. This is evident for instance in the Philippines' 2016 Green Jobs Act, a landmark piece of environmental legislation with a strong focus on integrated sustainability. The drafting and implementation of the act received direct ILO support (Philippines, 2015; interview #7, 16 January 2020). The institutionalisation of just transition within the ILO also impacted the scope of the Green Jobs programme, favouring its development from the narrow campaign for 'win-win' green works towards a more balanced focus which also takes into account all the challenges of transitions, particularly those related to their social and distributional effects. This has led to a marked increase in research and advisory work on social protection, now seen as both a resilience tool and a shield for workers negatively impacted by environmental legislation or policies. While the Green Jobs Programme is the first and by far the largest 'green' ILO initiative to date, the 2013-15 period also saw the launch of the Green Initiative, which focuses on research to strengthen the ILO's ability to manage a just transition towards greener economies and a sustainable future.

At the organisational level, two major developments have occurred since 2013. First, the ILO upgraded in 2013-14 the Green Jobs initiatives from a mere programme to a full-fledged unit, which gave it formal organisational recognition and own budget lines. Second, in 2016 the ILO launched its Environmental Sustainability Policy and

Management System, with an office-wide committee chaired by the Director-General for Management and Reform. This committee is linked to the Green Initiative and aims at promoting the integration of environmental sustainability across the ILO.

However, in addition to being relatively limited, institutional change towards integrating environmental concerns in the ILO has again been largely instrumental. Policy drivers in the Programme and Budget are explicitly defined as means to achieve ILO constitutional objectives, and the increasing ‘significance’ of the environment is linked to the need to act promptly in order to ‘reap the decent work dividend’. Additionally, strategic documents have not included any reference to ‘progressive’ or critical approaches to socio-economic development. This strict prioritisation is also evident in the more operational initiatives, notably regarding green jobs. In Mexico City, for instance, the ILO tackles waste management problems predominantly because of their negative socio-economic repercussions (interview #9, 30 January 2020). Moreover, budgetary limitations create an imbalance between discursive developments and the actual mobilisation of resources. At the organisational level, the lack of substantial change stems in large part from the fact that the ILO has to justify any change in its course of action before its tripartite constituents. Given the focus of its formal mandate on social justice and the world of work, any standalone environmental focus would unlikely be deemed a priority by the ILO’s tripartite constituents (interview #8).

In short, integration of environmental concerns within the ILO occurred at all levels of ideas, norms and institutions. And yet, this integration remains instrumental to the ILO’s socio-economic mandate. We do not attach normative value to instrumentality: an instrumental approach to sustainability integration is not ‘better’ or ‘worse’ than an unconditional one. We also look at instrumentality in *descriptive* terms, as a ‘marker’ which is largely expected in light of the ILO’s very *raison d’être* and which does not diminish the *substantial* relevance of change within the organisation. An organisation’s core mandate rarely changes. What changes are the ideas, norms and institutions around

*how* that mandate is best carried out (see e.g. Park 2005; Vetterlein 2007). There is no consensus on how to navigate the tensions and trade-offs between socio-economic progress and environmental protection (Arias-Maldonado 2013), which makes such a ‘conditional’ approach appealing to a non-environmental actor such as the ILO. The lack of consensus, and therefore of diffusion, also contributes to explaining slower change at the normative and institutional level.

Importantly, however, we also find an acceleration and deepening of the integration of environmental concerns after 2013. This suggests that the negotiation and later adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals was an important impetus. We turn to this question next.

#### **8.4 The Influence of the SDGs**

On the one hand, the negotiation and adoption of the SDGs have left their mark in the evolution of ideas, norms and institutions within the ILO. Regarding ideas, many ILO reports after 2013 mention links between the achievement of SDGs and the implementation of the Decent Work Agenda (ILO, 2017c). Others state that the SDGs have provided a ‘framework for guiding future action’ (ILO, 2017d: 63) to which the ILO strives to align, particularly in its development assistance activities such as the Decent Work Country Programmes (ILO, 2018b). Also the more radical ideas regarding environmental integration can be partly attributed to the overarching rationale of the SDGs (ILO, 2019a: 38). The influence of the SDGs is visible in strategic documents as well. For instance, the 2018-19 Programme and Budget links all budget outcomes to specific SDGs (ILO, 2017g: 5). The SDGs have also informed the Green Jobs Programme. Especially SDG 8 and SDG 13 (on climate change) are quoted as ‘foundational’ for the integration of different dimensions of development and sustainability (interview #10, 18 February 2020). More broadly, the SDGs have bolstered the legitimacy of the ILO’s

integrated just transition approach. This has increased its support among ILO members and reduced potential resistance to integrating environmental concerns (interview #8).

The SDGs' integrated approach might have also triggered the ILO to overcome siloisation through more multilateral cooperation (ILO, 2016a; 2017c). In particular, the SDGs' emphasis on cooperation, notably SDG 17 on strengthening global partnerships, has fostered a direct link between its pursuit and achieving integrated sustainability (ILO, 2013; 2017d; 2018b; 2019). Furthermore, a resolution explicitly mentions the importance for the ILO to ensure the compatibility of its Development Cooperation Strategy and SDG 17 (ILO, 2016). At the institutional level, the ILO has since 2013 stepped up its commitment to inter-organisational sustainability-oriented partnerships. Among them are the Partnership for Action on Green Economy (PAGE) and the Green Jobs Assessment Institutions Network (GAIN) (since 2013), as well as the Memoranda of Understanding with the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (2017) and with the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (2019), and the 2019 UN-wide Climate Action for Jobs Initiative. All these mention the 2030 Agenda as an important frame, and the two Memoranda of Understanding refer to specific SDGs (13 and 14) as informing factors.

At the same time, the ILO has also influenced and shaped the SDGs. The ILO has been a driving force in the negotiation of the SDGs and had a key role in ensuring the centrality of 'decent work' in the 2030 Agenda (ILO, 2013; 2014). Reports of the proceedings of the UN General Assembly Open Working Group on the SDGs highlight not only the active role played by ILO delegates, but also the repeated acknowledgement by other delegates of the importance for the SDGs to reflect ILO targets and conventions (IISD, 2013a; 2013b; 2014). In the sixth session, two country delegates stated that 'the ILO's decent work agenda provides a model for mainstreaming human rights into the post-2015 agenda' (IISD, 2013b: 13). The ILO explicitly hails just transition as a forerunner of the integrated approach in the SDGs (ILO, 2017a). It also sees social justice as crucial to both integrated

sustainability and the SDGs, and its tripartite constituents as key to foster social dialogue and shape the global commitment to decent work, which in turn is decisive for the success of the 2030 Agenda (ILO, 2013; 2015; 2016; 2016b; 2017d; 2018a).

The SDGs are also widely understood as an opportunity for the ILO, as the organisation's resources and expertise are crucial for the implementation of what the ILO itself has contributed to making a work-centred Agenda. This enables the ILO to use the SDGs as a platform to increase its global reach and to further pursue its objectives and mandate (ILO, 2015; 2016b; 2018b). The ILO's strong agency behind the SDGs is also evident in the Green Jobs Programme's emphasis on the cruciality of its tripartite resources for the success of the Goals (ILO, 2017d).

This bidirectionality, however, is not on equal terms. Although clearly influenced by the SDGs, the references in ILO documents to the SDGs are not systematic. While they are prominent in ideational documents, they are less frequent in more action-oriented normative and institutional ones (e.g. ILO, 2015a; 2017a; 2019). As these documents respond more explicitly to the interests of the organisation's members, one can question the influence of the SDGs on the partial greening of the ILO. While ILO officials who work on Green Jobs stress that the relationship between the SDGs and ILO initiatives is 'acknowledged' and 'growing', little has happened in practice. These officials point to the need to strengthen links between the 2030 Agenda and the ILO (interview #9). In addition, no significant changes have been made to ILO structures and operations as a result of the SDGs. A minor exception is the 2018 Decent Work for Sustainable Development platform, an online support tool mostly aimed at ILO staff and constituents to foster understanding and stimulate discussions on the relationship between the Decent Work Agenda and the SDGs.

In sum, the relationship between the ILO and the SDG is thus not one of unidirectional influence but rather of bidirectional co-constitution and co-evolution – which strongly



challenges the linear rationale behind the impact and effectiveness of ‘global governance through goal setting’ (Abbott & Bernstein, 2015; Biermann, Kanie and Kim, 2017).

Additionally, the SDGs themselves are not immune to the challenges of integration, which constitutes a further caveat when assessing their influence. Studies have highlighted how the synergistic aspirations of the SDGs go hand in hand with numerous trade-offs between goals (e.g. Pradhan et al. 2017). Even more fundamentally, the very integration of environmental concerns into the SDGs has been questioned, with critics pointing at the enduring prioritisation of growth and at the dilution of environmental targets and indicators within socio-economic goals (Elder and Olsen 2019; Zeng et al 2020). This further emphasises the challenges of bridging the existing fault lines which hinder (greater) sustainability integration. Given how the ILO’s mandate ‘sits’ largely on the socio-economic side of these fault lines, the bidirectional influence between the SDGs and the ILO should also be taken into account as a potentially impeding factor towards deeper greening, both within the ILO and in global governance.

## **8.5 Conclusion**

This chapter analysed how the ILO, as an example of a major international organisation, has responded to the call for greater integration of environmental sustainability into its primarily socio-economic focus; and whether the SDGs have acted as a catalyst in this response.

A number of key findings emerge. First, the ILO has indeed placed greater emphasis on the importance of environmental concerns in its ideas, norms and institutions. There are consistent greening trends, most notably in the development and refinement of the just transition framework. These trends have been strongest at the level of ideas, but are also observable in norms and institutions.

While such greening, remains largely instrumental, the ILO shows growing awareness of the interdependence between socio-economic and environmental factors, which has spurred greater multilateral and inter-organisational engagement. In this respect, the SDGs have had some influence in promoting less siloisation and more openness to integrated sustainability governance.

However, our findings also show a strong bidirectionality in the relationship between the SDGs and the ILO. The consistent emphasis on its success in influencing and even shaping the SDGs and on how its actions are essential to the Agenda's achievement shows that the ILO sees itself more as an active 'manager' of the 2030 Agenda rather than a mere recipient or implementor of the SDGs.

How does our conceptualisation of change help explain the gradual evolution of international organisations such as the ILO towards integrated sustainability? First, our findings show how new ideas have led to some normative and institutional change. However, this change has also been slower and less pervasive. Our framework suggests here that changes of the core institutions require not only high normative diffusion, but also considerable resource mobilisation. They thus depend more on the interests and priorities of the members of an international organisation, especially if these are as powerful as in the ILO.

This underscores again the importance of understanding change in cyclical terms, with institutions and the actors that operate in them playing a crucial role not just as recipients of change, but also as shapers. In the ILO, these dynamics are evident in the instrumental nature of its approach to integrating environmental concerns. A majority of ILO constituents actively resisted the explicit prioritisation of environmental concerns, seeing it as a danger to the integrity of the organisation's mandate. Their ideas have been feeding back into the overarching cycle, shaping the way the ILO has 'received' the contextual input towards fully integrated sustainability.

Moreover, the ILO's bidirectional relationship with the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs supports our conceptualisation of a cyclical link between contextual change and change in ideas. The SDGs are part of a new context of global sustainability governance, which informs the ideas and norms of international actors such as the ILO. However, actors do in turn exert influence on their context. Thus, any claims about the ability of global goals to have direct, linear steering effects on international organisations need to be significantly nuanced.

We also offer valuable insights into the change dynamics in an international organisation. While the ILO does have some unique features given its tripartite structure and the stronger role of societal actors, like all other international organisations it is mandate-driven and embedded in broader governance systems and regimes. It therefore faces similar challenges of linking the pursuit of its mandate with overarching contextual changes. Hence, net of its inevitable 'idiosyncrasies', the ILO's comparability with other international organisations and broad representativeness make our theoretical and empirical findings widely relevant to future research into other international organisations.

In sum, our study shows that international organisations can and do gradually move towards a greener and more integrated approach to sustainability, and that the SDGs do play a role in this process. At the same time, it also illustrates that such change is far from a linear process whereby governance frameworks such as the SDGs are simply 'applied' to targeted recipients, but rather emerges from the constant cyclical interplay of agents and their context.

# 9. Greening Labour? Trade Unions, Integrated Sustainability and the SDGs

This chapter is based on: Montesano, F. S., Biermann, F., Kalfagianni, A. & Vijge, M. J., 2023. Greening Labour? The role of the SDGs in fostering sustainability integration within trade unions. *Globalizations*.

## 9.1 Introduction

In a global context where human activities and the natural world are increasingly interlinked, overcoming siloisation and integrating the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainability has become a central governance and policy challenge (Bhaduri, et al., 2015; Visseren-Hamakers 2015; Tosun & Lang, 2017). As discussed in previous chapters, to foster such sustainability integration the United Nations launched in 2015 the seventeen SDGs, mostly to be achieved by 2030.

However, for these SDGs to succeed, it is crucial that actors from national to global levels increase their efforts at integrating all sustainability dimensions into their priorities. This is a special concern for trade unions, which are challenged to align environmental concerns with their traditional socio-economic policy agendas. Such alignment is often described as ‘labour environmentalism’, which refers not only to attempts by trade unions to develop environmental policies and to mobilise around environmental issues, but also to their engagement in novel alliances with environmental actors (Nugent, 2011, p. 59). Labour environmentalism stems from the awareness that environmental changes affect jobs, which makes trade unions inevitable stakeholders in environmental policies. Labour actors have indeed a long track record of engaging with environmental issues (Stevis &

Felli, 2015). Also international organisations in this field, such as the International Labour Organisation, have started to ‘green’ their policies (see chapter 8).

So far, labour environmentalism has been studied largely at the national level (Mayer, 2009; Nugent, 2011), with its international dimension having been investigated much less, regarding both the role of international trade union centres and national unions (Felli 2014). Little research has also been conducted to conceptualise diverse ways of how trade unions engage with environmental agendas. Given the importance of labour engagement for the achievement of the SDGs, investigating how unions understand and implement environmental integration is hence crucial. Such research is important also in light of the fundamental dilemmas of trade unions in how they relate to global capitalism and the economic growth paradigm, on the one hand, and the global ecological crisis on the other hand. The traditional core purpose of trade unions is ‘to improve the material welfare of members’ (Booth, 1995, p. 51), and in recent decades, trade unions especially in OECD countries have largely aligned with the capitalist logic of competition, corporatism, and broad public consumption. This often includes their support for market-based solutions to environmental problems (Brand & Niedermoser, 2019).

