Global Studies Quarterly (2023) **3**, 1–13

How the World Bank Engages with the Sustainable Development Goal on Reducing Inequalities: A Case of Organizational Jiu-Jitsu

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In 2015, the United Nations agreed on seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to mobilize various actors, including international organizations, for a global transformation toward sustainability. The expectation was that international organizations would assist in the implementation of the goals and encourage, support, or coordinate others to work toward their achievement. But have international organizations over the last 8 years changed their behavior because of the SDGs? We present an in-depth examination of how the World Bank, an influential international organization with a broad development mandate, has engaged with the SDGs, especially with SDG 10 that seeks to reduce inequalities. Based on a mixed-method approach that included the study of 326 key documents and 23 interviews, we found no evidence of a policy impact of the SDGs on the World Bank. Instead, we conclude that the World Bank's engagement with the SDGs can best be described as "*organizational jiu-jitsu,*" mobilizing the metaphor of the ancient martial art in which an actor uses the force and strength of the opponent to advance one's own position. We argue that the World Bank used the growing momentum of the SDGs to further its strategic objectives without being influenced by the SDGs in turn. The bank engaged with the SDGs selectively; efforts to integrate the goals into organizational practices remained limited; and their inclusion in country-level processes is primarily voluntary. These findings, which may be similar for other powerful international organizations, raise important questions about the ability of global goal-setting to realize a transformative impact.

En 2015, les Nations unies ont convenu de 17 Objectifs de Développement Durable (ODD) afin de mobiliser différents acteurs, notamment les organisations internationales, en faveur d'une transformation mondiale vers la durabilité. Il était attendu que les organisations internationales apportent leur aide pour la mise en application de ces objectifs, et qu'elles en encouragent, soutiennent ou coordonnent d'autres pour qu'elles travaillent à leur réussite. Toutefois, les organisations internationales ont-elles modifié leur comportement ces huit dernières années à cause des ODD ? Nous présentons une analyse approfondie de l'approche de la Banque mondiale, une organisation internationale influente au mandat de développement large, notamment relativement à l'ODD 10 dont le but est de réduire les inégalités. En nous basant sur une approche aux méthodes mixtes qui incluait l'étude de 326 documents clés et 23 entretiens, nous n'avons trouvé aucune preuve de l'effet politique des ODD sur la Banque mondiale. Nous concluons plutôt que l'approche de la Banque mondiale en matière d'ODD s'apparente plus justement à du ≪ jiu-*jitsu organisationnel* ≫, un art martial ancestral dans lequel l'acteur utilise la force de son adversaire pour servir ses propres fins. Nous affirmons que la Banque mondiale s'est servie de la prise de vitesse des ODD pour avancer ses propres objectifs stratégiques sans subir l'influence des ODD en retour. La banque a adopté une approche sélective. Les efforts pour intégrer les objectifs dans les pratiques de l'organisation sont restés limités et leur inclusion dans les processus nationaux est majoritairement volontaire. Ces résultats, qui sont peut-être similaires pour d'autres puissantes organisations internationales, soulèvent des questions importantes concernant la capacité de définition d'objectifs mondiaux pour parvenir à un effet transformateur.

En 2015, las Naciones Unidas acordaron 17 Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS) con el fin de movilizar a diversos agentes, incluidas las organizaciones internacionales, de cara a intentar lograr una transformación global en materia de sostenibilidad. Existían expectativas con relación a que las organizaciones internacionales ayudaran en la implementación de los objetivos y alentaran, apoyaran o coordinaran a otros para que trabajaran en favor de su consecución. Pero, ¿se ha producido algún cambio en el comportamiento de las organizaciones internacionales durante los últimos ocho años debido a los ODS? Presentamos un estudio en profundidad sobre cómo el Banco Mundial, una organización internacional influyente con un amplio mandato en el campo del desarrollo, se ha comprometido con los ODS, especialmente con el ODS 10 que busca reducir las desigualdades. Nos basamos en un enfoque de método mixto que incluía el estudio de 326 documentos clave y 23 entrevistas. Como resultado de este enfoque, no encontramos evidencia alguna de la existencia de un impacto político de los ODS dentro del Banco Mundial. En cambio, concluimos que el compromiso del Banco Mundial con los ODS puede describirse de forma más precisa como un ≪jiu-jitsu organizacional≫, usando la metáfora del antiguo arte marcial en el que una de las partes usa la fuerza y la energía del oponente con el fin de poder avanzar en su propia posición. Argumentamos que el

van Driel, Melanie et al. (2023) How the World Bank Engages with the Sustainable Development Goal on Reducing Inequalities: A Case of Organizational Jiu-Jitsu. *Global Studies Quarterly*, https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksad035

Banco Mundial utilizó la creciente pujanza que estaban experimentando los ODS con el fin de promover sus propios objetivos estratégicos, pero sin verse influenciado, a su vez, por los ODS. El banco se comprometió con los ODS de manera selectiva: por un lado, los esfuerzos que se llevaban a cabo para integrar los objetivos dentro de las prácticas institucionales siguieron siendo limitados y, por otro lado, su inclusión en los procesos a nivel nacional es, principalmente, voluntaria. Estas conclusiones, que podrían ser similares en el caso de otras organizaciones internacionales poderosas, plantean preguntas importantes sobre la capacidad que puede tener el establecimiento de objetivos globales para lograr un impacto transformador.

Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly launched the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These goals, which succeed the earlier Millennium Development Goals, are the most ambitious example of global governance through goal-setting to date (Biermann et al. 2017; Kamau et al. 2018; Vijge et al. 2020). According to the United Nations (2015), the ambition of the SDGs is nothing less than "transforming our world."

International organizations are expected to partake in the governance, promotion, and support of these SDGs. Many international organizations already participated in the development of the goals (Cormier 2018) and serve as so-called "custodians" of the SDG indicators that are being developed to measure progress on the goals (van Driel et al. 2022). However, it is still unclear how global goals are used once they have been agreed upon. Notably, how do global goals affect the processes and policies of international organizations. For example, do their internal organizational structures, priorities, and procedures change because of the goals? This question is important for both the theory of international relations and the practice of global sustainability governance; yet little is known about how international organizations engage with the SDGs.

To address this knowledge gap, we conducted a case study of the relationship between the SDGs and one important international organization, the World Bank. The World Bank plays a significant role in global economic governance due to its broad mandate, its vast resource base, its frequent and regular interactions with governments as clients, and its myriad publications and databases (Weaver and Park 2007). In 2020, the World Bank's total commitments amounted to USD 77.1 billion, it had 12,300 full-time staff, and it operated in 145 countries (World Bank 2020). World Bank projects cover a range of areas from building schools to fighting disease, providing water and electricity, and environmental protection, and as such, they are linked to most SDGs.