Yet, have trade unions now also integrated environmental considerations into their principles and practices? Can we see – especially since the launch of the SDGs in 2015 – new trends towards integration? This is the focus of our study. Based on a novel conceptual framework for the analysis of the integration of environmental concerns, we conduct a detailed qualitative content analysis of programmatic and policy documents of two major international labour actors, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), covering the ten-year period from 2012 to 2022, along with a series of interviews with trade union representatives in The Netherlands and Belgium.

The chapter proceeds as follows. In section 2 we conceptualise how different approaches to the environment are situated with special regard to labour environmentalism. In

section 3 we explain our methods and research design. In section 4 we report on our empirical findings. In section 5 we reflect on the key implications of our findings, followed by a conclusion in section 6.

## 9.2 Conceptualisation

In terms of conceptualisation, we refer in this study to the integration of ‘the environment’ into the economic and social agendas of organisations, such as trade unions, as ‘greening’. We distinguish here two broad approaches to greening, ‘reformist’ and ‘transformative’ (see Table 1), which we further differentiate by three core features. Inspired by existing typologies seeking to map different approaches to (environmental) sustainability (Dobson, 1996; Hopwood, et al., 2005), as well as by research highlighting different ‘varieties’ of environmental justice and just transitions (Stavis & Felli, 2015), we distinguish here two broad approaches to greening, ‘reformist’ and ‘transformative’ (see Table 1), which we further differentiate according to three core features. As discussed earlier, trade unions face a dilemma, as they find themselves torn between their goal to protect and improve workers’ welfare within the existing system and their ambitions to change said system to further enhance welfare. Hence, a conceptual framework rooted on dualism is especially suited to further investigate such intrinsic tensions in the context of greening.

‘Reformist’ approaches locate change *within* the dominant global political, economic and value system. The first defining feature here is *anthropocentrism*, that is, the prioritisation of human wellbeing over ecological integrity. Anthropocentrism is an instrumental and exemptionalist understanding of the environment, whereby natural capital is to be preserved only insofar as it advances human interests (Helne & Hirvilammi, 2015; Koprina, et al., 2018). The subordination of environmental priorities to socio-economic ones is apparent in concepts such as green Keynesianism or ‘green jobs’, all of which share an ultimate concern for ensuring that environmental policies do not affect but support

human welfare (Sarkar, 2005; Kareiva & Marvier, 2012; Stevis & Felli, 2015). It is important to mention that some anthropocentric approaches, such as environmental justice, do call for profound systemic changes (see Walker, 2012). However, as further discussed below, reformist or transformative approaches are not defined according to strict, mutually exclusive features, but are rather located along a continuum according to the relative prevalence of said features.

The second feature of reformist approaches is hence *a balanced approach* to sustainability in which the environmental, social and economic dimensions are not hierarchically related. One example is the ‘balance sheet’ approach to sustainability that is close to the ‘Triple Bottom Line’ (Elkington, 1997). This approach could also be seen as underlying the SDGs, which are defined as ‘balanc[ing] the three dimensions of sustainable development’(UNGA, 2015, p.3).

The third feature of reformist approaches is a ‘weak’ approach to sustainability, characterised by *a high degree of substitutability* between human and natural capital (Arias-Maldonado, 2013) and a win-win optimism about the interplay between sustainability dimensions. Reformist perspectives argue not only that environmental protection and social welfare are compatible with economic growth, but also that growth can promote sustainability. Reformist perspectives hence follow the optimistic model of the environmental Kuznets Curve (Maler, 2001; Baek & Kim, 2013). This optimism is often strongly tech-driven (Hovardas, 2016) and speaks to more conservative approaches of ecological modernisation where techno-fixes coupled with market incentives are seen as minimising disruption to the socio-economic system (Barca, 2019). Also stronger versions of ecological modernisation that call for a socio-ecological reconsideration of the criteria that define progress and growth (Stevis, 2011, p. 154) essentially follow socio-economic priorities, and the environment is rarely seen as important in its own right.

‘Transformative’ approaches to greening, instead, call for much deeper changes. The first feature is here *ecocentrism* instead of anthropocentrism, that is, the recognition of the

intrinsic value of all lifeforms and ecosystem themselves (Devall & Sessions, 1985; Washington, et al., 2017). Ecocentrism is also linked to an understanding of environmental justice that refers not only to environmental impacts and injustices to human beings but also to non-human world (Schlosberg, 2013).

The second feature of transformative approaches is a *hierarchical approach* where environmental protection is seen as absolutely necessary for social and economic sustainability (Milne, 1996; Giddings, et al., 2002) and where socio-economic progress is not seen as more crucial than the preservation of natural capital and ecological integrity (Kim & Bosselmann, 2015). This hierarchisation is at times illustrated as the ‘wedding cake’, with the biophysical systems being the basis for all others (Rockström & Sukhdev, 2016).

The third feature is a ‘strong’ approach to sustainability that rejects win-win optimism and instead argues for a *lower degree of substitutability* of natural capital with human capital (Arias-Maldonado, 2013). This often also comes with a more fundamental critique of the capitalist socio-economic system, arguing for its unrealistically optimistic growth expectations as the culprit of the current ecological crisis (Newell, 2013; Hickel & Kallis, 2020).

Table 1 summarises this conceptualisation of reformist and transformative approaches towards the greening of labour organisations. It is important to note that the table is an analytical tool that identifies the two ‘extreme’ archetypes of these approaches. Not all three features need to be simultaneously present for an approach to qualify as either reformist or transformative. For instance, some may argue in favour of what is identified here as Anthropocentrism but reject the Kuznets curve. In other words, reformist and transformative features should not be seen as airtight, rigidly separate compartments, but rather as qualifiers of different approaches along a greening spectrum.

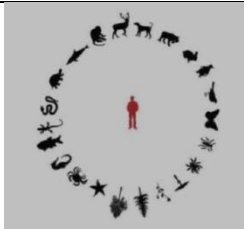
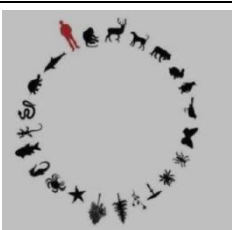

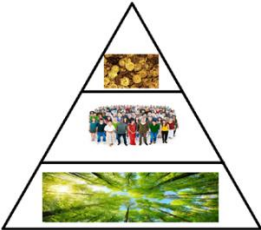




The not necessarily mutually exclusive nature of these features is evident when trying to situate the SDGs based on their declared ambitions. On the one hand, the ‘label’ of the SDGs is a transformative one, seeking to boldly revolutionise sustainability governance by overcoming the enduring neglect of its environmental dimension. The SDGs have unprecedented environmental content, and openly encourage a view of the environment as a foundation for development (Elder & Olsen, 2019). On the other hand, the mission of the SDGs also fits many of the reformist elements. The SDGs’ definition of wellbeing is firmly anthropocentric, relying primarily on socio-economic indicators without integrating planetary considerations or enshrining ecocentric rights. Though the SDGs do include more references to the environmental side of sustainability than previous governance frameworks, the environment is also never prioritised *above* other dimensions. This also signals the SDG’s optimistic view of the positive interplay between the three dimensions and thereby their rather ‘weak’ approach to sustainability. Furthermore, the SDG’s approach to sustainability is clearly balanced, seeking to strike a balance between ‘people’, ‘planet’ and ‘prosperity’. The SDGs’ emphasis on balanced interactions between different dimensions of development (Tosun & Lang, 2017) is also enshrined in the goals themselves, with target 14 of Goal 17 explicitly seeking to increase policy coherence for sustainable development (Tosun & Leininger, 2017).

Table 1: Different approaches to greening<sup>5</sup>

	Approach to greening	
Features	Reformist	Transformative
Role of humans	Anthropocentrism	Ecocentrism

<sup>5</sup> Image sources: Terracon ecotech (Anthropocentrism, Ecocentrism); Wikimedia commons (balanced integration); the authors (Hierarchical integration); Introduction (Weak sustainability, Strong sustainability).

		
Form of integration	Balanced integration 	Hierarchical integration 
Degree of substitutability between dimensions	Weak sustainability 	Strong sustainability 

To study how these approaches to greening are actually operationalised, we distinguish two analytical levels where reformist or transformative greening can be observed (see chapters 6 and 8). The first analytical level is *internal understanding*, that is, the discursive uptake by trade unions of reformist or transformative approaches both descriptively (what is greening) and normatively (what should be done about it). The second analytical level is *operational engagement*, that is, the concrete commitments and initiatives by trade unions to address environmental issues. Operational engagement can be either internal, referring to commitments and initiatives within the unions, or external, that is, how trade unions engage with other actors bilaterally or multilaterally.

To explore causality, we also investigate the factors that shape the engagement of trade unions with greening. We distinguish here between internal factors that have to do with dynamics within trade unions, and external influences of actors and processes outside

trade unions. Among these external factors, we further differentiate between political factors, related to the impact of government agendas and policies, and economic factors, linked to the relevance of production and employment circumstances for trade union priorities.

### **9.3 Methods**

Based on this conceptualisation, we studied how trade unions have changed their internal understanding of the environment and whether and how this translated into operational changes, and whether such changes followed either the reformist or transformative approach. For the latter, we looked at internal initiatives (such as programmes, budget allocation and changes in the organigram) and external engagement with other actors and with global sustainability governance developments. Our empirical research consisted of three main steps.

First, in order to map the historical evolution of labour environmentalism up to 2012, we conducted desk research based on primary sources, such as reports from the ILO and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, and secondary sources, such as scholarly studies on the origins and evolution of labour environmentalism.

Second, we conducted a systematic qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) of 49 ‘adopted documents’ - such as Congress Statements, Strategy and Action Plans, Action Programmes, Resolutions and Positions - published by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), the two largest trade union centres, in the period from 2012 to 2021. We take as a starting point the year 2012, when the UN Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro launched the negotiations for the SDGs. This is an important global contextual change against which developments in the approach of trade unions to the environment can be investigated - not just as outcomes but also as informing inputs – and therefore help answer our research questions. Adopted documents are those that must be approved

by all member organisations and thus have a high degree of legitimacy and representativeness. International trade union centres such as the ITUC and the ETUC are ideal units of study given their function as union ‘aggregators’ that allow for a focussed analysis of trends across the multifaceted landscape of national labour unions. Simply put, the official standpoints of an international trade union centre reflect a baseline and common understanding on which all member unions have agreed upon. Given the vast amount of publicly available documentary sources from the ITUC and the ETUC, we used a preliminary keyword-based screening on topical relevance to focus on documents that had at least one mention of ‘sustainable development’ or ‘environment’. We also used this qualitative content analysis to specifically investigate the relationship between greening trends within trade unions and the SDGs. By looking at how the SDGs are framed and operationalised, we can not only further qualify trade unions’ evolving approaches to greening, but also probe into the existence and direction of causal links between stronger engagement with the SDGs and greater alignment with a specific approach to greening.

Third, to complement our findings we conducted eleven semi-structured interviews with representatives from international and national trade union centres. Regarding the latter, for accessibility and language-related reasons we focused on Dutch and Belgian trade union confederations. In addition to accessibility and language-related reasons, this choice was also due to the Netherlands and Belgium being countries with respectively among the lowest (15.4%) and highest (49.1%) trade union density rates (ILO, 2022). Zooming in on both cases had thus illustrative value for a wider range of national contexts with different degrees of unionisation. Furthermore, national union confederations have greater internal cohesion which allows them to go beyond the ‘minimum common denominator’ of the ITUC and ETUC. By looking at two national cases, it is therefore possible to gain a deeper understanding of the current trends in labour environmentalism. The aim of the interviews was to add granularity to the content analysis by providing further information. Such anecdotal evidence is also useful to explore hypotheses and

concepts and complement more rigorous findings with vivid elements that add persuasiveness (Enkin & Jadad, 1998; Hoeken, 2001).

Our approach brings some methodological limitations. First, given our focus on international trade union centres, it is likely that some subaltern or radical perspectives on labour environmentalism are underrepresented in our findings. Second, because our focus on aggregate trends, the generalisability of our findings will be more limited than what a large-*n* qualitative study of national trade unions would warrant. Complementary in-depth research of national trade unions would therefore be needed to add complexity to these findings. Finally, our reliance on official documents and interviews with union representatives might lead to a positive bias towards assessing concrete change.

## 9.4 Findings

We used the conceptualisation of greening as a spectrum to qualify our findings about trends in labour environmentalism. We divided our findings into pre- and post-2012, and for each period we looked at developments in terms of both internal understanding and operational engagement with greening.

### 9.4.1 *Greening processes before 2012*

Until the late 1960s, environmental concerns were largely absent from trade unions. Soon after, however, the engagement of trade unions with environmental issues increased. One starting point was a broader understanding of occupational safety and health concerns (ILO, 1972; Silverman, 2006). This engagement with the environment was still primarily instrumental and driven by concerns about the impact of pollution on workers' welfare (Felli 2014). At the end of the 1980s, the decade the Occupational Safety and Health Working Party at the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (the predecessor of ITUC) tried to push unions to open to general environmental issues. Greening began to be seen as a necessary catalyst for labour influence in societal transitions, and the

concept of 'Just Transition' was introduced by trade unions to promote green jobs as a key component of transitioning from fossil fuels. While the idea of 'just transition' is a bit more transformative than traditional 'green Keynesianism' (McCauley & Heffron, 2018), its core aims remain anthropocentric. The greening of jobs is subject to strong social demands; it is the 'decency' of jobs that matters and greening is mostly framed as an opportunity to reap win-win socio-economic outcomes (see chapter 8).

More concretely, policy agendas and initiatives of trade unions started to reflect the strengthening discursive links between the working environment and the natural environment (Olsen & Kemter, 2012), advocating the greening of jobs as a key step towards greater welfare. Occupational safety and health priorities were important in the development and implementation of for example workplace risk assessments, where unions contributed to the evaluation of the environmental and labour practices of a workplace (Vogel & Boix, 1999).

More recent is the emergence of coalitions between trade unions and environmental movements. The first steps towards coalition-building were made only in the 1990s. The run-up to the 1992 Rio Earth Summit was a founding moment, and in its aftermath important collaborations and debates between unions and environmentalists were launched (Silverman, 2004; Stevis, 2011). First concrete results of these interactions were for example the 2006 launch of the Blue-Green alliance between steel workers and the environmentalist Sierra Club in the United States (Stevis, 2011). The key triggers for these early developments were instrumental, as both labour and environmental organisations became aware of their interdependence in a globalised context and realised that their interests were likely to be damaged by the same neoliberal production model (Silverman, 2006). Furthermore, globalisation increased the interdependence between biophysical and socio-economic systems, which drove a 'logic of participation', exerting pressure on actors with different priorities towards coalition building (Turner, 2006). As sustainable development gained global prominence, an important concern of trade unions was to

steer the definition of sustainability towards one that was more in line with their own anthropocentric priorities: ‘the long-term task must be to find a balance between growth and the establishment of an optimum environment’ (ICFTU/IFWBB, 1972).

The involvement of unions with *global* environmental governance began only in the 1990s. The 1992 ICFTU (now ITUC) World Congress on environmental issues consolidated their official position, which was based on the idea ‘that in a world of finite resources there must be a reconciliation between growth and environmental protection’ (ICFTU OHSE Working Party, 1992; Silverman, 2004). In 1996, trade unions were recognised as major stakeholders and gained an official seat in the new Commission of Sustainable Development. This enabled them to play a significant role in the development of the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015). In this context, labour’s involvement was centred on emphasising the cruciality of decent work to combat poverty, which was the first aim of the Millennium Development Goals (ITUC, 2010) (ILO, 2012). At this stage, trade unions’ stance on greening – with its optimistic focus on balancing economic growth and environmental sustainability as well as the declared aim to push social welfare up the global sustainability agenda, can be best described as ‘reformist’.

#### 9.4.2 *Greening processes after 2012*

After 2012, the concept of just transition as debated within trade unions had significantly broadened and included now an explicit ecological dimension as the driver of a ‘sustainable economic model based on social justice and ecological transition’ (ETUC, 2019, p. 21). This is also clear in the greater support for international environmental protection and openness to a full transition away from polluting sectors (FNV, 2018). Embracing a broader definition of just transition was a ‘cultural switch’ for trade unions, helping them green their definition of sustainable development while still prioritising employment protection (interview ETUC). Unions have also integrated the original

'defensive' approach to transitions (protecting just and healthy jobs *from* transitions) with more proactive and future-oriented elements (interview FNV #2).

There was also more criticism of neoliberal globalisation, and trade unions have increasingly referred to the negative environmental impacts of the socio-economic system. Some documents argued that 'unregulated capitalism' is 'ecologically destructive and unsustainable' 'for the environment, for society and for the economy' (ETUC, 2015; ITUC, 2018), and that a 'new social contract' would be needed to address its shortcomings that would need to include 'a full-scale transformation of global production systems and consumption patterns' and advance a new 'model of globalisation anchored in sustainability and environmental preservation' (ITUC, 2010, p. 34; 2014; 2018). Although mentions of the environmental implications of the failings of the current system remain within a socio-economic frame, references to the ecological dimension of a systemic crisis have gained frequency and weight. The ETUC mentions 'deep and radical change in our economic system' as essential to solve the 'current ecological crisis' (ETUC, 2019, p. 23), and the ITUC puts 'people and planet' on an equal footing as victims of the failures of a system that is responsible for the 'destruction of the environment' (ITUC, 2021). Overall, this evidence indicates a gradual shift towards a revised, less anthropocentric view of the role of humans vis-à-vis nature, which in turn informs a stronger approach to sustainability.

Despite the harsh words about the ecological responsibilities of the global establishment, however, trade unions are not calling for a real system transformation. Instead, they are mostly advocating 'reformism from within', arguing that well-managed integration will lead to positive socio-economic and environmental outcomes. While rejecting 'an exclusive focus on economic growth' (ITUC, 2010, p. 32), trade unions still uphold a win-win vision on balancing environmental and economic policy as the key to the establishment of a 'social market economy' (ETUC, 2015; 2019, p. 12). As 'there is no contradiction between sustainability and the demand for quality jobs for all' (ETUC, 2019,



p. 49), ‘the new economic model’ trade unions promote is, in fact, one that is still centred on efficiency and ‘greener’ growth rather than deeper system transformations (ETUC, 2011; 2019).

Additionally, all references to environmental themes are framed as instrumental for a just transition which, as seen above, prioritises socio-economic welfare over environmental protection (ITUC, 2018, p. 28; ETUC, 2019, p. 7). A just transition is one that *protects* workers from the negative effects of transitions in general, and trade unions stress the importance of putting social safety nets in place across the whole production chain of the most transition-sensitive sectors (interview FNV #3; ITUC, 2018, p. 29). In the key documents of trade unions, despite the increasing attention to ‘stabilising the planet’, environmental concerns remain always linked to their socio-economic costs and a markedly anthropocentric focus on ‘sustainable growth’ that ensures human wellbeing (ETUC, 2019; ITUC, 2021).

The concrete agendas and initiatives of trade unions largely confirm these discursive trends. On the one hand, there has been some greening of such initiatives, for example in terms of a shift from a strict focus on growth-focused development cooperation to ‘development-at-large’, including environmental sustainability (ITUC interview #2). There is also more emphasis on the role and relevance of unions in transition processes, ‘where social progress, environmental protection and economic needs are brought into a framework of democratic governance’ (ITUC, 2010, p. 65). More recently, trade union documents also mention ‘environmental rights’ as part of the ‘social model’ unions should strive to defend (ETUC, 2019, p. 6) and of ‘the planet’ as context for union action (ITUC, 2018, p. 25), which seem to indicate a shift towards more ecocentric and transformative approaches. The new ITUC Frontline campaigns also include a clear environmental angle (ITUC 2021). At organisational level, specific environmental sustainability dossiers and working groups are beginning to emerge, and specialised staff have been hired in many unions (ETUC interview; FNV interview #3; ACLVB interview).

On the other hand, actionable sustainability priorities remain growth-heavy (ETUC, 2015, p. 7; 2019). References to the environment are mostly found in the introductory sections of trade union documents and less so in the more action-oriented sections (ITUC, 2010; 2014; ETUC, 2019). The ITUC's strategic priorities and plans hinge on four pillars (Peace, Democracy and Rights; Regulating Economic Power; Global Shifts Just Transitions; Equality), with the environment only marginally featuring in the Just Transitions pillar (ITUC 2018; 2021). At the organisational level, actual change towards the institutional integration of environmental concerns within trade unions is still limited (ITUC interview #1).

Our research shows that coalitions between trade unions and environmental actors have become more significant in recent years. While these coalitions were initially mostly to add vague 'green goals' to welfare-oriented priorities (ETUC, 2011), a few years later they became more open and with more outspoken sustainability goals, seeking 'to create alliances with other actors to support the "sustainability first" principle' (ETUC, 2019). Such alliances deepened also in the run-up to the climate summits 2019 in Madrid and 2021 in Glasgow, where cooperation between labour, social and environmental civil society organisations was strong, as all sides looked for allies to mobilise resistance to damaging (neoliberal) policy developments (Heery, et al., 2012; interview ITUC #1). These trends are also visible at the national level. In the Netherlands, ties between unions and environmentalists have also been strengthening, particularly in the wake of the national 2019 Climate Accord, where a large number of governmental and non-governmental actors agreed on core principles to fight climate change (Netherlands, 2019; interview FNV #1, #4, #5). Since then, Dutch trade unions have developed closer ties with major environmental organisations, particularly those that focus on the social side of climate issues (interview FNV #3).

Internationally, trade unions also cooperate more with environmental alliances such as the Cities Climate Leadership Group C40 (ITUC, 2021, p. 12). The increasing joint

mobilisation is also a sign of the growing understanding of the compatibility of the sustainability agendas of both labour and environmental movements. This is visible in the greater solidarity among movements when they mobilise for the ‘other’s’ cause, for example with environmental activists supporting strikes by railway staff for better working conditions, or trade unions joining climate demonstrations (interview FNV #4).

In addition, the aims of alliances have expanded beyond mobilisation to include more substantial cooperation (interview ITUC #1). For example, trade union centres and civil society organisations now sit together in the Belgian Federal Council for Sustainability (interview ACLVB). By focusing on shared priorities while acknowledging the existence of differences between them, labour and environmental actors have set up sizable networks to jointly pursue social, economic and environmental sustainability goals. The Dutch Climate Crisis Coalition is a good example of such a network (interview FNV #1). Overall, trade unions increasingly see cooperation with environmental movements as a way to push for deeper reforms, including on environmental protection (ITUC, 2010, p. 36). Cooperation is seen as offering an opportunity for building broader support for trade union positions, while allowing the concerns of environmental organisations to be incorporated into social dialogue (ITUC, 2018, p. 9).

Deeper cooperation has also led both sides to influence each other. Trade unions mention their engagement with environmental actors as important to better understand the importance of the (natural) environment for jobs, which in turn played a role in the green ‘update’ of core concepts such as just transition (interview FNV #2; interview ITUC #2; interview ACLVB). However, from a labour perspective, environmental movements have not been able to have much of an influence on trade union priorities (interview ACLVB), which remain staunchly anthropocentric. Environmental actors themselves state that their greening influence on labour actors is far from consistent and depends instead on contextual factors. Specifically, it is easier for them to push a greener agenda in sectors or businesses that are facing problems and where therefore workers are more open to

mobilisation and change than in ‘successful’ companies where employee satisfaction is high (interview XR). Trade unions have also successfully ‘used’ alliances to push their own social priorities up the agenda of environmental actors. There, concepts such as just transition have been important frames to call for the integration of social dialogue and justice into all aspects of sustainability transitions (interview FNV #1;#2;#5; interview ACLVB). Engaging with labour actors has also made some environmental movements more aware of the need to adjust their communication in a socially conscious way when discussing sustainability (interview XR).

Despite recent changes in a green direction, however, trade unions’ engagement with environmental actors stays broadly within the reformist frame. Enhanced cooperation is primarily seen as useful to advance labour’s own ‘values and objectives’, including in areas where the traditional capacity of trade unions is limited, such as via the Civil Society Equity Review Project on phasing out fossil fuels (ITUC, 2010, p. 11; interview ITUC #2). Alliances are often seen as ‘influence magnifiers’, helping unions access and diffuse their views across networks where they would normally not be included (interview FNV #2). Trade union centres such as the ETUC have explicitly said that their cooperation with environmental civil society organisations occurs in initiatives that will advance ETUC’s own policies (ETUC 2011; 2015), thereby confirming the instrumental nature of their engagement. In general, trade unions predominantly talk about coalitions for social goals, and focus much less on their environmental contributions (ITUC, 2014, p. 10). The content of trade unions’ input to alliances with environmental movements also fits the ‘reformism from within’ mould discussed above. Cooperation should namely foster socio-economic welfare, measured in terms of the far-from-transformative ‘inclusive growth’ (ETUC, 2019). In this sense, it is telling that the largest Dutch trade union centre coordinates a bi-monthly roundtable on transitions with business leaders, where only one environmental organisation has been invited and only after it had announced a review of the transition strategy of ‘big polluters’ (interview FNV #3).

Alliances are still hampered by many challenges. First, labour and environmental actors have different views of what ‘sustainability’ entails. Trade unions have a rather balanced view, where humans and nature are seen as a fully integrated system and where it is important to look at both sides when discussing transitions. Conversely, environmental movements favour a stronger, more hierarchical approach that focuses on ‘saving the planet’ *from* human excesses (interview FNV #4; see also section 3 above). Although overall tensions have been decreasing, trade unions still criticise environmentalists for not considering the social costs of what they advocate (interview FNV #2).

Furthermore, there are tensions surrounding the ‘ownership’ of certain concepts. Trade unions argue that they should be the only actors responsible for multilateral consultations on what they consider their issues, as ‘social partnership should not be confused with civil society dialogue. Worrying developments [...] have been witnessed both at European and national levels, with the so-called consultation of social partners and NGOs, or public consultation on issues that are within the competence of the social partners’ (ETUC, 2015, p. 27). This also led to conceptual frictions, where unions expressed discontent for the co-optation by environmental movements of labour concepts such as ‘strike’ (in the case of the climate strikes) or just transition (interview ITUC #1; interview ACLVB). Given these barriers, it is perhaps unsurprising that poor communication is seen as one of the main obstacles to deeper cooperation between labour and environmental actors. Even between union members and environmental activists with compatible goals, ‘company culture’ and discourse can be rather different (interview XR). In some cases, the lack of communication between the two sides has even led to conflicts, for example when environmental activists were occupying a forest that was to be cleared and this was countered by a demonstration of workers of a nearby factory whose jobs would be endangered if this did not happen (van Gurp, 2022; interview FNV #3). Finally, trade unions’ commitment to cooperation appears stronger on paper than in practice. Mentions of engagement with other actors, particularly on environmental themes, tend to dwindle

when discussing the setup of concrete campaigns (ITUC, 2014, p. 4), which further weakens any transformative trends at play.

#### 9.4.3 *The influence of the SDGs*

Since the negotiations that led to the launch of the SDGs, trade unions have been engaging with this new global framework. But has this also influenced their approach to ‘greening’? Discursively, trade unions see the SDGs primarily as important frames, a common language within a growing policymaking space of many networks and alliances. They see the SDGs also as useful indicators to complement labour-specific ones in measuring trade union aims, such as in the case of target 2 of SDG 13 that can be used alongside indicators on social dialogue and just transition (interview ITUC #2). Trade unions use the SDGs also in international contexts, for example to frame their input to the COP (interview FNV #3). Furthermore, the SDGs have been mainstreamed by the ITUC Congress in 2018 and since been incorporated into the discourse and work of virtually all ITUC departments (interview ITUC #2). The ‘translation’ of the SDGs into labour concepts and agendas also occurs in national trade union centres (interview ACLVB; interview FNV #4). Overall, the key discursive influence of the SDGs is an instrumental one: the goals are seen as ‘opportunities’ to ‘advance goals that are critical to the labour movement’ (ITUC, 2018, p. 6), including via the SDGs’ role as investment triggers to ‘create new, quality jobs’ (ETUC, 2019, p. 80). Furthermore, while trade unions see the SDGs as a legitimising framework for greater attention to environmental issues as well as for stronger collaboration with non-labour actors (interview FNV #3; #4; interview ITUC #2; see also chapter 8), their main SDG references are rarely environmental, as is evident in the broad absence of environmental SDGs and targets from the document ‘SDG – trade union highlights’. (ITUC, 2018, p. 40). Rather, the core focus here is on SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth, which trade unions see as informing their demands for a New Social Contract based on just transition (ETUC, 2019, p. 72; ITUC, 2021, p. 7; 20).

Trade union centres have also launched a variety of SDG initiatives, ranging from seminars to projects to increase awareness of what unions can do within and for the 2030 Agenda (interview ETUC; interview FNV #2), often linking SDG 8 and 13 (on climate change) to stress the importance of a balanced approach to sustainability. The ETUC successfully lobbied the EU to replace the Annual Growth Survey with Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy and to add new indicators to the Scoreboard based on SDGs (interview ETUC). Trade unions have also run trainings for their representatives to bring the SDGs closer to the work floor and to highlight the ‘win-win’ synergies between greening and better working conditions (interview ACLVB).