Among these many links, we focus here on the World Bank's engagement with SDG 10, the goal that aims at reducing inequalities within countries and among countries. Inequality was not covered by the SDGs' predecessors, the Millennium Development Goals. Moreover, prior to the inclusion of inequality in the 2030 Agenda, the World Bank was criticized for not embracing inequality reduction as a goal and for taking instead an instrumental approach to the issue, in which inequality policies were seen as useful as long as they contributed to reducing (extreme) poverty or promoting average economic growth (Saiz and Donald 2017, 1030; Oestreich 2018). Nevertheless, World Bank officials participated in the negotiations for SDG 10, and the bank has stated its ambition to help catalyze the SDGs through "thought leadership, global convening, and country-level uptake" (World Bank Group 2021c).

This raises the question of whether the SDGs, particularly SDG 10 on reducing inequality, have influenced the agenda, communication strategy, organizational set-up, and through this, the work of the World Bank. We arrive here at a cautious answer. We find that despite calls for transformative steps, the World Bank's engagement with the SDGs can best be characterized as "organizational jiu-jitsu," a concept that we borrow from Japanese martial arts, where it describes the act of one combatant using and transforming the strength and power of another to advance its own interests (Hopkins 2015). In political terms, we conceptualize organizational jiu-jitsu as the behavior of an international organization that strategically uses the power of global goals in its favor to reinforce its own policies or interests while minimizing the chance of being itself reshaped or transformed by these goals. The ways in which organizations limit the need for overall adjustment are likely to affect the room for maneuver of other actors in the (organizational) environment.

We structured the paper as follows. In the "International Organizations and Global Goals" section, we assess the research gap on the engagement of international organizations with global goals. In the "Methodology" section, we present our methodology. In the "Results" section, we present our findings. The "Discussion: Organizational Jiu-jitsu" section discusses the concept of organizational jiu-jitsu, and in the "Conclusion" section, we conclude.

International Organizations and Global Goals

Global goals such as the SDGs are unique governance mechanisms, and they need to be seen as such in International Relations theory. The SDGs are, in essence, universal, time-bound, and legally non-binding policy objectives agreed upon by governments. They come close to prescriptive international norms but are generally more specific, and they can be highly ambitious (Jolly 2004; Fukuda-Parr 2014; Vijge et al. 2020). The overarching UN program "2030 Agenda" presented the SDGs in 2015 as a "supremely ambitious and transformative vision" that should be accompanied by "bold and transformative steps" with "scale and ambition" (United Nations 2015, 1–3). Scholars noted that the goals had the potential to form overarching and crosscutting norms that integrate social and environmental considerations into new definitions of development (Stevens and Kanie 2016; Biermann et al. 2017). For international organizations, this would require them to refocus their priorities, redefine their legitimacy and role (Maupain 2020), and reformulate short-term vested interests (Kamau et al. 2018).

Many international organizations have committed to the SDGs since 2015. To date, however, studies on the engagement of these organizations with global goals remain scarce (e.g., Grek 2020; Montesano et al. 2021; van Driel et al. 2022). Early studies have focused on implementation, noting the efforts of international organizations to "cherry-pick" goals (Forestier and Kim 2020; Bogers et al. 2023), to engage in selective mainstreaming (Meurs et al. 2019), or to continue to adopt policies that are barriers to goal attainment (James 2019). However, little is known about the influence of international organizations within the process of governance through goals and about the influence global goals, in turn, have on international organizations.

Prior International Relations research can offer some expectations about the engagement of international organizations. The idea of a mutual constitution, for instance, helps to understand international organizations as active norm entrepreneurs and, at the same time, as agencies shaped by external forces (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001; Park 2006; Grek 2020). In this literature, international organizations may resist, adapt to, or reshape norms depending on the configuration of variables. Scholars of historical institutionalism add here that all outcomes may vary and be influenced by temporality, such as the timing and sequence of events that condition and create path dependencies for later events (Fioretos 2011; Keohane 2017).

Because the SDGs have been adopted by global consensus, they could well incentivize behavioral change. From a principal–agent perspective (Nielson and Tierney 2003, 246; Park 2009, 110), however, the SDGs also leave much room for discretion. The principal would be here not a unified entity because states are still allowed to prioritize some of the seventeen goals during implementation (Langford 2016; Young 2017; Forestier and Kim 2020). In general, global goals might be a low priority for international organizations that have many other assignments that are often more binding, have more urgent deliverables, and have more repercussions in case of inaction. Furthermore, the SDGs, although presented as a holistic agenda, have many internal contradictions that must be addressed in implementation (Hickel 2019). Overall, in a principal–agent perspective, this would leave much room for agency slack, including efforts to minimize efforts to execute the SDGs or shift policy away from the wishes of (some) principal(s) (Hawkins et al. 2006). Yet principal–agent theory does not give much information about the exact behavior of international organizations that is to be expected.

From a constructivist perspective, international organizations would be influenced by many intra-organizational variables, including their identity, mandate, structure, bureaucratic culture, and leadership (Park 2006; Vetterlein 2007; Park 2012; Tallberg et al. 2018). The uptake of norms in behavioral templates, or script-writing, for example, has been argued to depend on struggles within and between the board of directors and staff of international organizations (Kentikelenis and Seabrooke 2017). The breath of the SDGs, covering nearly all areas of global governance, however, is at odds with international organizations that over time have become highly functionally differentiated and that operate through intra-organizational compromises.

Viewed from the perspective of organizational ecology, it is evident that international organizations operate in a siloed and fragmented governance system with significant resource constraints (Bogers et al. 2022). The speed and degree of SDG implementation would result from calculations about its (potential) impact on organizational survival (Abbott et al. 2016). This calculation will partially be shaped by perceived pressure from third parties, including civil society to socialize the SDGs and public sentiment toward the goals. These will be weighed against other external pressures, including those resulting from policy failures, external shocks, and the prevailing intellectual climate, which can all impact SDG uptake.

Within global governance, the SDGs might also be expected to feed into conflicting material and normative pressures (Weaver 2008). The SDGs are promoted as a holistic agenda, but states, through their limited financial contributions and their own cherry-picking, often maintain the incentives for functional differentiation. If pressures of differentiation are internalized in organizational structures, processes, and ideologies without being resolved, the result might be the "the organization of hypocrisy" (Lipson 2007); that is, contradictory activities that proliferate in different parts of an organization or a gap in organizational outputs, such as between talk, decision (discursive commitments and mandate), and action (implementation). Without attention to potential negative trade-offs between goals, selective implementation may undermine rather than support the implementation of the SDGs.