Yet all such initiatives around the SDGs remain strongly anthropocentric. ‘SDG 8, decent work and economic growth, together with the Agenda for Decent Work, and the fight against inequalities are (...) key priorities for the trade union movement’, and the SDGs are to be prioritised to move ‘toward progressive policies that promote social justice and defend fundamental rights of workers’ (ETUC, 2019, pp. 80-81). This focus is also evident in ETUC’s new Sustainable Growth and Decent Work index, which is almost entirely based on SDG 8 and follows the rationale that progress towards decent work and economic growth will spill over to all other sustainability objectives (ETUC, 2021; interview ETUC).

While trade unions increasingly refer to the SDGs as important frames that inform discourse and initiatives, the actual influence of the goals is much weaker. For example, there are no mentions of the SDGs or the 2030 Agenda throughout the 2015 ETUC’s Action Programme (ETUC, 2015). Four years later, the ETUC, while acknowledging that ‘the adoption of the United Nations Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [...] have set universal standards and create new policy cycles’, also stated that the ‘real impact [of the SDGs] is far too limited to change the situation fundamentally.’ (ETUC, 2019, p. 49).

The influence of the SDGs is limited and mostly confined to trade unions' own socio-economic agenda. It also needs to be qualified by stressing how trade unions themselves have had influence on the goals. Confirming the bidirectional trends identified for other labour actors such as the ILO (see chapter 8), trade unions have from the beginning actively pushed for the inclusion of employment and decent work priorities as 'standalone' goals within the SDGs and lobbied to shape the indicators for the goals in a labour-friendly way (ITUC, 2014, p. 6; interview ITUC #2; interview ACLVB). Although trade unions emphasise transformative elements when mentioning how their input is aimed at radically reforming the unsustainable capitalist institutions (ITUC, 2014), their actual agenda is far more conservative when it comes to the environment. Trade unions openly prioritise a balanced approach to greening that is centred on just transition, stressing that 'holding governments to account for climate is a top priority, but so too is ensuring that (...) the crucial issues of food security, energy security and water are addressed' (ITUC, 2014, p.10).

Overall, trade unions have since 2012 intensified their engagement with the environment. Discursively, greater emphasis on ecological concerns has coincided with harsher and more explicit criticism of the shortcomings of neoliberal capitalism. Trade unions have also developed a stronger environmental focus at the level of strategies and campaigns and broader cooperation with environmental movements. Since their adoption, they have also recognised the SDGs as important frames. At the same time, however, these changes since 2012 have not heralded any major shifts towards the transformative approach towards greening.

Both discursively and operationally, greening trends have remained firmly reformist, with enduring optimism towards growth-based sustainability solutions and no real integration of environmental priorities. The engagement of unions with the SDGs reflects this trend, and the goals have been largely used as frameworks to advance anthropocentric labour priorities.



#### 9.4.4 *Factors that might explain variation in greening*

Our research also offered some insights into why trade unions' approaches to greening vary over time and across unions, even though our research design does not allow for firm causal inferences. First, one major factor are intra-union characteristics and dynamics. Here, growing awareness of the impact of environmental problems of working conditions as well as growing confidence that labour priorities are not mutually exclusive with environmental ones have bolstered labour environmentalism (interviews FNV #2, #4). The personal initiative from union leaders has also been helped to push green topics on a union's agenda (Silverman, 2006; interview FNV #4). Shifts in how union representatives see their role are also relevant. Particularistic agendas that focus on the defence of their own members tend to be less open to general green concepts and prefer to act upon 'environmental conditions' that affect the working environment. Universalistic goals instead prioritise the greater good and favour stronger views of sustainability (Silverman, 2004; Stevis, et al., 2018). Perceptions of the union's green role also tend to vary across sub-groups within a union, such as the generally more environmentally aware youth and healthcare representatives (interview FNV #4).

Second, external factors help trade unions legitimise discourses or initiatives that go beyond traditional interpretations of their mandate. The increasing prominence of environmental protection in global debates can enable unions to be more vocal on green themes if they can link them to global agreements such as the Paris accord (interview FNV #1; interview ACLVB) or to supranational frameworks such as the EU Green Deal (ITUC interview #2). The growing 'judicialisation' of the environment, with successful court cases where environmental priorities weighed more than other interests – for example, the *Urgenda* and Shell cases in the Netherlands – also had an empowering function (interview FNV #3). Important are also global dynamics, such as neoliberal globalisation, on the formation and strengthening of alliances between trade unions and environmental movements.

One external factor are also national political characteristics, notably different government approaches to sustainability. For example, many Western European countries lean towards a more environmental interpretation of sustainability, with large sustainability dossiers falling under the ministry of environment, which in turn leads trade unions to interpret sustainability as a more environmental issue. In other countries, however, such as in Africa, sustainability has a more developmental connotation, which is mirrored by their national unions (ITUC interview #1). Trade unions also tend to be more cautious about advocating environmental sustainability if the national or local government is less green and less likely to, for instance, subsidise the protection jobs during transitions (interview ACLVB). In repressive regimes, where unionism is primarily concerned with survival, environmentalism is also unable to be prominent (interview ITUC #1). Shifts in political preferences impact labour environmentalism as well. For instance, the migration of union members from the traditional socialist party strongholds to the more progressive left or to populist right is likely to affect a union's environmental disposition (interview FNV #3).

Finally, the composition of the national economy and the resulting distribution of workforce across sectors influences unions' view of the environment. For example, unions in Eastern European countries, where the extractive sector is still large and transitions are more likely to have short-term negative effects on employment, tend to be less favourable to greening than those in service-oriented economies (interview ETUC; interview ITUC #2).

As for the engagement of trade unions with the SDGs, the nature and design of the SDGs seem to hinder their use by and impact on unions. Union representatives view the SDGs as conceived by and for technocrats and policymakers, which creates a gap between management and blue-collar employees and makes the goals difficult to translate for and use at the work floor (interview ITUC #1; #2; interview ETUC; interview FNV #3; #5). The SDGs are also seen as too broad and difficult to operationalise, which increases scepticism

of the SDGs as ‘mostly smoke’ used by ‘people in suits with SDG pins’ (interview FNV #4) and leads many unions to use their agreed goals – which often overlaps with the SDGs – for mobilisation purposes (interview FNV #1). The form of the SDGs, with targets and formalised indicators, also seems to make them more popular with union management and marketing departments than on the work floor (interview FNV #4; interview ACLVB).

## 9.5 Discussion

We now discuss the most striking trends emerging from our study and their theoretical and policy implications. First, our research suggests that unions fall almost entirely within the reformist approach towards greening. While their engagement with environmental issues has intensified since 2012, this engagement has barely moved towards more transformative approaches. Trade unions broadly address environmental concerns based on their instrumental relevance, that is, in terms of their potential impact on their own agreed goals. Although we observed some discursive integration of more transformative elements concerning, notably regarding the overhaul of the ‘unsustainable’ global capitalist system towards greater attention to the planet as a whole, the core priorities and concrete initiatives of trade unions still reflect a strictly anthropocentric view of nature, as something that contributes to (or hinders) socio-economic welfare but is not an equally worthy self-standing entity (Rathzel & Uzzell, 2011).

Second, even though open criticism of neoliberal capitalism as a key cause of unsustainable development is rising within trade unions, the same unions still emphasise economic growth and other capitalist mainstays as compatible solutions to achieve synergies across all three sustainability dimensions. Trade unions have been very successful in advocating the integration of social concerns as counterweights to unbridled capitalism. At the same time, even if the maintenance of some social dimensions (such as occupational health and safety) may warrant more transformative approaches, most

unions still follow the capitalist interpretation of their mandate to increase material welfare rather than a broader one that is more aware of its socio-ecological challenges. In other words, balanced integration and weak sustainability remain virtually unchallenged. While unions especially in the Global North shrink in membership and density (van Biezen & Poguntke, 2014), they still represent the interests of millions of workers worldwide. Hence, the persistent alignment of some of the largest trade union centres with the reformist approach to the environment does not bode well for those who advocate for more transformative approaches to sustainability. While union representatives are certainly more aware of the importance of environmental issues in the context of their own socio-economic priorities, it is unlikely that they will support any kind of transformative ecocentrism anytime soon.

Third, these trends are reflected in the largely instrumental engagement of trade unions with other actors and global debates on environmental issues. Alliances between trade unions and environmental organisations are appearing, but for the unions, the triggers behind this growing engagement remain strictly anthropocentric. External engagement is here mostly seen as an influence magnifier that allows unions to broaden their reach and push for labour welfare progress beyond their traditional fora. Alliances could therefore be defined as ‘catalytic’, as the ‘allies’ cooperate to achieve shared goals but retain separate leaderships, use different means, and ultimately keep their original agendas (Waddock & Post, 1995).

Fourth, as for engagement of trade unions with the global SDGs, their approach is ambivalent. On the one hand, trade unions use the SDGs to push their own socio-economic priorities further up the global agenda. This approach confirms the SDGs’ own alignment with a reformist approach to environmental issues. It is also likely to fuel further criticism of the contradictions between the official ‘bold and transformative’ ambitions of the SDGs – also with a view to environmental priorities – and their actual enduring prioritisation of economic growth and neglect of environmental priorities (Elder

& Olsen, 2019; Hickel, 2019). The fact that trade unions actively use the SDGs – and particularly SDG 8 – also further confirms their enduring belief in the advantages of capitalism for their welfare-oriented mandate.

On the other hand, trade unions have also criticised the SDGs as vague, out-of-touch goals that are of more interest to marketing managers and CEOs than to workers. This scepticism about the SDGs' business-friendly nature, with their focus on indicators and targets, speaks to the diffusion of 'corporate' and 'technocratic' forms of governance far beyond economic domains (Engle Merry, 2011; Hartley, 2020). It also underscores how the claims of the SDGs to unprecedented inclusivity and to overcoming the strictly quantitative approach of their predecessors (Fukuda-Parr, 2016) are far from a universally accepted reality. Hence, the combination of trade unions' instrumental use of the goals and their criticism of the SDGs' corporate appeal are likely to further hinder the SDG claim to bridge the economic, social and environmental 'silos' of sustainability (see e.g., Bogers, et al., 2022).

Overall, our findings highlight the complexity of the relationship between the SDGs and the notion of transformation. On the one hand, there is a clear gap between the SDGs' transformative claims and actual content: the SDGs' approach to integration and greening anthropocentric, balanced and based on a weak approach to sustainability, and therefore irrefutably reformist. On the other hand, the criticism of the SDGs on the part of several labour actors suggests that the SDGs do in fact go against *some* of the established systems. In other words, the SDGs' reformist paradigm of bridging the three dimensions of sustainability is not aligned with the reformist priorities of trade unions, and therefore might have the potential to inspire transformative aspirations.

Finally, our findings illustrate the importance of adding conceptual nuance to the notion of 'change towards sustainability'. First, shedding light on the key features of the two ends of the greening spectrum – reformist versus transformative – allowed us to qualify trade unions' greater engagement with environmental issues. It offered well-defined criteria to

differentiate between reformist and transformative approaches based on the definition of the role of humans, on the form of sustainability integration, and on the degree of substitutability between sustainability dimensions. We also inductively identified factors that might explain variation across trade unions' approaches to greening. These factors could provide useful reference points for future investigations into how other actors deal with environmental concerns.

Second, our operationalisation of approaches to greening highlighted differences between greening trends at the discursive and at the operational level. The stronger prevalence of the reformist approach that we observed when looking at concrete initiatives, corroborates research that show how actionable change often lags behind ideational change, thereby stressing the importance of a layered and interdependent conceptualisation of processes of change (see Introduction and chapter 8). The link we draw between a clear conceptualisation of greening and a dynamic operationalisation of change also offers a valuable starting point for future research on sustainability integration by a wider range of actors.

Third, our conceptualisation of greening helps gain insights into the challenges to achieving deep and resilient 'sustainability transformations'. With regard to sustainability-oriented cooperation, our findings show that despite some progress, unions and environmentalists are still at the opposite ends of the spectrum when it comes to their normative interpretation of greening. Not only does this shed light on the origins of and factors behind the communication obstacles between the two sides. It also adds predictive value to our findings, as greater distance on the spectrum between two actors makes frictions and therefore the inability to agree on truly transformative joint action likely to persist for the near future. This is also relevant for the impact of sustainability governance frameworks and frameworks, such as the SDGs. The SDGs do not sit on the far end of the transformative spectrum and have therefore attracted much criticism from environmentalists. At the same time, their reformist content is also not fully aligned with

trade union priorities. On the one hand, the SDGs' ambivalent role between reformist and transformative approaches could optimistically bolster their importance as 'boundary objects' able to speak to and therefore unite different interest groups (Burger & Parker, 2022). On the other hand, this great discursive distance is also likely to complicate their ability to be fully embraced and implemented by actors at both ends of the greening spectrum.

## **9.6 Conclusion**

This chapter studied the integration of environmental considerations into the discourse and practice of trade unions, including changes in their engagement with other actors and on the global stage. Before 2012, we observed a slow but gradual integration of environmental concerns into trade union agendas, a process that started in the 1970s and was characterised by an instrumental approach to the environment that prioritised socio-economic concerns of unions. Cooperation between trade unions and environmental movements also faced a sluggish start, and first steps in the 1990s were made only as both sides sought to join forces to counter the dangers of neoliberal capitalism for their respective interests. As for global sustainability governance, trade unions began to engage in the 1990s mainly to ensure that the social dimension did not end up as the junior partner of economic and environmental sustainability.

After 2012, there has been deeper discursive change in how trade unions conceive and operationalise the environment. However, this emerging 'labour environmentalism' has remained strictly anthropocentric and rooted in the mainstream, without concrete calls for more transformative change. There are also differences between trade unions in their approach to their larger environment, whereby contextual factors – internal and external, political and economic – play an important role. Alliances between trade unions and environmental movements have been growing, driven by greater understanding as well as by the self-interested awareness of the role of cooperation as a catalyst for a broader scope

of action. Despite these developments, cooperation remains limited when it comes to communication around the definition of what environmental sustainability entails, since labour and environmental actors remain here at opposite ends of the conceptual spectrum.

As for the role of the SDGs, trade unions have largely continued to promote their own socio-economic priorities as a cornerstone of sustainability. This instrumental approach is evident in the bidirectional engagement of unions with the SDGs. While the SDGs have influenced trade unions as framing tools, unions have also been shaping goals, targets and indicators to increase compatibility with their own anthropocentric objectives around decent work and just transitions. Trade unions also mention the limits to and concerns around the influence of the SDGs on labour, which further dilutes expectations about the ability of the SDGs to promote the integration of the environment into the agendas of socio-economic actors. In sum, the odds that the SDGs will deliver on their transformative promises before they expire in 2030 appear rather small.

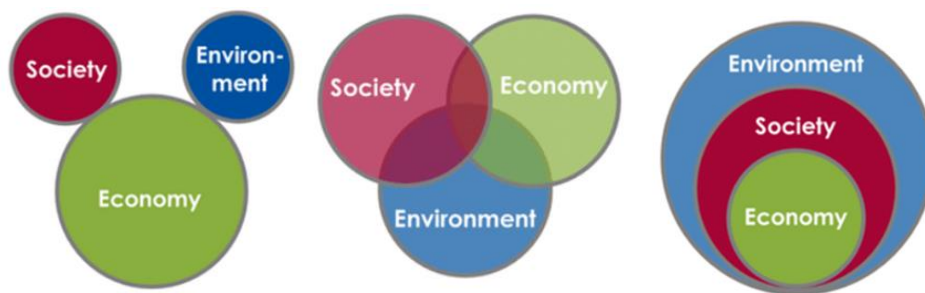


# Part IV

# 10. Conclusion

## 10.1 Premise and aims

This work began with the premise that we live in a new epoch, the Anthropocene, where the interplay between human and natural systems has become deeper and more complex than ever. This has also resulted in the unprecedented interconnectedness between the three traditional dimensions of sustainability: economic, social, and environmental. The integration of these three dimensions has long been discussed in both academic and governance sustainability circles, resulting in a range of standpoints about the most desirable shape of integration. For the sake of analytical simplicity, this thesis focused on three main models of integration (see fig. 1 below): a growth-centric one, where a healthy environment and society depend largely on economic success; a balanced one, where the three dimensions are not hierarchically related and where progress in one dimension can optimistically substitute for shortcomings in another; an ecocentric model, where environmental protection is necessary for social and economic sustainability.



*Fig.1: the three models of sustainability integration – left to right: growth-centric; balanced; ecocentric*

The advent of the Anthropocene has made sustainability integration more normatively urgent: to face Anthropocenic challenges, we *need* to be aware of and act in a way that is compatible with the unprecedentedly blurred divide between ‘human’ and ‘natural’.

Adding to the general urgency of integration, the new context has exposed two gaps. First, a *knowledge gap* between the new context and the conceptual frameworks available to understand its impact on how we perceive and deal with sustainability integration as a response to those changes. Second, an *institutional gap* between the structure and aims of current institutions and the demands and challenges of the new Anthropocenic context. Here, the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) constitute the latest and most comprehensive attempt at a new institutional framework to promote integration. However, their ambitions have been the target of widespread criticism, leading to questions about whether these new goals are – in fact – a ‘broken bridge’. To address these gaps, we started by building our own conceptual arsenal. Drawing on international relations theories such as the English School and discursive institutionalism, we developed a framework to explain how a major contextual and institutional changes are bidirectionally linked via a cyclical process centered on ideational and normative trends (Fig. 2).

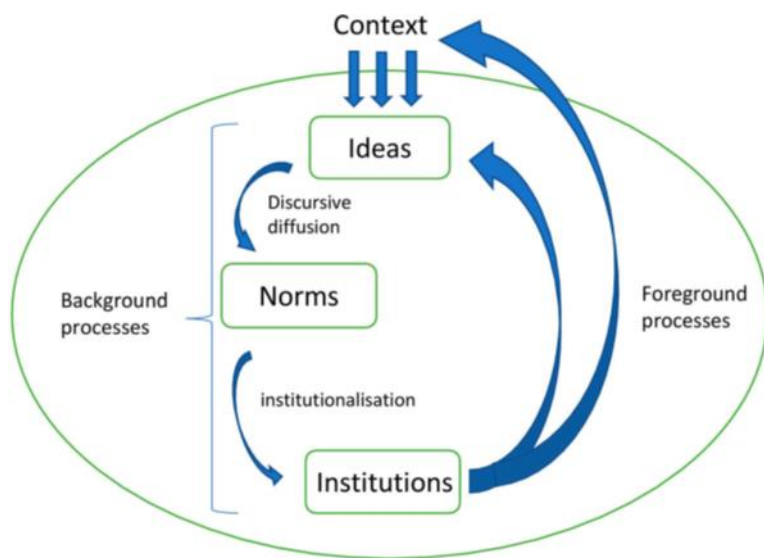


Fig. 2: the cycle of change (see Introduction and chapter 8)

The overarching aim of this work was therefore to put the conceptual framework to the test and investigate whether and how change towards sustainability integration is happening at the ideational, normative, and institutional level. This aim informed three

main research questions seeking to address both the knowledge gap (question 1 and 2) and the institutional gap (question 3):

1. How can we study and explain which models of sustainability integration are prevalent in the Anthropocene?
2. Which models of sustainability integration are prevalent and why?
3. How do institutions such as the SDGs influence the prevalence of different models of sustainability integration?

## **10.2 Summary of findings**

### *10.2.1 Knowledge gap*

This research started with the development and application of a novel framework explaining how contextual factors and different approaches to sustainability integration are bidirectionally linked via a cyclical process centred on ideas and norms (Research question 1). Using the framework as a reference point, we found ideas and norms of sustainability integration to be diverse, but we did observe an overall – and at times overwhelming – prevalence of the balanced approach to integration over the ecocentric or growth-centric ones (Research question 2 – see chapters 6-9). Looking at socio-economic organisations (chapters 6 and 7), both the ILO and trade unions have made visible steps towards the integration of environmental items into their agendas, primarily in terms of discourse but also at a more operational level. At the same time, their approach to integration has retained a decidedly instrumental nature, whereby environmental priorities have not gained ‘autonomy’ and have instead been accepted as catalysts of the original socio-economic ones. Both the ILO and trade unions repeatedly mention the importance of taking on environmental concerns and cooperating with environmental actors to broaden and deepen their scope of action and their ability to promote their views in otherwise inaccessible fora. Interest-driven – as opposed to value-driven - change fits

the weaker approach to sustainability typical of balanced integration, informed by pragmatism rather than ideology.

Following up on instrumentalism, the prevalence of balancing was also evident in the anthropocentric arguments behind virtually all integration trends. Here, we did observe some shifts towards a more open approach to integration, whereby environmental protection and transitions are no longer just threats that need managing but also a way for socio-economic actors to improve the welfare of their (human) stakeholders. Quoting the ILO, transitions are a *means* for sustainable economic and social progress (ILO, 2017a: 8) and integrated sustainability offers *opportunities* to advance decent work (ILO, 2017a; 2018). This finds further corroboration in how, despite the increasingly harsh criticism of the unsustainability of the established capitalist system, the organisations we studied have made no real calls to uproot it, advocating instead a ‘reformism from within’ that can ensure long-lasting welfare. The prevalence of the balanced approach was also clearly visible when we zoomed in on the perceptions of individual professionals (chapters 4 and 5), as an overwhelming majority indicated the three dimensions of sustainability as equally important.

We also found a strong correlation between contextual factors and diverging ideas, norms and institutions of integration (Research question 2). More specifically, we first looked at external contextual factors, which constitute the ‘intersubjective’ context. Here, we found a very strong influence of geographical factors. Actors from the Global South were less inclined to prioritise specific dimensions of sustainability than those from the Global North, and consistently reported greater efforts towards the pursuit of balanced, win-win integration (chapters 4 and 5). In addition to these factors, we also found other external elements that affect how actors perceive and implement sustainability integration. More frequent external professional engagement was linked to greater alignment with the balanced model of integration (chapter 4). Furthermore, organisations mentioned the increasing relevance of sustainability in global debates as well as its increasing weight in

different courts of law as important legitimising triggers towards greater ideational, normative and institutional engagement with sustainability integration (chapters 6 and 7).

As for internal factors, the subjective context also affected views on sustainability integration. We found that professional affiliation mattered, with professionals in academia being less aligned with the balanced model than other professional categories, and members of the business community, on their part, being the most favourable about balanced integration. Seniority also played a role, as mid-career professionals were less favourable about balancing than their more senior colleagues. We also found that growing awareness within an organisation of the importance of environmental concerns had an effect on integration, although not necessarily in the direction of an ecocentric prioritisation of the environment per se (chapter 7). On the other hand, the professional prioritisation of any of the three sustainability dimensions did not correlate with greater support for any model of sustainability integration. Rather, we found a surprising convergence between allegedly conflicting models of sustainability integration. Professional priorities are rather ambivalently linked to ideas and norms, as environmental concerns are not exclusive to environmental actors while environmental actors are also open to balanced integration. Given the overall prevalence of the balanced model, this appears to further strengthen a weak and instrumental interpretation of sustainability integration.

These findings offer an important bridge to the more conceptual research question informing this thesis (Research question 1), which relates to the dynamics through which sustainability integration is linked to contextual change and can be institutionalised. First, change towards integration is stronger at the ideational level than at the normative and institutional level. This applies to both organisational change and more subjective professional perceptions. Organisations such as the ILO (chapter 6) and trade unions (chapter 7) have integrated environmental concerns into their discourse much more than

they have into their concrete agendas or practices. As for professionals (chapters 4 and 5), there is much stronger agreement on the descriptive side of sustainability integration than on the prescriptive side. In other words, while awareness of (mostly balanced) sustainability integration has been on the rise, concrete change to implement it lags behind. Our framework helps explain this lag by stressing that institutional changes require not only high normative diffusion, but also considerable - time-consuming and politically sensitive - resource mobilisation.

Our findings (chapters 6 and 7) also confirm the bidirectional dynamics described in the conceptual framework, stressing how actors are not only influenced by their context, but also actively work to shape it according to their ideas and norms. In the ILO (chapter 6), these dynamics are evident in the instrumental nature of the organisation's approach to integrating environmental concerns. A majority of ILO constituents actively resisted the explicit prioritisation of environmental concerns, seeing it as a danger to the integrity of the organisation's mandate. Their ideas have been feeding back into the overarching cycle, shaping the way the ILO has 'received' the contextual input towards sustainability integration.

### *10.2.2 Institutional gap*

When comparing these findings with those on the role and relevance of the SDGs (research question 3), the same actor groups that showed greater alignment with the balanced model of integration were also more open to integration frameworks such as the SDGs. This appears to confirm the balanced integration ambitions of the SDGs themselves. The high degree of variation in perceptions associated with different demographics also underscores the importance of contextual factors, both individual (professional affiliation, seniority) and collective (geography). In general, we found the SDGs to have a strong general 'presence', with a vast majority of professionals and organisations being (very) familiar with them (chapters 5, 6 and 7). Greater reported

influence of the SDGs tended to go hand in hand with greater alignment with a balanced approach to integration, but – as above – we also observed ‘contradictory synergies’ between the SDGs and specific environmental or social priorities (chapter 6).

On the one hand, the relative lack of relevance of priorities could be seen as a sign that the SDGs are succeeding in the promotion of balanced integration. On the other hand, it could also mean that the SDGs do not accurately reflect the distribution of ideas and norms about sustainability integration, and further fuel criticism of their vulnerability to cherry-picking practices. This argument finds further evidence in the findings regarding how the organisations I studied concretely use the SDGs. Both the ILO and trade unions refer to the impact of the SDGs mainly as framing tools, which they can use to ‘translate’ their existing priorities into a globally accepted set of goals (chapters 8 and 9).

Organisations also stress their active shaping role *on* the goals. I therefore observed a bidirectional influence between organisations and SDGs, whereby the former are not only using and being affected by the latter, but also see themselves as active shapers of the SDGs according to their own (socio-economic) priorities (chapters 8 and 9). Adding to this, the survey-based findings also stress the impact of ideas and norms on the conceptualisation and implementation of frameworks like the SDGs (chapters 6 and 7), thereby hinting at how professionals are not merely ‘receiving’ the SDGs, but also actively (if not deliberately) shaping them. As seen across the empirical chapters (6-9), this active shaping is usually instrumentally aimed at ensuring that the SDGs can serve pre-existing priorities, and is therefore more likely to foster hierarchical rather than balanced models of integration.

My conceptual framework also helps situate the SDGs within these complex processes leading to institutional change towards sustainability integration (research question 1). As institutions, the SDGs act as institutional *context*. This research has shown how the SDGs have influenced ideas, being taken up as discursive frames (chapters 8 and 9); norms, affecting organisational strategies (chapter 8); institutions, informing collaborative efforts



and partnerships across different dimensions of sustainability (chapters 8 and 9). I have also observed consistently significant links between different ideas, norms and institutions about the SDGs and different ideas, norms and institutions of sustainability integration (chapters 6 and 7). They are also institutional *output*, shaped by the general Anthropocenic contextual change and the ideational and normative developments that follow. Hence, the findings about the bidirectional engagement with the SDGs attest to the validity of my analytically dualist approach, whereby context and agency are fully integrated and constantly influencing each other.

### **10.3 Implications**

What is the relevance of our findings for the challenge of bridging the knowledge and the institutional gaps, and how do they help chart possible future research avenues?

#### *10.3.1 Theoretical implications*

Looking at the knowledge gap, the cyclical framework I developed and used throughout this research enabled some important conceptual progress (research question 1). By combining the English School and discursive institutionalism, the conceptual contribution of this thesis not only lies in the novel simultaneous use of these two theoretical perspectives as sources for the framework. By developing the framework itself, I also actively contribute to the theoretical development of both the English School and discursive institutionalism, highlighting previously underexplored synergies and stressing areas for further cross-fertilisation (see e.g. Falkner, 2021).

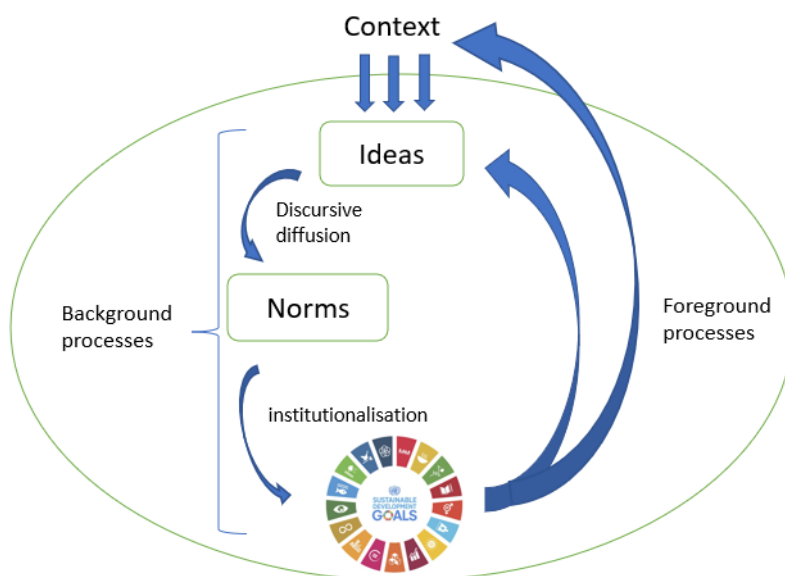
First, I observed how the way ideas, norms and institutions align with different models of sustainability integration is at least partially affected by contextual circumstances. In turn, different ideas and norms also affect the implementation of different models of integration, which then impact the context in which future ideas and norms are formed. In the Anthropocene, with the unprecedented centrality of humans in socio-ecological

processes, delving into the relationship between what humans think and the context for those thoughts is of global relevance. The correlation between different geographical locations and different engagement with sustainability integration models and frameworks further stresses the importance of simultaneously probing the black box of institutional change from two sides: context and ideas and norms. This is also relevant for future conceptualisations and operationalisations of governance processes, as both context and ideas and norms need to be taken into account as factors affecting the trajectory and output of said processes.