Other studies have shown that international organizations adopt many activities to cope with contradicting internal and external pressures. Among these are shallow norm diffusion (Tallberg et al. 2018), the modification of norms through the creation of benchmarks (Waage et al. 2010; Cornwall and Fujita 2012; Joshi and O'Dell 2013; Nattrass 2014), and a focus on norms validated by key actors in their environment (Gutner 2005). Soft management tools such as policy advice, monitoring, reporting, and lending program conditionalities have also been used to (re)shape norms in line with organizational ambitions (Alvarez 2016; Ylönen 2017). To extend their authority and facilitate norm diffusion, some international organizations also use their own knowledge-production to feed into global policy discourses (Zapp 2021). This has facilitated paradigm maintenance by "teaching" specific norms and "judging" compliance (Broome et al. 2018). Organizations also exert influence through close relationships with other organizations or grassroots channels (Linnér 2006; Park 2010; Arias 2015; Mahajan 2019; Grek 2020; Laubber et al. 2020), for instance, in attempts of international organizations to change the anticipated decisions in overlapping organizations to prevent rules that might bring negative consequences for their own work (Margulis 2021).

Overall, our review of the theoretical literature in International Relations research shows that there are no clear expectations about the concrete impact of global goals on international organizations, and conversely on the effects of international organizations on the emergence and eventual functioning of global goals. The concrete relations between global goals and international organizations will thus stand at the center of our following investigation, with the empirical example of the relationship of the SDGs with the World Bank as one of the largest and most influential international organizations. Before we report on our empirical research, we next present our methodology.

Methodology

Our study of the engagement of the World Bank with the SDGs builds on a mixed-method approach that combines quantitative text analysis, extensive document analysis, and semi-structured expert interviews. We study the period from 2012, when the negotiations for the SDGs started, up to 2021. Among the seventeen SDGs, we focus on SDG 10 on reducing inequalities for three reasons. First, reducing inequalities was not covered by the Millennium Development Goals, which makes the determination of novel patterns of engagement easier. Second, the goal of reducing inequalities relates closely to the mandate of the World Bank, making it a most-likely case for engagement for the World Bank. Third, by focusing on a novel case where engagement by the bank seems likely, we can look for patterns of engagement that might be more indirect, subtle, or convoluted in other cases, and can thereby illuminate potential expectations for future research.

We structure our analysis according to key facets of the policy cycle, where actors move from deciding on topics, goals, targets, and benchmarks to organizational mainstreaming, implementation, and review processes (Jann and Wegrich 2007; Vijge et al. 2020). We look at five phases: agenda-setting; discursive uptake; organizational adjustment; country-level processes; and global review processes. Agenda-setting and global reviews are at the UN level and involve a broad range of actors. The other three phases are internal to an organization, focusing on how global goals interact with organizational communication, set-up, and operational activities. Theoretically, however, all variables might play a role in these phases. For example, pressure from civil society to take up the SDGs in organizational communications might impact discussions on organizational reporting. We now elaborate on each phase individually.

First, agenda-setting describes activities that shape the issues that policymakers focus on (Kingdon 1995). International organizations may be affected by new issues as they are incorporated into global goals, but they may also try to shape the content of these goals and benchmarks by promoting their own objectives on the global agenda. An effective frame can be connected to the values, priorities, and commitments of other actors, has technical credibility, and can be linked to an organization's capacity (Princen 2011). It can also be spread through networks and stakeholders outside of an institution. To analyze agenda-setting, we focus on the negotiations of the SDG goals, targets (2012–2015), and indicators (which lasted until March 2017).

Second, discursive uptake describes attempts to change the language that is used to conceptualize, frame, and ultimately define an issue (Moon 2019). Organizations may adopt the SDGs as a comprehensive agenda but may also prioritize some goals and indicators over others (Meurs et al. 2019), reframe their work or targets after adoption (Birkenkötter 2018; Bentley 2019; James 2019; Meurs et al. 2019; Larionova 2020; Sommer and Forman-Rabinovici 2020), or make superficial references to the goals without changing policies.

Third, organizational adjustment pertains to changes within an organization that might lead to the incorporation of goals into their organizational identity. Structures, policy settings, and instruments may change, including being extended through layering, adapted to suit new objectives, replaced entirely, or phased out gradually in favor of new methods of operation (Vetterlein and Moschella 2014). Activities might be evaluated against new goals, but may also be subject to (deliberate) strategic ambiguity (Mallard and McGoey 2018). For our analysis of organizational change, we focus on the overall organizational set-up, the means through which work is evaluated (indicators of success), and the means through which work is funded.

Fourth, country-level processes refer to activities of international organizations at the country level, which can also be extended, adapted, dismantled, or replaced. This category is distinct as managerial processes, including definitions, standards, and procedures for borrowing and reporting; and it can affect third parties, including state clients that have agreed to a work plan for receiving support (Gutner 2005; Alvarez 2016). Country-level processes can also include grassroots-level activities and influence national policy debates (e.g., Linnér 2006). For our analysis, we focus on the so-called Country Partnership Frameworks (CPFs) of the World Bank that guide concrete country programs and projects.

Fifth, global review processes include global monitoring and evaluation. The continuous evaluation of the SDGs allows for network-based engagement of international organizations, which are invited as observers. This engagement allows actors to influence or be influenced by others who push their preferred frames and align adjustments to implementation (Broome et al. 2018; Grek 2020). For our analysis, we focus on the review of SDG 10, which took place in 2019, and the review of the SDG 10 indicators within the overall review of the SDG indicator framework, which took place in 2020.

To get an overall picture of the World Bank's activities, we undertook desk-analysis of documents related to or informative for the organizations' approach to the SDGs, including here strategy documents, evaluation reports, monitoring databases, partnership frameworks, and country-level documents. Thereafter, we conducted twenty-three semi-structured expert interviews to help identify and supplement developments in all phases of engagement. Interview themes included the prioritization and (factors impacting the) impact of the SDGs at the World Bank.

Interviewees included seventeen World Bank staff, most of them from the Poverty and Equity Global Practice or the Development Data (Research) Group. All interviewees worked directly or indirectly on the topic of inequality, including on data-collection, country projects, and research. Some of the interviewees also serve in the World Bank as focal points for the SDG 10 indicators. One interviewee conducted negotiations for the SDG indicators. Some interviewees were members of the Independent Evaluation Group, and three were former World Bank officials now active as inequality scholars. In addition, we interviewed five representatives from civil society organizations working on the topic of inequality. Relevant organizations were identified through the open consultations on so-called Grey Indicators that were published around the SDG indicator negotiations and included numerous comments on proposed indicators by civil society organizations (IAEG-SDGs 2015). All organizations were active on the topic of inequality before the launch of the SDGs; provided input during the negotiations; and still engage with the World Bank on the inequality topic.

To study the discursive uptake of the SDGs, we conducted a quantitative text analysis of a set of World Bank documents, presented in table 1, to determine whether, which, and how the SDGs are mentioned in World Bank communication (Hardy et al. 2004). We compiled results from 326 key documents from the World Bank Group Open Knowledge Repository. All documents are consistently available throughout the research period, cover a broad coverage of policies and present an official stance of the World Bank. Furthermore, they are relevant for both internal and external communications.