The findings on the differences between ideas, norms and institutions of sustainability integration also point to the importance of understanding and mapping the origins and distribution of norms (Alger & Dauvergne, 2019). Whether the prevalent balanced model of integration will be further implemented, whether its ecocentric counterpart will make headway, or whether the growth-centric model will hold its historical institutional grip, also depends on which ideas about the relationship between the three dimensions of sustainability are going to gain a prescriptive element and diffuse enough to qualify as norms (Florini, 1996). Given the close links between context, ideas and norms stressed by the framework, this research also refines the mainstream constructivist interpretation of processes of normative diffusion, underscoring their cyclical rather than linear nature.

As for bidirectionality, my conceptual framework helps situate institutions such as the SDGs as not only products of norms and ideas, but also platforms used by actors to deliberate about their content and thus inform new ideas (see Fig.3). It also offers a novel look at the impact of discourse and framing, as the use and influence of the SDGs as 'language' can have concrete influence in a cyclical context. These findings thus further highlight the limitations of linear approaches to change and the importance to use analytical dualism as a theoretical anchor for future research into ideational, normative, and institutional change. This is of great relevance not only for the SDGs, but for global goals as governance institutions in general. As discussed in chapter 4, governance through

global goals hinges on the conceptual premise that aspirational, non-binding goals can have steering effects on the actions and policies of all kinds of actors. Since steering is by definition a unidirectional concept (A steers B towards a given outcome), the whole rationale of governance through global goals is built around a linear core. Hence, by illustrating the pitfalls of linear conceptualisations of change, my findings cast doubts on the very foundations upon which the theoretical and therefore empirical viability of this approach to governance rest. Further research, which could benefit from my conceptual approach, is needed to investigate the actual extent of these foundational flaws. This will help determine whether global goals beyond the SDGs can be effective institutions not only to foster sustainability integration, but in other issue areas as well.



*Fig. 3: the SDGs in the cycle of change*

I also found a disconnect between the three ‘standard’ models of sustainability integration outlined in the introduction and the actual distribution of perceptions about them. This suggests that, while some existing concepts might indeed be prevalent and constitute the starting point around which people form their opinions, their tendency to compartmentalise is often not a good representation of how these opinions actually look like and develop. This therefore highlights a disconnect between the (over)simplified depictions of integration as growth-centric, balanced or ecocentric and a much more fuzzy

reality of how integration is perceived and institutionalised. Hence, while the models have been a useful conceptual tool to guide and structure this research, my findings suggest that their accuracy and therefore viability as institutional frames is flawed. More in-depth research to assess perceptions on sustainability could certainly help update and refine the existing toolkit.

### *10.3.2 Empirical implications*

As for the gap between the challenges posed by Anthropocenic socio-ecological interconnectedness and the current institutional structures, my findings suggest that there is still a long way to go before that gap is bridged.

First, a red thread across this research was the overwhelming prevalence of the balanced approach to sustainability integration (research question 2). Both professionals (chapters 6 and 7) and socio-economic organisations (chapters 8 and 9) adopt a win-win, reformist approach when thinking about – and therefore acting upon - sustainability integration. This finding needs to be qualified by stressing that the prevalence of balancing is stronger at the ideational and normative level, as well as by methodological considerations such as the inevitable bias due to our statistically non-representative samples and cases. The practice of integration shows greater divergences and, in the case of our case-study organisations, a reticence to stray from the mandated socio-economic priorities and integrate environmental concerns ‘as equals’. In general, these findings are thus not good news for those arguing for an ecocentric approach to sustainability integration. A stronger, ecocentric approach to sustainability remains confined to a niche, and its advocates will need to find ways to increase its visibility if they want to stimulate the formation of new ideas around it and thereby foster change throughout the cycle outlined in this research.

Second, the very significant variations I found in terms of perceptions of sustainability integration highlight how sustainability itself remains a profoundly contested concept.

Looking at the influence of context on perceptions, I observed enduring rifts – particularly between Global North and Global South – around what sustainability integration is and how it is supposed to look like. These persistent divergences, beginning at the ideational level, constitute one of the key challenges to designing and agreeing on effective sustainability integration institutions. They also underscore the importance of critically investigating how power dynamics – such as (neo)colonialism, economic dependence, and political clout at different levels- affect ideas, norms and institutions of sustainability integration in different contexts.

This brings us to the empirical implications of the findings for the third research question of this thesis: whether and how the SDGs are actually acting as the bridge across the institutional gap. The SDGs openly claim to be flagbearers of a balanced approach to integration. Overall, the empirical evidence I gathered indicates how this claim rests on shaky foundations.

First, I found that the SDGs are not unequivocally linked to any of the three main integration models. On the one hand, there are significant correlations between greater support and use of the SDGs and alignment with the balanced model. On the other hand, the SDGs are also seen as important frameworks to bolster existing priorities, which strengthens siloisation and is therefore not in line with a balanced approach. Furthermore, the SDGs are also linked to clear preferences for growth-friendly integration, which suggests that criticism aimed at the enduring developmentalism of global sustainability governance frameworks is not entirely unfounded. This fuzzy relationship between the SDGs and different approaches to integration is likely to impact their ability to deliver on their ambitious balancing promises. It also suggests that greater consistency, as well as greater attention the distribution of preferences for the different approaches to integration, will be crucial to successfully design and implement future sustainability integration frameworks.

Second, context-based differences also apply to how the SDGs are perceived and implemented (chapter 7), with a clear divide in particular between a more proactive Global South and a more hesitant Global North. This signals that the SDGs have not been equally received by different stakeholders, and casts further doubts about the truly universal nature of the goals.

Third, I observed strong bidirectional dynamics between the impact that the SDGs have on ideas, norms and institutions in different organisations and the influence that those organisations themselves have (had) on the goals via their own ideas, norms and institutions. This bidirectionality challenges the linear rationale behind the impact and effectiveness of ‘global governance through goal setting’ (Abbott & Bernstein, 2015; Biermann, Kanie and Kim, 2017), and therefore calls into question the overall *raison d'être* not only of the SDGs, but of global goals in general as a viable institutional option to tackle any kind of Anthropocenic challenges (see chapter 4).

Fourth, the findings not only indicate rather limited overall direct impact of the SDGs, but also stress how the main use of the SDGs is an instrumental one. Organisations (chapters 8 and 9) largely refer to the SDGs as frames, which help them reformulate and catalyse their existing agendas. Thus, the SDGs might in fact be having the opposite effect to what their core ambition was, favouring the consolidation of existing priorities and thereby fostering siloisation instead of balanced integration (Bogers, et al., 2022). The prevalence of instrumental engagement with the SDGs also suggests that most actors are unlikely to remain on board the sustainability integration train if they feel their core priorities are being ‘existentially’ threatened. While it is hard to predict how the global agenda for sustainability integration and its governance frameworks are going to evolve, this should be considered in the discussions in both academic and policy circles about the advantages and disadvantages of pushing for radical goals vis-à-vis favouring a more gradual, reformist approach.

## 10.4 Reflections and final thoughts

In this thesis, I started from a normative premise: the need to be aware of and act in a way that reflects the unprecedentedly blurred divide between ‘human’ and ‘natural’ and thus the greater integration between the three dimensions of sustainability. I therefore sought to investigate whether and according to which integration model this is actually happening, as well as whether existing integration frameworks like the SDGs are helping bridge the institutional gap. Having outlined the key findings and discussed some of their main theoretical and empirical implications, I conclude with a few forward-looking thoughts about the relevance of our research for the future of sustainability integration in terms of both research and practice. To organise these thoughts, I borrow the Aristotelian ‘5 W + 1 H’ (Who, What, When, Where, Why + How) method often used in journalism (Sloan, 2010) and ask the following questions.

*Who* will be the key actors to shape future sustainability integration efforts? I have shown that significant differences exist between actors groups in terms of perceptions and implementation of sustainability integration. Some organisations, like environmental movements, tend to favour a much stronger and more ecocentric interpretation of integration, while others, such as trade unions, are more cautious vis-à-vis the impact of environmental integration on their socio-economic priorities (chapter 9). Differences are also ascribable to more individual factors, such as professional sector, seniority, and geographical location (chapters 6 and 7). These differences tend to become greater moving from the level of ideas to norms and institutions – that is, there is greater distance between different actors regarding how integration should be pursued and about their current integration-oriented initiatives than regarding their general ideas about what integration is. This creates a very fragmented context for the development of coherent and consistent integration policies. It also suggests that future action towards sustainability integration will entail strong tradeoffs between high ambitions and broad acceptance, and that leadership from any actor is likely to face considerable resistance. At the same time, certain

governance solutions can in fact function well in a highly fragmented context. So-called ‘boundary objects’, these are broad and flexible tools that intersect and therefore ‘speak’ to different communities of practice (Star, 2010). Some scholars have argued that the SDGs fit this definition, thereby casting an optimistic light into the ability of the SDGs to act as a uniting framework (Burger & Parker, 2022).

From a practitioner’s perspective, greater awareness of context-sensitive fragmentation should guide future efforts on both the advocacy side and the design and implementation side. Both those calling for policy change, such as lobbying groups, civil society actors and campaigning politicians, and those working on designing and implementing policy change, such as civil servants and lawmakers, should reflect more on how context will affect the support or opposition of different constituencies to their agendas. Both would also do well to take into account how the increasing variation moving from ideas to norms and institutions means that discursive public support for their plans might not coincide with concrete backing (or opposition). Anticipating this will help both advocates and executives endogenise uncertainty, fostering the promotion of policies that are more in touch with the reality of a very complex distribution of preferences.

From a research perspective, more mapping efforts are therefore needed to gain better insights into this variation within and across different actors, focusing on both large-n and more granular, qualitative investigations. This might help identify shared features and thereby formulate recommendations for possible collaborative efforts towards integration at all levels, including in the context of existing and future global sustainability governance frameworks. Future research should also integrate the focus on fragmentation with further investigation into whether and how the power of specific actors can act as a counterweight to the impact of fragmentation on the development of common policies. By zooming in on power dynamics, researchers could also shed further light on the existence of tradeoffs between the effectiveness and democratic legitimacy of governance frameworks.



*What* will sustainability integration look like? My findings have illustrated the general prevalence of the balanced model over the ecocentric model, but also how these existing models often fail to capture the complexity of the interplay between the dimensions of sustainability at the level of ideas, norms, and institutions. This underscores the importance of critically reassessing the validity and the generalisability of the models themselves, as they were largely developed far before the sustainability integration governance challenges of the Anthropocene gained centre stage. I have also shown that the SDGs are not fully aligned with preferences for either model, and that their claim to advance perfectly balanced integration needs to be substantially qualified in light of both their actual content and operationalisation by different actors, which have been using the SDGs as a catalyst to consolidate rather than to expand their existing priorities (see chapters 8 and 9). The overwhelmingly instrumental approach to the SDGs suggests that future efforts towards sustainability integration will likely be the result of a balancing act between individual interests rather than arise from shared values-based commitment. Although awareness of environmental concerns is increasing across a wide range of organisations, those interested in an ecocentric prioritisation of the environment constitute a slowly expanding but still very small minority. I therefore expect concrete integration initiatives to remain strongly anthropocentric and focused on balancing for the foreseeable future.

For practitioners, these results should inspire caution towards the excessive reliance on model-based approach, not only because of the inherent dangers of ideological ‘policy crusades’, but also for pragmatic reasons, as the values and interests - and therefore support - of their constituents and stakeholders are unlikely to fully align with any existing ‘template’.

From a research perspective, it is therefore important to studying why and how interests develop, and subsequently to delve deeper into how they affect different actors’ approaches to integration. Conceptually, investigating the relationship between interests

and ideas/norms will also allow to build new bridges between rationalist and constructivist perspectives.

*When* do we expect important developments with regard to sustainability integration to take place? In light of the great degree of fragmentation across actors in terms of their ideas, norms and institutionalisation of sustainability integration in general and of integration frameworks in particular, my findings suggest that we are very unlikely to see major changes by the 2030 mark. The findings also highlight the significant lag between ideational change and the eventual institutionalisation of such changes (see chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9). This further suggests that ‘minoritarian’ approaches to integration, notably the ecocentric approach which some argue is the only suitable one to ensure the Anthropocenic resilience of our governance structures, are unlikely to be matched by concrete large-scale institutional efforts in the short-to-medium term.

For practitioners, these additional lags further complicate any attempts at reconciling the long-term nature of sustainability challenges with the short-term interests driving political and policy cycles. It is therefore more important than ever for actors on both the advocacy and the executive side to integrate time-related considerations into their agendas, particularly when setting deadlines based on discursive support which – as seen – might not correspond to support for actual implementation. To refine this very preliminary assessment, further research is necessary to better understand the factors that accelerate or slow down the uptake of sustainability integration on the agenda of various individuals and organisations. How do ideas of time and of time-bound action develop and evolve into norms and institutions?

*Where* can we expect to observe significant developments in perceptions and operationalisations of sustainability integration? This thesis has shown that there is a clear link between geography and different sustainability integration ideas, norms and institutions (chapters 6, 7, and 9). Actors in the Global South are more open to a balanced approach to integration than those in the Global North (chapters 6 and 7), and economic

and political geography also appears to affect how organisations such as trade unions deal with environmental concerns (chapter 9). Overall, our findings indicate that variations in approaches to sustainability integration are highly dependent on a wide range of localised factors – be that at the regional, national, or subnational level. Like the SDGs were spearheaded by a small number of countries in the Global South – primarily in Latin America - (Chasek & Wagner, 2016), I would expect future sustainability integration governance initiatives to be driven by groups of actors sharing a similar geo-economic and geopolitical situation.

For practitioners, the relevance of these findings is twofold. First, it stresses the importance of looking at geographical factors not only as features affecting the implementation of policies, but also as important drivers of initiatives. Second, it adds pragmatic importance to being aware of and addressing geography-sensitive imbalances such as those linked to postcolonialism, as these imbalances have a major impact on the coherence and therefore eventual success of any policy initiative. Further research into the ideational, normative and institutional geography of sustainability integration could therefore yield valuable knowledge on how and why actors in different settings tend to favour different models of integration, and help shed predictive light on future trends.