To be able to place the use of the SDGs in some context, we extended the timeframe for our text analysis to include documents from the era of the Millennium Development Goals (starting in 2000). Using NVivo 12, we first compared overall references to the MDGs and the SDGs between 2000 and 2020. We used both "MDG(s)/SDG(s)" and "Millennium Development Goal(s)/Sustainable Development Goal(s)" as key terms for our text search.[1] For the time cohort of 2000–2005, a limited number of speeches

[1]We excluded cases where the acronym followed the full term, or occurrences in the list of abbreviations, the index, the table of contents, notes, bibliographies, titles of speeches, and instances of "MDG" that referred to Madagascar.

Table 1. Documents used for analysis

Type of documents	*Specification*	*Number of documents*
Speeches of Presidents	James D. Wolfensohn (2000–2005)	11
	Paul Wolfowitz (2005–2007)	32
	Robert B. Zoellick (2007–2012)	20
	Jim Yong Kim (2012–2019)	94
	David R. Malpass (2019–present)	34
Flagship Reports	World Development Report	21
	Global Economic Prospects	32
	Doing Business (2004–2020)	16
	Poverty and Shared Prosperity (2016–2020)	3
Annual Reports	World Bank Annual Report (IBRD and IDA) (2000–2020)	21
	International Finance Corporation (2000–2020)	21
	Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (2000–2020)	21
Total		326

Source: World Bank Open Knowledge Repository 2021.

have been made available, and it, therefore, had fewer documents overall. We then mapped the coverage and prioritization of the SDGs (2016–2020), using "SDG(s)" and "Sustainable Development Goal(s)" as well as the respective goal number as keywords for a frequency search. This frequency analysis informs about the topics for which the organization views the SDGs as relevant, and those SDGs that the World Bank is promoting.

By and large, our findings are applicable to all the organizations that together constitute the World Bank Group, except for the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the International Development Association together make up the World Bank and engage in shared annual reporting, but the World Bank Group also includes the International Finance Corporation and the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency. Where relevant we note differences observed between these entities.

Results

We now present our research results of the World Bank's engagement with SDG 10 during the five phases outlined above, moving from the negotiation of the goals toward discursive uptake, organizational- and country-level adjustments, and the review of the goals.

Agenda-Setting and Benchmarking: Constructing the Global Narrative

In the agenda-setting phase, we made two key observations. First, the World Bank significantly influenced the definition of SDG 10 during the negotiations, which minimized the need for later adjustments to comply with the goal. Second, by advocating for the adoption of its own preferred benchmarks, the World Bank ensured that others would evaluate their success based on the bank's own definition of inequality.

While international organizations were formally only observers during the SDG negotiations, in practice, they had much space to promote their preferred frames and operationalizations for topics that were not yet defined, including for the goal of reducing inequalities in SDG 10. The emergence of SDG 10 partially relates to the financial crisis (2007–2009) and its aftermath, which prompted calls for addressing extreme inequalities in outcomes and wealth concentration at the top of the income distribution (Atkinson 2015). When discussions on the SDGs began in 2012, the Millennium Development Goals were thus criticized for not having a separate goal on inequality. World Bank President Jim Kim, who took office in that year, recognized this changing global context (Interview 5). An internal process within the bank led to the adoption of the concept of Shared Prosperity as one of the World Bank's "Twin Goals" of 2013, with the other one focusing on poverty reduction, aiming to reduce the share of people in extreme poverty to 3 percent of the global population by 2030 (World Bank Group 2015). The bank defined Shared Prosperity as increasing the income of the bottom 40 percent of the population in each country (World Bank Group 2015). As a result, reducing inequality, in this definition, had become an integral part of the World Bank's objectives and effectively "broadened its mandate" (Interview 6 and Interview 5).

Individuals working on inequality viewed Shared Prosperity as "a compromise solution" (Interview 7), more "palatable" (Interview 2), and "a tentative step" (Interview 5) toward addressing inequality. Shared Prosperity focused on inequalities in income, rather than outcomes, and did not compare the lowest incomes to the highest in a country. Some claimed that Shared Prosperity was not truly about inequality, but rather a way to reframe inclusive poverty reduction, leaving out questions about wealth redistribution from the top (Interview 11). Additionally, it was perceived that "pro-growth" World Bank staff could still argue that Shared Prosperity was "all about growth" (Interview 10) instead of addressing inequality.

Eventually, the bank succeeded in incorporating its goal of Shared Prosperity into SDG 10, according to the staff at the World Bank and observers from civil society. Shared Prosperity was a ready-made framework to use, and it left out sensitive political discussions around inequalities of outcome. SDG 10's first target hence became to "by 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 percent of the population at a rate higher than the national average." The only difference between this goal and the World Bank's own internal goal is the addition of "higher than the national average." Although there is no hierarchy among SDG targets, in practice, the first target is often seen as the "headline target." In short, the World Bank managed to enter its own framing into the global agenda and to block any possibly more radical global inequality narrative.

In 2015, after the SDGs were launched, the more concrete indicators for the SDGs were negotiated, and civil society representatives noted here a "tension" emerging (Interview 9). The negotiations for indicators were conducted by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on the SDG Indicators, consisting of twenty-seven representatives of national statistical offices, where international agencies acted as observers (IAEG-SDGs 2017). For each indicator, the Inter-Agency and Expert Group tried to designate at least one "custodian agency" that would be responsible for developing the methodology, data collection, data aggregation, and later reporting (United Nations Statistical Commission 2017). The initial division of labor resulted in 2017 in several "orphan" indicators for which no agency wanted to take responsibility; the ability of international organizations to decline such indicators, however, put them in an influential position, as they could shape which indicators were seen as potentially viable and which were not.

The division of indicators was primarily based on existing mandates and organizational capacity (van Driel et al. 2022). This allowed the World Bank to establish itself as a data gatekeeper through its broad mandate, staff, budget, and expertise in large-scale data collection. Actors proposing an indicator often had to ensure its acceptance by providing "methodologically mature" sources, which were preferably already collected, to demonstrate their value for global monitoring (Interview 5). The World Bank became formally involved in about 20 percent of all 231 SDG indicators; it served as the "custodian agency" for 20 of them and was involved in the development and monitoring of another 22 (Serajuddin and Scuriatti 2019).

During the inequality indicator negotiations, it was perceived that World Bank staff considered not only technical issues but also the political implications of turning monitoring practices into policy instruments for the SDGs (Interview 9 and Interview 12). A representative from civil society mentioned that the World Bank was "very possessively" striving to have its operationalization of Shared Prosperity as indicator 10.1.1, equating its SDG 10 agenda with the Shared Prosperity agenda, as its inclusion would give the World Bank leeway to "cling to it" (Interview 12). The World Bank was well positioned to argue for its operationalization, and it did so by pointing to existing databases and working papers for theoretical robustness (Interview 13). Many negotiators saw Shared Prosperity as a seemingly innovative and bold narrative to discuss inequality backed by a powerful actor with some legitimacy (Interview 11). The final indicator thus closely resembled again the bank's own notion of Shared Prosperity, measured now as "the growth rates of household expenditure or income per capita among the bottom forty percent, and the total population" (UNSTATS 2022). While these data thus allow to compare the bottom 40 percent and the total population, the indicator itself is not focused on the comparison. World Bank officials explained their reluctance to focus on "higher than the national average," as formulated in the first target of SDG 10, by stating that the Shared Prosperity indicator was broader and better fitting the variety of countries they worked in. One employee mentioned:

> *We wanted the goal to be 'higher is always better.' Higher than the national average would mean attaining the goal even with a lack of overall growth, but the bottom forty growing 0.1 percent. We were not going to say that such a country was doing better than one where average growth was eight percent and the bottom grew six. The [Shared Prosperity] goal was not just about inequality, but in the UN discussion they wanted a goal about inequality* (Interview 13).

World Bank officials also argued that their Shared Prosperity indicator would be clearer. Even though more clear-cut inequality-of-outcome indicators like the Gini and the Palma ratio had already been measured by the World Bank, its officials considered these to be "less viable options" or "too complicated to measure" (Interview 12). Civil society organizations, however, saw the bank's Shared Prosperity indicator as limiting the room for more innovative benchmarks, as decreasing ambition during the negotiations (Interview 12), and as diminishing the focus on between-country inequality. The indicators of SDG 10 could allow countries to "pick and choose" among indicators with the aim of arguing that inequality was decreasing (Interview 9). When the World Bank became custodian for five of the ten indicators under SDG 10 (UNSTATS 2021), it could further increase its overall network influence through links to national statistical offices, capacity-building efforts, and other international organizations involved with, or reliant on, their indicators.

Discursive Uptake: The SDG Selection within the World Bank

In the following phase of discursive uptake, we made two key observations. First, although the World Bank Group has used the SDGs more than the earlier MDGs, they have not become an integral part of its discourse. Second, SDG 10 is among the goals least used goals by the bank, even though the theme of inequality, one of the bank's Twin Goals, is recognized largely as originally conceptualized by the bank.

Figure 1 indicates the overall discursive attention given to global goals in key World Bank Group documents. Comparing overall references to the MDGs and SDGs between 2000 and 2020 shows that references to the MDGs fluctuated and decreased when the economic and financial crises started in 2008. In absolute numbers, the SDGs picked up where the MDGs left off, and have a higher starting point. However, the SDGs have not become an enduring integral part of the annual reporting of the World Bank Group. Initially, for the World Bank (IBRD and IDA), a subset of SDG indicators was used to present a regional snapshot for each world region (2016–2019), to evaluate its environmental footprint (2017–2018), and to track the diversity of staff (2016–2020). However, in 2020, in the first report presented during the coronavirus pandemic, most of these key SDG indicators were removed. The Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency included an overview of the SDGs (without targets or indicators) that its projects were supposed to advance between 2017 and 2019. The International Finance Corporation continued to focus on its own development goals (inspired by the MDGs) up to 2017 and published in 2018 a paper on how its work aligned with the SDGs, but it did not go further than using one paragraph in its 2020 annual report to list them, without using this connection. Despite UN-wide calls for the use of the SDGs as blueprints for recovery, the global goals do not appear to serve as a compass for the World Bank.

Rather than using the global goals as an *integral* part of its organizational reporting, the World Bank tends to publish *separate* monitoring reports for such purposes. For the Millennium Development Goals, this separate report was titled *Global Monitoring Report* (World Bank Group and International Monetary Fund 2015). For the SDGs, a series titled *Implementing the 2030 Agenda* was initiated, highlighting not all, but some key initiatives and focus points for the seventeen SDGs (World Bank Group 2016). The report was rather short, and SDG 10 on reduced inequality received less than two pages in both the 2017 and 2019 reports.

When SDGs are referred to, SDG 10 on inequality is notably rarely mentioned. Figure 2, which displays references to individual SDGs, indicates that most references (59.9 percent) are to a subset of only five goals, including SDG 3 (Health), 6 (Water and Sanitation), 7 (Energy), 5 (Gender Equality), and 17 (Partnerships). The World Bank's core mandate, reducing poverty (linked to SDG 1 on Poverty Reduction) and increasing shared prosperity (linked to SDG 10 on Reduced Inequalities), is not reflected therein. These goals take up sixth (SDG 1, 10.4 percent) and thirteenth (SDG 10, 1.4 percent) positions, respectively. For SDG 10, this means only four goals are cited less often, including the environmental goals of SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life below water), SDG 15 (Life on land), and SDG 16 (Peace, justice, and strong institutions). Although explaining this overall pattern is beyond our scope here, it can be noted that SDGs falling in the social and economic

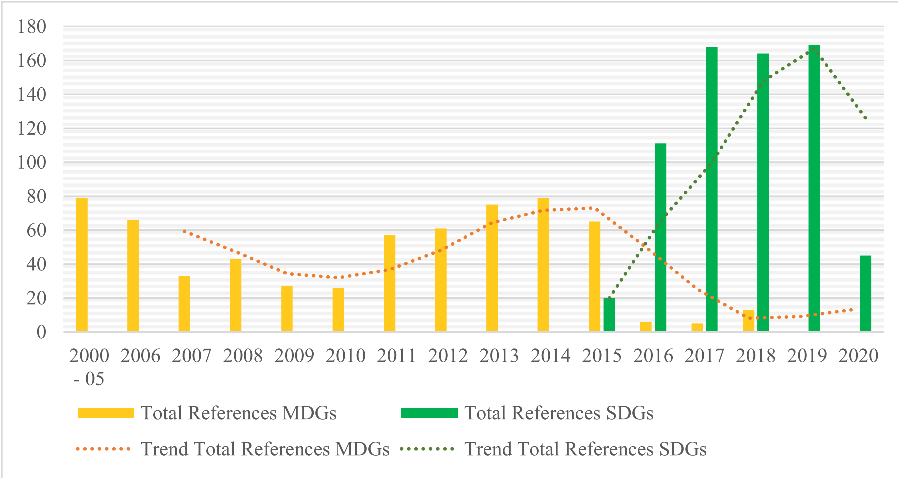

Figure 1. References per year (2000–2020)—MDGs and SDGs.
Source: Based on calculations of the authors.