*Why* do we need sustainability integration? As already mentioned, the answer to this question acts as the normative premise for the entire thesis: we need integration because we live in a ‘hyper-integrated’ context – the Anthropocene. Our findings show that while the ideational awareness of this need is very high, the normative and institutional landscape appears a lot less receptive to it. This is also visible looking at the different degrees to which the SDGs are embraced as an integration framework, and at the extent to which they are instead used to reinforce siloed priorities. In other words, the normative need for sustainability integration – regardless of its form - is still far from being broadly and consistently diffused at a global scale. Until this diffusion has occurred, future

developments towards a new framework for the global governance of integration are unlikely to yield substantive results.

For practitioners seeking to advance any form of sustainability integration, it is therefore important to be at all times mindful of both components of diffusion when developing their agendas: breadth, which makes striving to be as inclusive as possible more crucial than ever; and consistency, by actively promoting systematic dialogue and other knowledge-sharing initiatives that foster convergence between groups and thereby reduce the polarisation of ideas. In this context, systematic research to assess and monitor the diffusion of norms of sustainability integration at all levels is therefore of paramount importance.

As for *how* change towards sustainability integration happens, the conceptual framework developed in the introduction and applied and tested throughout this thesis certainly offers a useful analytical toolkit. The general theoretical implications of using the framework, as well as its cross-cutting relevance across all the 5 W's of sustainability integration, have already been discussed above. But what are the *methodological* implications of the approach we used? The main strength of a cyclical approach is its analytical dualism – that is, the interdependence and interchangeability of structures and agents, of context and institutions. Given its emphasis on both intangible (ideas and norms) and tangible (context and institutions) elements, a cyclical approach to studying change enables a wide range of analytical methods, ranging from in-depth qualitative analyses seeking to discern the causal generators of specific ideas and norms (see chapters 8 and 9) to large-n quantitative investigations aimed at mapping correlations between factors across hundreds of actors (see chapters 6 and 7).

The nature of this approach therefore opens up many more methodological paths than those we were able to walk given the limited scope of this thesis. The rejection of linearity also makes this approach especially suitable for probing into complex phenomena. Depending on how the stages of the cycle are operationalised, future students of change –

including but not limited to the sustainability realm – might for example use it to underpin modelling efforts to explore the features and challenges of human-natural co-development. How does a changing natural context affect human ideas and norms? And how do changing human societies impact how individuals think of nature and thereby nature itself?

A cyclical approach is thus also very relevant for practitioners, as a sound understanding of the mutual interdependence of different contexts and actors would greatly increase the success rate of most policy initiatives. Furthermore, each cycle of change includes virtually endless supra- and sub-cycles, provided the definitions of its elements are scaled up or down. For example, studying the cycle of change at the level of one organisation could be complemented by studying the cycles of change of selected departments of that organisation, and in turn those of the sub-units within those departments, and so on. As we hinted at in chapters 6 and 7, cycles of change could arguably also be observed at the individual level, where ‘institutions’ could be proxied by ‘actions’ or ‘behaviours’. This might foster interesting future synergies between the political and the cognitive sides of the social sciences, opening up exciting research avenues into the links between individual perceptions and political and institutional developments, including in the field of sustainability governance.

# Samenvatting

Het begrip duurzaamheid vraagt sinds het ontstaan ervan een balans. Aan de ene kant zijn het winnen en toewijzen van hulpbronnen nodig voor het welzijn van de mens. Aan de andere kant is het behouden van de natuurlijke omgeving nodig om ervoor te zorgen dat die hulpbronnen beschikbaar blijven. Toen duurzaamheid een kernbegrip werd in ontwikkelingsbestuur en -beleid, kwam er steeds meer focus op drie dimensies of 'pijlers' van duurzaamheid: milieu, maatschappij en economie. Hoewel het bestaan van de drie dimensies van duurzaamheid algemeen wordt aanvaard, is de ideale *vorm* van hun integratie onderwerp geweest van talloze discussies. In dit proefschrift heb ik me gericht op drie hoofdmodellen van duurzaamheidsintegratie. Ik definieer duurzaamheidsintegratie als de gelijktijdige en onderling afhankelijke focus op en operationalisering van de drie dimensies van duurzame ontwikkeling: economisch, sociaal en ecologisch.

Het eerste model is het 'traditionele' groei-centrische model, waarbij de gezondheid van milieu en samenleving grotendeels afhankelijk is van economisch succes. Gezien de sterke overtuiging van het bestaan van positieve economische neveneffecten, accepteert dit model dus ook een sterke verzuiling tussen de drie dimensies van duurzaamheid. Het tweede model noem ik gebalanceerd, waarbij de drie dimensies niet hiërarchisch met elkaar verbonden zijn en waar vooruitgang in de ene dimensie de tekortkomingen in een andere kan compenseren. Sinds de jaren 1990 is dit optimistische model geleidelijk omarmd als het belangrijkste referentiekader voor de meeste multilaterale initiatieven op het gebied van duurzame ontwikkeling. Het derde model is een eco-centrisch model, waarbij milieubescherming noodzakelijk is voor sociale en economische duurzaamheid. Dit model, met mogelijk de meest ontwikkelde kritiek op het gebalanceerde model, wordt soms ook afgebeeld als een bruidstaart met het milieu als onderste laag.

Hoewel driedelige integratie dus een belangrijk kenmerk van duurzaamheid is geworden, hebben recente contextuele ontwikkelingen het ook tot een noodzakelijk doel gemaakt. De ongekende huidige niveaus van biofysische en sociaaleconomische afhankelijkheid luidden een nieuw tijdperk in waarin mensen niet langer louter waarnemers zijn, maar de belangrijkste aanjagers van planetaire verandering: het Antropoceen. De komst van het Antropoceen heeft de drie dimensies van duurzame ontwikkeling dan ook dichterbij elkaar gebracht dan ooit tevoren. Dit maakt het uiterst actueel om te analyseren of en hoe verandering richting duurzaamheidsintegratie plaatsvindt. Dit is het hoofddoel van dit proefschrift.

De contextuele revolutie van het Antropoceen, die onze traditionele rol in de natuur op zijn kop zet, heeft twee kloven in onze *toolkit* blootgelegd om met dergelijke fundamentele transformaties en dus met duurzaamheidsintegratie om te gaan. De eerste kloof heeft te maken met hoe de diepgaande contextuele veranderingen die door het nieuwe tijdperk worden veroorzaakt invloed kunnen hebben op hoe we duurzaamheidsintegratie waarnemen en 'beheren' als reactie op die veranderingen. Ik definieer deze **kenniskloof** als die tussen de nieuwe context en het conceptuele en empirische begrip van de impact ervan op ideeën, normen en instituties.

De tweede kloof is veel tastbaarder en heeft te maken met het onvermogen van de huidige institutionele structuren om de nieuwe sociaalecologische context het hoofd te bieden. Ik definieer deze **institutionele kloof** als die tussen bestaande instituties en de sociaalecologische systemen waarin ze opereren. Met andere woorden, deze kloof weerspiegelt het zogenaamde '*problem of fit*', dat stelt dat de compatibiliteit tussen instituties en context van invloed is op de effectiviteit en robuustheid van de instellingen zelf. De zeventien Duurzame Ontwikkelingsdoelen (SDG's) van de Verenigde Naties (VN) vormen de nieuwste en meest uitgebreide poging tot een nieuw bestuurskader voor duurzaamheidsintegratie. De ambities van de SDG's zijn echter het doelwit geweest van veel kritiek, wat leidt tot de vraag of deze nieuwe doelen in feite een 'gebroken brug' zijn.

Om de twee kloven aan te pakken, ben ik begonnen met het bouwen van een eigen brug. Op basis van theorieën over internationale betrekkingen, zoals de Engelse School en discursief institutionalisme, heb ik een conceptueel kader ontwikkeld om uit te leggen hoe grote contextuele en institutionele veranderingen bidirectioneel met elkaar verbonden zijn. Dit gebeurt via een cyclisch proces waarin ideeën en normen een centrale rol spelen. Het overkoepelende doel van dit werk was om het conceptuele kader op de proef te stellen en te onderzoeken of en hoe verandering in de richting van integratie van duurzaamheid plaatsvindt op het niveau van ideeën, normen en instituties. Dit doel leidde tot drie hoofdonderzoeksvragen:

1. Hoe kunnen we bestuderen en verklaren welke modellen van duurzaamheidsintegratie prevalent zijn in het Antropoceen?
2. Welke modellen van duurzaamheidsintegratie zijn prevalent en waarom?
3. Hoe beïnvloeden instellingen zoals de SDG's de prevalentie van verschillende modellen van duurzaamheidsintegratie?

Om de onderzoeksvragen te beantwoorden heb ik een *mixed-methods* benadering gekozen. Kwalitatief heb ik kritisch literatuuronderzoek, discoursanalyse, kwalitatieve contentanalyse van meer dan 190 documenten, 21 interviews en casestudies gebruikt. De casestudies betreffen de Internationale Arbeidsorganisatie (ILO), het Internationale Vakverbond (ITUC) en het Europese Vakverbond (ETUC). Het kwantitatieve deel is gebaseerd op de statistische analyse van een grootschalige enquête met 506 respondenten.

De resultaten tonen aan dat percepties van duurzaamheidsintegratie divers zijn, maar we zagen wel een algehele - en soms overweldigende - prevalentie van het gebalanceerde model van integratie boven het eco-centrische model. Sociaaleconomische organisaties hebben zichtbare stappen gezet in de integratie van het milieu in hun agenda's, voornamelijk in termen van discours maar ook operationeel. Tegelijkertijd heeft hun benadering van vergroening een uitgesproken instrumenteel karakter behouden, waarbij milieuprioriteiten geen 'onafhankelijkheid' hebben gekregen maar worden gezien als



katalysatoren om de bestaande sociaaleconomische doelen te bereiken. Ook vond ik een sterke correlatie tussen contextuele factoren – namelijk geografische locatie, professionele affiliatie en ervaringsniveau - en uiteenlopende ideeën, normen en instellingen van integratie.

Wat de rol en relevantie van de SDG's betreft, stonden dezelfde actorengroepen die meer aansluiting toonden bij het gebalanceerde integratiemodel ook meer open voor integratiekaders zoals de SDG's. Dit lijkt de gebalanceerde integratieambities van de SDG's zelf te bevestigen. De hoge variatie in percepties van de SDG's geassocieerd met verschillende demografische categorieën onderstreept ook het belang van contextuele factoren, zowel subjectief (professionele affiliatie, ervaringsniveau) als intersubjectief (geografie).

Wat de kenniskloof betreft, benadrukt de correlatie tussen contextuele factoren en verschillende benaderingen van duurzaamheidsintegratie het belang van het gelijktijdig onderzoeken van institutionele verandering van twee kanten – context en percepties – om vragen over de effectiviteit van bestuur en beleid verder te onderzoeken. Dankzij de nadruk op bidirectionaliteit, helpt mijn conceptuele kader om de SDG's niet alleen te situeren als producten van normen en ideeën, maar ook als platforms die door actoren worden gebruikt om over hun inhoud te beraadslagen en zo nieuwe ideeën te vormen. Het biedt ook een nieuwe kijk op de impact van discours en framing, aangezien het gebruik en de invloed van de SDG's als 'taal' concrete invloed kan hebben in een cyclische context.

Wat de institutionele kloof betreft, geven mijn bevindingen aan dat er nog een lange weg te gaan is voordat die kloof is overbrugd. Ten eerste benadrukt de zeer significante variatie in percepties van duurzaamheidsintegratie hoe duurzaamheid zelf een zeer omstreden concept blijft. Ten tweede blijft een milieu-hiërarchische benadering van duurzaamheid beperkt tot een niche. De voorstanders van dat model zullen dus manieren moeten vinden om de zichtbaarheid ervan te vergroten als ze de vorming van nieuwe ideeën eromheen willen stimuleren en zo verandering willen bevorderen. Tenslotte heb ik vastgesteld dat de

SDG's dubbelzinnig gekoppeld zijn aan de belangrijkste integratiemodellen. Enerzijds zijn er significante correlaties tussen meer draagvlak en gebruik van de SDG's en afstemming met het gebalanceerde model. Anderzijds worden de SDG's ook gezien als belangrijke instrumenten om bestaande prioriteiten te versterken, wat de verzuiling versterkt en dus meer aansluit bij een hiërarchische aanpak. Deze onduidelijke relatie tussen de SDG's en verschillende benaderingen van integratie zal waarschijnlijk van invloed zijn op hun vermogen om hun ambitieuze beloften waar te maken. Het suggereert ook dat meer aandacht voor de verdeling van voorkeuren voor de verschillende benaderingen van integratie cruciaal zal zijn voor het succesvol ontwerpen en implementeren van toekomstige bestuur- en beleidskaders voor duurzaamheid.

**Trefwoorden:** duurzaamheidsintegratie; SDG's; percepties; duurzame ontwikkeling; enquête; mixed methods;

# Sintesi

Sin dalle origini, il concetto di sostenibilità è strettamente legato a quello di equilibrio. Da un lato, la produzione e l'allocazione delle risorse necessarie a garantire il benessere umano. Dall'altro lato, la necessità di proteggere l'ambiente per assicurare la longevità delle medesime risorse.

Da quando la sostenibilità è divenuta un tema centrale sia in ambito politico che organizzativo, l'attenzione si è progressivamente andata concentrando su tre dimensioni o 'pilastri': ambiente, società ed economia. Sebbene l'esistenza delle tre dimensioni sia generalmente accettata, la *forma* ideale secondo la quale tali dimensioni debbano essere integrate tra di loro è stata ed è tuttora oggetto di numerose e spesso contrastanti interpretazioni. Questa tesi si concentra su tre modelli principali di integrazione, che definiamo come la considerazione e l'implementazione simultanea ed interdipendente delle tre dimensioni della sostenibilità: economica, sociale ed ambientale.

Il primo modello è il modello 'tradizionale' di sviluppo, che afferma che la sostenibilità sociale ed ambientale dipendano in larga parte dalla prosperità economica. Corredato di forte ottimismo sulla capacità dei miglioramenti economici di produrre ricadute positive in ambito sia sociale che ambientale, questo modello tende anche ad accettare una significativa compartimentalizzazione delle politiche di sviluppo per ciascuna delle tre dimensioni.

Il secondo modello è quello 'bilanciato'. Secondo questo modello, le tre dimensioni non sono gerarchicamente legate tra loro e il progresso in una dimensione può compensare problemi nelle altre. Già a partire dagli anni '90, questo modello è gradualmente divenuto il parametro di riferimento per la maggior parte degli accordi multilaterali in tema di sviluppo sostenibile.

Il terzo modello è quello ‘ecocentrico’, secondo il quale la protezione dell’ambiente è condizione necessaria per garantire la sostenibilità economica e sociale. Questo modello, seguito da alcuni tra i critici più severi del modello bilanciato, viene spesso rappresentato come una torta nuziale con l’ambiente a fungere da base.