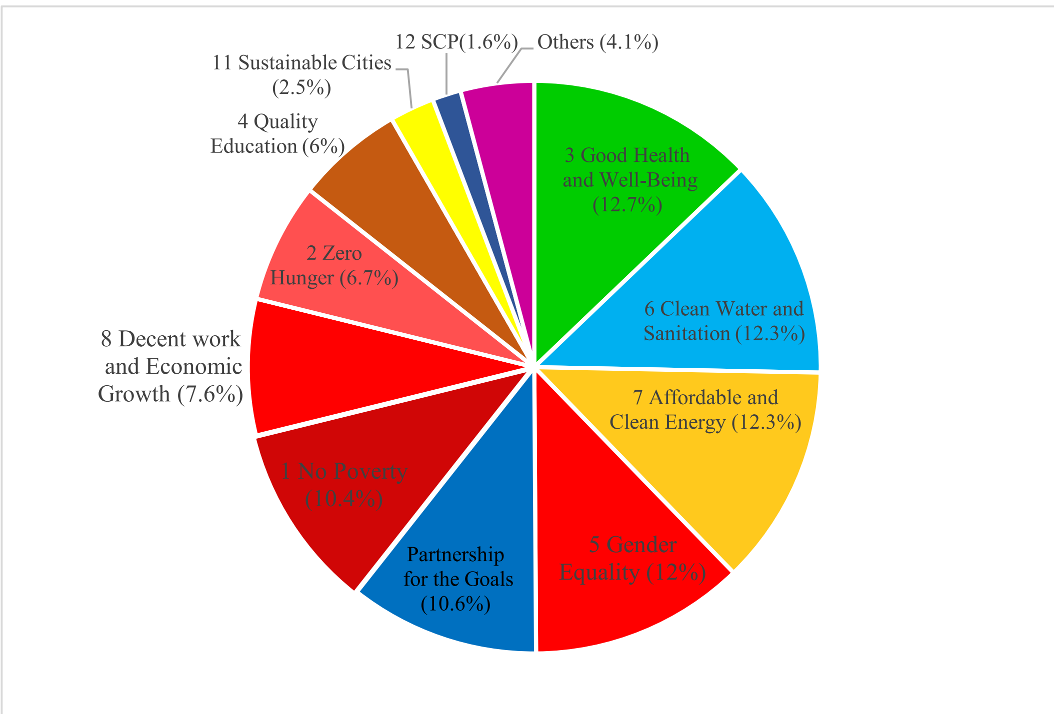

Figure 2. Relative attention per SDG (2016–2020) (% of total references).
Source: Based on calculations of the authors.

dimensions of sustainable development are most often used, and the environmental goals much less. For some social goals, like SDG 5 and SDG 7, the World Bank has a "custodianship" role, which might partially explain the attention. Most others in the top five are key sectors that World Bank projects aim to contribute to, although most are more primarily associated with other UN agencies, like the World Health Organization for SDG 3, UN Water for SDG 6, and UN Women for SDG 5.

To explain the lack of references to SDG 10, World Bank staff refer to the prior success of the bank in setting the (global) inequality agenda long before the SDGs emerged. Following the SDG negotiations, as mentioned above, the World Bank's inequality narrative aligns with several SDG 10 targets, notably with SDG 10.1. Consequently, staff perceive SDG 10 as a non-essential discursive tool. One interviewee mentioned:

> *Despite explicitly mentioning and referring to the SDGs less often than UN staff, our teams' work is closely related to SDG concepts and essence. As long as people pay attention to SDG concepts and objectives, it doesn't really matter if they explicitly refer to the SDGs all the time. For example, me and other colleagues have written documents where we do not explicitly mention the SDGs, but we do explain why the topic is important* (Interview 14).

To discuss inequality, referring to the shared prosperity goal established by Jim Kim remains a central part of the discourse, even after he was succeeded by David Malpass in 2019. The consequence is that the "other" dimensions of inequality captured in SDG 10 are thereby not referred to, including discrimination (10.3), migration (10.7), the need for market regulations (10.5), and the need for increased representativeness of financial institutions themselves (10.6), including the World Bank. When SDG 10 is referred to at the target level, it is to target 10.1 and 10.2, which can both be clearly linked to the World Bank's expertise and its own Shared Prosperity goal (World Bank 2016, 2018).

Organizational Adjustment: Pre-Alignment and the Twin Goal Filter

In the phase of organizational adjustment, the World Bank's overall set-up has remained virtually unchanged, with its staff arguing that this structure aligns with the SDGs "by design." In practice, however, the alignment with SDGs remains selective. Some frameworks to measure performance now include SDG targets and indicators, but most are viewed only instrumentally in pursuit of the Twin Goals. Funding streams are not differentiated to disclose their contributions to the SDGs, as the organization has set up an alternative funding mechanism that focuses on SDG projects.

The World Bank Group's organizational set-up was altered in 2014, after the Twin Goals were agreed upon, to be comprised of fourteen Global Practices and five Cross-Cutting Solution Areas. Many of these "practices" are sectoral and include topics such as water, health, or education. To mainstream the SDGs, adjustments to this structure were deemed unnecessary, as it was noted that the "practices" aligned "almost one to one" with many of the SDGs (World Bank Group 2021c). However, this is not always evident. The agriculture "practice," for example, has remained unchanged since its inception and does not align with any of the seventeen SDGs. The topic of reducing inequalities (SDG 10), despite being taken up in the SDG agenda, only appears as a focus area of the Poverty "practice" (World Bank Group 2021d). This can make it difficult to mainstream a broader view on inequality, and it institutionalizes the view among World Bank staff that reducing extreme poverty and reducing inequality are essentially the same.

In theory, a separate "practice" could have been institutionalized to better integrate inequality into this structure, or inequality could have become a new "cross-cutting solution area." And yet, using a broad conception of inequality as a "cross-cutting solution area" might be challenging for the bank, as 71 percent of staff members surveyed still consider a focus on inequality of opportunity, rather than outcomes, as the best way to promote Shared Prosperity (World Bank 2018). Equality of opportunities seeks to minimize the negative impact of circumstances such as race, gender, and social and family background (World Bank 2006, 4) and to focus on better access to, for example, education and employment opportunities. Equality of outcomes, instead, focuses on deprivation in outcomes, such as inhealth, education, and consumption, and is often associated with the need for redistributive policies. Such redistributive policies, however, and even the need for targeted inequality policies, remain disputed by many World Bank economists who argue that focusing on average growth is more effective (Dollar et al. 2013). The argument of pre-alignment might thus preclude the need for such more profound discussions on broader definitions of inequality.

When it comes to monitoring and evaluation, the World Bank Group's Corporate Scorecards now include a subset of SDG indicators. However, the scorecard presents the SDGs in three different "Tiers," rather than a holistic agenda. The top tier consists of the Twin Goals, operationalized as SDG 1.1.1 (population living below the international poverty line) and a partially defined version of SDG 10.1 (concentrated growth in the bottom 40 percent) (World Bank Group 2021a). The other monitoring tools of the World Bank, including the World Development Indicators and the SDG-focused SDG Atlas, also include subsets of SDG 10 indicators (World Bank 2021). Importantly, however, through the Tier division of the Corporate Scorecard, other SDG goals (insofar as they are included) have become part of Tier 2 and Tier 3, useful in pursuit of the overarching goals of reducing poverty and increasing shared prosperity. This approach seemingly counters the spirit of the SDGs, which the United Nations presented as a holistic and integrated agenda where each goal was considered equally important to reach sustainable development in practice.

Country-Level Processes: SDG Inclusion Based on State Preferences

At the country level, the World Bank staff uses the concept of pre-alignment, and mechanisms earlier introduced to support the Twin Goals in structuring country-engagement remain unchanged.