Oltre ad essere un importante parametro descrittivo delle politiche di sostenibilità, alla luce di recenti sviluppi l’integrazione tripartita è diventata anche una necessità. I livelli senza precedenti di interdipendenza tra il sistema biofisico e quello socio-economico hanno di fatto introdotto una nuova era, in cui gli esseri umani non sono più meri ricettori di cambiamenti ambientali a livello globale, bensì i principali propulsori di tali cambiamenti. Questa nuova era viene pertanto definita ‘Antropocene’. L’avvento dell’Antropocene coincide dunque con una convergenza estrema tra le tre dimensioni della sostenibilità, il che rende lo studio di eventuali cambiamenti verso l’effettiva integrazione di tali dimensioni di grande attualità. Questo è l’obiettivo principale di questa tesi.

La ‘rivoluzione contestuale’ dell’Antropocene ha dunque profondamente trasformato il nostro ruolo a livello globale, rivelando due deficit nell’arsenale a nostra disposizione per comprendere e gestire tali trasformazioni. Il primo deficit riguarda il modo in cui i profondi cambiamenti generati dalla nuova era influenzano il modo in cui la sostenibilità integrata viene percepita e di conseguenza gestita in risposta ai cambiamenti stessi. Definiamo questo **deficit conoscitivo** come il divario tra il nuovo contesto e la conoscenza sia concettuale che empirica del suo impatto a livello di idee, norme ed istituzioni. Il secondo deficit è decisamente più tangibile e riguarda l’incapacità delle attuali strutture istituzionali di fornire risposte efficaci nel nuovo contesto. Definiamo questo **deficit istituzionale** come il divario tra le istituzioni esistenti e i sistemi socio-ecologici in cui esse operano. In altre parole, questo deficit riflette il cosiddetto ‘*problem of fit*’, secondo cui la compatibilità tra istituzioni e contesto influenza l’efficacia e la resilienza delle stesse istituzioni. I diciassette Obiettivi di Sviluppo Sostenibile (*Sustainable Development Goals*

- SDG) adottati dalle Nazioni Unite nel 2015 costituiscono l'esempio più recente e avanzato di un quadro istituzionale globale volto alla promozione della sostenibilità integrata. Le ambizioni degli SDG hanno tuttavia ricevuto numerose critiche, portando numerosi osservatori a domandarsi se i nuovi obiettivi non costituiscano in realtà un tentativo fallito in partenza di colmare il deficit governativo.

Per affrontare entrambi i deficit, abbiamo cominciato con il costruire la nostra strumentazione. Facendo riferimento ad alcune teorie di relazioni internazionali, principalmente la 'scuola inglese' e l'istituzionalismo discorsivo, abbiamo sviluppato un quadro analitico-concettuale volto a sottolineare la natura bidirezionale del rapporto tra cambiamenti contestuali ed istituzionali. Tali cambiamenti avvengono attraverso un processo ciclico, dove idee e norme giocano un ruolo centrale. Lo scopo principale della presente tesi è dunque di mettere alla prova questo quadro analitico attraverso lo studio di se e come i cambiamenti mirati alla sostenibilità integrata avvengano a livello di idee, norme e istituzioni. Questo scopo ispira le due domande di ricerca principali:

1. Come studiare e spiegare quali modelli di sostenibilità integrata sono prevalenti nell'Antropocene?
2. Quali modelli di integrazione della sostenibilità sono prevalenti e perché?
3. In che modo istituzioni come gli SDG influenzano la prevalenza di diversi modelli di sostenibilità integrata?

Per rispondere a tali domande, abbiamo scelto un approccio metodologico misto ('*mixed methods*'). A livello qualitativo, ci siamo avvalsi di analisi critica della letteratura, analisi del discorso, analisi del contenuto, interviste e casi studio. I casi studio riguardano l'Organizzazione Internazionale del Lavoro (OIL), la Confederazione Sindacale Internazionale (ITUC) e la Confederazione Sindacale Europea (ETUC). A livello quantitativo, ci siamo invece basati sull'analisi statistica di un sondaggio esteso a 506 intervistati.

Dai risultati emerge una certa diversità nella percezione della sostenibilità integrata, ma anche una generale e a tratti quasi assoluta prevalenza del modello bilanciato su quello ecocentrico. Le organizzazioni socio-economiche da noi studiate (OIL, ITUC e ETUC) hanno indubbiamente mosso dei passi visibili verso l'integrazione di considerazioni ambientali nelle rispettive agende, principalmente a livello retorico ma anche – e in maniera crescente – a livello operativo. Allo stesso tempo, tale '*greening*' ha mantenuto un deciso carattere strumentale: le priorità ambientali non godono di autonomia ma vengono invece viste come catalizzatori volti al perseguimento degli obiettivi socio-economici 'originali'. Abbiamo anche osservato una forte correlazione tra fattori contestuali – posizione geografica, affiliazione professionale e anzianità di servizio – e diverse interpretazioni della sostenibilità integrata a livello di idee, norme ed istituzioni.

Quanto al ruolo e all'importanza degli SDG, gli stessi attori che mostrano una maggiore affinità al modello bilanciato di integrazione tendono anche ad avere una percezione più positiva degli stessi SDG, il che sembrerebbe confermare le loro ambizioni di bilanciamento. La rilevante diversità nel modo in cui gli SDG vengono percepiti è fortemente legata a diversi fattori demografici, il che sottolinea nuovamente l'importanza dei fattori contestuali, sia a livello soggettivo (affiliazione professionale, anzianità) che intersoggettivo (fattori geografici).

Per quanto riguarda il deficit conoscitivo, la correlazione tra i fattori contestuali e i diversi approcci alla sostenibilità integrata evidenzia l'importanza di esaminare i cambiamenti istituzionali sotto due profili: il contesto e le percezioni. Ciò consentirebbe di approfondire questioni relative all'adeguatezza e all'efficacia del sistema politico-istituzionale. Grazie all'enfasi posta sulle dinamiche bidirezionali attraverso l'uso del nostro quadro analitico, siamo stati in grado di studiare gli SDG non solo in quanto prodotti di idee e norme, ma anche come 'piattaforme' istituzionali che diversi attori utilizzano per riflettere sul contenuto degli SDG stessi, portando di conseguenza alla formazione di nuove idee. Il nostro approccio teorico offre inoltre uno sguardo innovativo sull'importanza degli

sviluppi a livello retorico, dato l'impatto concreto che l'uso degli SDG come 'linguaggio' può avere in un contesto ciclico.

Per quanto invece riguarda il deficit istituzionale, le nostre osservazioni indicano che la strada per colmarlo è ancora lunga ed in salita. Innanzitutto, la grande diversità di come la sostenibilità integrata viene percepita sottolinea come il concetto stesso di sostenibilità rimanga tuttora estremamente controverso. In secondo luogo, il modello ecocentrico di integrazione rimane confinato ad una minoranza molto ristretta. I sostenitori di tale modello dovranno pertanto trovare il modo di aumentarne la visibilità qualora vogliano stimolare la formazione di nuove idee e di conseguenza cambiamenti concreti nella direzione da loro auspicata.

Abbiamo infine osservato che gli SDG hanno un rapporto piuttosto ambiguo con i principali modelli di integrazione. Da un lato esiste una correlazione significativa tra maggior sostegno e uso degli SDG e un'affinità con il modello bilanciato. Dall'altro lato gli SDG vengono considerati anche come importanti strumenti per consolidare le priorità preesistenti, il che risulta in un aumento della compartimentalizzazione e pertanto più in linea con un approccio gerarchico. Questa ambiguità nel rapporto tra gli SDG e i diversi modelli di sostenibilità integrata avrà probabilmente un peso nella capacità degli SDG di mantenere le proprie ambiziose promesse. Tale ambiguità rivela inoltre l'assoluta importanza di prestare la massima attenzione alla distribuzione delle preferenze nella scelta dei diversi approcci all'integrazione nella progettazione e implementazione dei prossimi strumenti volti alla gestione della sostenibilità, sia a livello locale che globale.

**Parole chiave:** sostenibilità integrata; SDG; percezioni; sviluppo sostenibile; sondaggio; mixed methods

# Summary

Since its inception, the concept of sustainability has been closely related to that of balance. On the one hand, the extraction and allocation of resources necessary to ensure human welfare. On the other hand, the preservation of the natural environment that is necessary to ensure that those resources remain available. When sustainability became a cornerstone of development governance and policies, three main dimensions or ‘pillars’ of sustainability came to the fore: economy, society, and environment. Although the existence of the three dimensions of sustainability is generally accepted, the ideal way in which they should be integrated has been the object of a large amount of interpretations and models. In this thesis we focus on three main models of sustainability integration, defined as the simultaneous and interdependent consideration and operationalisation by actors of the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental.

The first model is the ‘traditional’ growth-centric model, whereby the soundness of environment and society is largely dependent on economic success. Given the conviction in the existence of positive economic spillover effects, this model also accepts a strong siloisation between the three dimensions of sustainability. The second model is the balanced model, whereby the three dimensions are not hierarchically related and whereby progress in one dimension can compensate shortcomings in another. Since the 1990s, this model has been embraced as the mainstream template for the vast majority of multilateral sustainability governance initiatives. The third model is the ecocentric model, whereby environmental protection is seen as necessary for economic and social sustainability. This model, with arguably the most developed critique of the balanced model, is often visualised as a ‘wedding cake’ with the environment at its base.



While tripartite integration has been an important feature of sustainability for a while, recent contextual developments have now ‘upgraded’ it to a necessary objective. Unprecedented levels of socio-ecological interdependence have heralded a new era where humans are no longer mere observers of planetary transformations, but the main instigators: the Anthropocene. The advent of the Anthropocene has thus brought the three dimensions of sustainability closer to each other than ever before. This makes studying whether and how change towards sustainability integration is happening extremely relevant. This is the main goal of this thesis.

The contextual revolution of the Anthropocene, which has upended our traditional role in nature, has also exposed two gaps in our toolkit to deal with such fundamental transformations and therefore with sustainability integration. The first gap has to do with how the profound changes brought about by the new era can affect how we perceive and manage sustainability integration as a result of those changes. We define this **knowledge gap** as that between the new context and the conceptual and empirical understanding of its impact on ideas, norms, and institutions. The second gap is much more tangible, and has to do with the inability of current governance structures to deal with the new socio-ecological context. We define this **institutional gap** as that between existing institutions and the socio-ecological systems they operate in. In other words, this gap reflects the so-called ‘problem of fit’, whereby the compatibility between institutions and context affects the effectiveness and resilience of those very institutions. The seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations constitute the most recent and most advanced attempt at a governance framework to promote sustainability integration. The ambitions of the SDGs have however been the target of substantial criticism, leading to questions about their ability to actually bridge the institutional gap.

To address the two gaps, we started by building our own conceptual ‘bridge’. Drawing on theories of international relations, namely the English School and discursive institutionalism, we developed a conceptual framework to explain how major contextual

and institutional changes are bidirectionally related to each other. This takes place via a cyclical process where ideas and norms play a central role. The overarching goal of this research was then to test this framework and to investigate whether and how changes towards sustainability integration occur at the level of ideas, norms, and institutions. This goal led to three main research questions:

1. How can we study and explain which models of sustainability integration are prevalent in the Anthropocene?
2. Which models of sustainability integration are prevalent and why?
3. How do institutions such as the SDGs influence the prevalence of different models of sustainability integration?

To answer these questions, we deployed a mixed-methods approach. Qualitatively, we used critical literature analysis, discourse analysis, qualitative content analysis of over 190 documents, 21 semi-structured interviews, and case studies. The selected case studies focus on the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). The quantitative part of the research is based on the statistical analysis of a large-scale survey with 506 respondents.

The results show that perceptions of sustainability integration are very diverse. However, we did observe a generalised and sometimes overwhelming prevalence of the balanced model of integration over the ecocentric model. Socio-economic organisations have made visible steps towards integrating environmental concerns into their agendas, primarily in discursive terms but also increasingly at the operational level. At the same time, their approach to ‘greening’ has retained a clear instrumental nature, whereby environmental priorities are not seen as self-standing goals but rather as catalysts for the achievement of existing socio-economic objectives. We also found strong correlation between contextual factors – geographical location, professional affiliation, and seniority – and diverging ideas, norms, and institutions of integration.

Regarding the role and relevance of the SDGs, the same actors showing greater affinity for the balanced integration model were also more open to integration frameworks such as the SDGs, which appears to bolster the balanced integration ambitions of the SDGs themselves. The high variation in perceptions of the SDGs associated with different demographic factors also highlights the importance of contextual factors, both subjective (professional affiliation, seniority) and intersubjective (geographical location).

Regarding the knowledge gap, the correlation between contextual factors and different approaches to sustainability integration also stresses the importance of simultaneously investigating institutional change from two sides – context and perceptions – to address questions about the effectiveness of governance and policy. Thanks to the emphasis on bidirectionality, our framework helps situate the SDGs not only as products of norms and ideas, but also as platforms used by actors to debate about the content of the SDGs themselves and thereby to form new ideas about sustainability governance. The framework also offers a novel view on the impact of discourse and framing, given how the use and influence of the SDGs as ‘language’ can have concrete effects in a cyclical context.

As for the institutional gap, our findings underscore how there is still a long way to go before that gap is bridged. First, the very significant variation in perceptions of sustainability integration indicates how sustainability itself remains a contested concept. Second, the ecocentric model remains confined to a niche. Advocates of that model will thus need to find a way to magnify the visibility of that model if they want to foster the emergence of compatible new ideas and thereby promote change in that direction. Finally, we found that the SDGs are rather ambiguously linked to the main integration models. On the one hand there are significant correlations between greater support for and reliance on the SDGs and alignment with the balanced model. On the other hand, the SDGs are also seen as important frameworks to strengthen existing priorities, which in turn fosters siloisation and is therefore more in line with non-balanced approaches. This ambiguous relationship between the SDGs and different models of integration is likely to

affect their ability to fulfil their ambitious claims. It also indicates that paying greater attention to the distribution of preferences for the different approaches of integration will be crucial for the successful development and implementation of future sustainability governance and policy frameworks.

**Keywords:** sustainability integration; SDGs; perceptions; sustainable development; survey; mixed methods

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Francesco Saverio Montesano (1992) studied Political Science (BA, LUISS University, Rome) and Global Politics (MSc, London School of Economics and Political Science), with a focus on international relations and foreign and security policy. Prior to starting his PhD at Utrecht University, he worked as a researcher at the Centre for European Policy Studies in Brussels, at the Clingendael Institute in The Hague, and at the College of Europe in Bruges. Since March 2023 he works as a senior policy officer in the directorate for international affairs of the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, focusing on bilateral and multilateral cooperation.

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