According to World Bank staff, country documents align with the SDGs already by design through their focus on the Twin Goals and sustainability (Interview 16). National development strategies, which often integrate the SDGs, provide an additional safeguard for alignment. Keys for International Development Assistance also rely on international commitments like the SDGs. These commitments are integrated into CPFs, which set priorities for a 5-year period. The CPFs are developed through conversations between staff and states, using Systematic Country Diagnostics to identify opportunities and constraints for sustainable poverty reduction and shared prosperity (World Bank Group 2021b). Both the CPFs and Systematic Country Diagnostics were introduced in July 2014 to operationalize the Twin Goals.

Interviewees state that the SDGs are part of a broader set of considerations that can inspire discussions on a country's priorities. The inclusion of SDG 10 indicators in country goals, however, depends on client preferences but can serve as a reminder to officials, particularly in National Statistical Offices, that these data will be reported globally (Interviews 4 and 5). "In some marginal cases," inequality has become a topic of discussion even in countries that may not prioritize it (Interview 5).

However, without systematic measures to ensure the integration of the SDGs, the goals often remain absent. In 2015, the World Bank introduced a post-2015 Development Diagnostic Framework to assess a country's progress toward the SDGs (Gable et al. 2015), but it has not been widely used. The guidelines for country engagement suggest aligning country goals with the SDGs (World Bank Group 2021e), but the need for explicit connections is not emphasized (World Bank Group 2021f).

The connection between the SDGs and the CPFs is relatively rare (World Bank Group Open Knowledge Repository 2021). Examples of frameworks that have links to the SDGs include Benin's 2019–2023 action program and South Africa's 2022–2026 framework. However, frameworks for countries like China and India, which represent about a third of the world population, only mention the importance of the SDG framework while not using it to frame their national goals. The framework for Nigeria refers to the SDGs only once. Many other countries mention only generally that the SDGs are integrated into their national development plans. This lack of active links makes it difficult to verify the alignment with the SDGs in practice. As CPFs form the overall framework for consecutive projects and programs at the country level, this does not incentivize the use of the SDGs in practice. In the Nigerian case (2015–2021), for example, no project documents or implementation completion and results reports refer to the SDGs, and only one program document mentions the SDGs as part of the institutional context.

Review Processes: Influenced by the Environment?

For SDG 10, the review of 2019 and the comprehensive indicator review of 2020 facilitated a feedback loop between the World Bank and its organizational environment. However, actors advocating for new approaches are constrained by the World Bank's early efforts to shape the terms of engagement, which precludes discussions about inequality frames sensitive within the organization.

The High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development monitors the global progress of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs (United Nations 2012). It focuses on a subset of SDGs and overarching themes, and international organizations, including the World Bank, play a role in preparation and reporting. In 2019, during the review of SDG 10, a preparatory expert meeting was co-led by the World Bank, allowing civil society to discuss the Bank's limited focus on SDG 10 indicators (Interview 12). During the starting presentation, World Bank staff used the Shared Prosperity indicator to claim that as the growth of the bottom 40 percent has increased in most countries, inequality was slowly reduced. Civil society actors noted, however, that this presented an overly optimistic perspective on global inequality, as on other indicators progress was lacking, including those covering the voting power of countries within the World Bank and the IMF and between-country inequality, which is the focus of nearly half the goals' target (Interview 12). World Bank officials were seen as agreeing with criticisms during discussions, yet without course-correcting thereafter (Interview 9). The outcome document was noted as an example of the World Bank's wish to be at the steering wheel. Instead of the normal iterative process where all participants offer input, the document was presented as a "*fait accompli*" (Interview 12). However, the report did include references to some issues pushed for during the meeting, like redistribution and tax policy.

The 2019 review of SDG 10 sparked interest among civil society organizations to use review processes for advocacy around inequality, even among some who had earlier been skeptical of the "SDG project" (Interview 9). The comprehensive review of the SDG indicator framework in 2020 was seen as a subsequent opportunity to improve the link between SDG 10's targets and indicators. Oxfam Novib and the Commitment to Equity Institute capitalized on this window of opportunity, successfully proposing an additional SDG 10 indicator (10.4.2), which measures the redistributive impact of fiscal policies on inequality. The World Bank agreed to the proposal, seeing it as a unique case of cooperation among organizations with differing perspectives on inequality. World Bank staff saw the eventual adoption of indicator 10.4.2 as a unique case of cooperation among organizations with "different perspectives on inequality" (Interview 1). The World Bank even agreed to become the custodian of this new SDG 10 indicator, as it was one of the few agencies with the necessary resources. Oxfam had long advocated for a more direct focus on (extreme) inequality of outcomes, and the Commitment to Equity Institute had developed a new methodology to measure the redistributive impact of fiscal policies on Gini. Both organizations viewed their proposed indicator relevant for target 10.4, which focused on the adoption of "policies, especially fiscal, wage, and social protection policies and the progressive achievement of greater equality." For Oxfam, part of the rationale for proposing the World Bank as a custodian was that it would "help advance the discourse and the conversation at the World Bank – and globally – on inequality, pushing them to think about SDG10 and inequality also in terms of redistribution rather than only about growth of the bottom forty percent" (Interview 11). This indicator choice shows how also other actors were able to impact the bank through the SDG process. However, other important indicators preferred by civil society, like the Palma Ratio, were not actively pushed for because it was believed that they would not receive enough support (Interview 9).

Discussion: Organizational Jiu-Jitsu

Our study is among the first to examine the engagement of a major international organization with the SDGs, a set of ambitious but voluntary global goals with a timeline. Our findings suggest that the mechanisms at play in this case relate to, but are not fully captured by, existing concepts in International Relations theory.

First, the idea of mutual constitution seems to apply (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001; Park 2006; Grek 2020), as the World Bank was an active participant in the agenda-setting phase of the SDGs. However, in the later phases, we did not find that the World Bank has in turn been influenced by the SDGs. The SDGs have not been integrated into World Bank processes such as annual reporting, country planning, or financial reporting. Where the SDGs appear, they are selectively inserted into existing structures, for example, Corporate Scorecards or Annual Reports, or introduced through supplementary structures, for example, the SDG Fund (see also Meurs et al. 2019; Forestier and Kim 2020). Second, instead of showing organized hypocrisy (Lipson 2007) as a discrepancy between rhetoric and behavior, the World Bank does not significantly incorporate the SDGs in its communication. When the bank mentions the SDGs in its reporting, it openly acknowledges its prioritization of some goals and communicates that it translates the global agenda in a way that harmonizes it with its preexisting organizational objectives. Third, instead of having to establish mechanisms to manage conflicting incentives, as observed in the context of organized hypocrisy (Lipson 2007; Weaver 2008), the World Bank has influenced its external environment to conform with its own existing goals by shaping the new SDG on reducing inequality. The World Bank succeeded in using its internally negotiated policy-script to shape the global policy agenda (Kentikelenis and Seabrooke 2017), and it avoids becoming entangled in the hypocrisy dilemma from the start, minimizing risks to its external legitimacy (Weaver 2008).

Contrary to these existing International Relations concepts, we argue here that the World Bank's policies can best be described as a type of *organizational jiu-jitsu*, borrowing here a concept from ancient Japanese martial arts, where jiu-jitsu describes actors who seemingly act in harmony with another, but with a strategic use of countermoves that leverage the other's strength for one's own advantage (Hopkins 2015). We find "organizational jiu-jitsu" as a phenomenon consistently across different stages of engagement, characterized by three distinct components.

Table 2. The dynamics of organizational jiu-jitsu, and the specific dynamics in the case of the World Bank

		Three components of organizational jiu-jitsu		
		Limiting need for adjustment	*Shaping terms of engagement for others*	*Being subject to efforts of others to inspire change*
Five phases of goal engagement	Agenda-setting and benchmarking	Shaping the agenda	Preempting others to set the agenda	Being subject to others shaping the agenda
	Discursive uptake	Paying lip-service to goals aligned with one's own priorities	Influencing others to report selectively	Being forced by others to adopt their reporting methods
	Organizational adjustment	Keeping structures and procedures largely intact	Funneling engagement with external parties through organizational structures that hinder comprehensive lobbying efforts	Being required by others to establish or conform to novel structures and procedures
	Country-level processes	Keeping country-level processes largely intact	Conditioning loans and projects for clients based on organizational interpretation of goals	Being subject to others for elaborate uptake of goals in country-level processes
	Review processes	Focusing on benchmarks that fit existing frames and priorities for monitoring and evaluation	Influencing others to use own frame and priorities for monitoring and evaluation	Being subject to others who determine frames and priorities for monitoring and evaluation

First, organizational jiu-jitsu is characterized by a tendency to *(pre-emptively) limit the required adjustment to mitigate changes in the environment.* In the agenda-setting phase, the World Bank exemplified this by incorporating its own interpretation of inequality into SDG 10. Its activity during this phase connects to the idea of interventions, as the World Bank influenced the SDG negotiations to prevent unwanted policies (Margulis 2021). By doing so, the organization could maintain the use of its own terminology and discourses. To prevent potential disruptions to the organization of work or procedures, the bank argued that these structures and procedures already aligned with the SDGs. In the review phase, the bank's efforts to shape the agenda enabled its officials to sidestep discussions on politically sensitive definitions of inequality that were not aligned with the bank's definition of inequality.

Second, organizational jiu-jitsu involves the *utilization or adaptation of existing managerial tools, as well as the creation of new tools, to shape the terms of engagement for other actors.* During the agenda-setting phase, the World Bank inserted its own benchmarks and indicators into the inequality goal, transforming its standards into global standards for all actors. Here, the organization used its managerial capabilities (Alvarez 2016; Broome et al. 2018) and its knowledge (Zapp 2021). These standards formed the framework for discussions in the review phase, where civil society actors could only argue for additional indicators to be linked to targets. The World Bank's Corporate Scorecard serves as a signaling mechanism to both its staff and external stakeholders, such as states, indicating that the organization considers SDG indicators 1.1 and 10.1 as crucial measures of success. By maintaining its existing organizational structure, the Bank also encouraged civil society actors to collaborate with a single "Global Practice" that combines the focus on inequality and poverty reduction.

Finally, organizational jiu-jitsu involves *engaging with actors who seek to influence the organizations' behavior in return.* We observed this component during both the agenda-setting and review phases of engagement. However, we found limited evidence of third-party impact on the behavior of the World Bank, implying that the organizational environment of the bank did not significantly shape its actions (Abbott et al. 2016). Only during the review phase did we observe a minor impact of civil society actors, but this occurred within an arena significantly shaped by the organization during the agenda-setting phase.

The framework provided by organizational jiu-jitsu thus connects to existing insights from the International Relations literature but is a means to study engagement comprehensively across all phases of engagement. In the case of the World Bank, the impact of jiu-jitsu in the agenda-setting phase facilitated its impact in other phases. However, the specific pathways of jiu-jitsu can vary, depending on the international organization and its environment. In table 2, we highlight the components that emerged in the five phases of engagement (indicated in green). Additionally, we have included other potential dynamics of organizational jiu-jitsu that one might hypothesize.

Conclusion

In this study, we examined the World Bank's engagement with the SDGs, focusing on SDG 10 on reduced inequalities, across five phases of engagement. We found that the bank has used the momentum created by the SDG process to strengthen its own position, without the SDG process significantly impacting the World Bank itself. We describe this observed pattern of behavior as "organizational jiu-jitsu." Regarding the engagement with global goals, organizational jiu-jitsu has three specific components: limiting the need for adjustment, shaping the terms of engagement for others, and being subject to the efforts of others to inspire change. Instead of engaging in a process of mutual constitution (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001; Park 2006; Grek 2020) or leading to organizational hypocrisy (Lipson 2007; Weaver 2008) to deal with conflicting environmental incentives, international organizations aim to prevent the emergence of conflicting incentives in the first place and engage selectively thereafter (in line with, e.g., Meurs et al. 2019; Forestier and Kim 2020). We found that the Bank was particularly influential in later phases of engagement, given its efforts to shape the goal itself in the agenda-setting phase.

Organizational jiu-jitsu emerges as a strategy that combines intricate internal incentives and external pressures, ultimately benefiting the organization. We anticipate that multiple international organizations have adopted the practice of jiu-jitsu. The capacity to align global goals with existing organizational priorities enables a focus on these goals during the implementation phase. This approach empowers international organizations to sidestep politically sensitive goals and navigate political compromises inherent in the SDGs, given the ongoing uncertainty surrounding the long-term relevance of individual goals and targets.

Jiu-jitsu might be particularly attractive for well-resourced organizations for which the UN system is not the primary source of legitimacy, such as international financial institutions. Less well-resourced international organizations within the UN system may find it more difficult to push intra-organizational goals onto the global agenda or to use own internal standards to shape the arena for other actors. Interactions with civil society might in such cases have a more pronounced impact on these international organizations. For smaller UN system entities, jiu-jitsu tactics may be more subtle. However, even for organizations that cannot shape targets in line with their organizational priorities, other forms of jiu-jitsu could be expected.

The widespread use of jiu-jitsu strategies by international organizations might lead to policy outcomes that block the transformative ambitions to achieve the SDGs. Some argue that the World Bank reduced the transformative potential of SDG 10 during the agenda-setting stage (Fukuda-Parr 2019). Moreover, after the agenda-setting phase, we observed only limited steering effects for those parts of the 2030 Agenda that the World Bank could not influence. And yet, whether jiu-jitsu is prevalent in other international organizations still warrants further investigation. Should this be the case, it would imply a significant need for much larger organizational changes to effectively deliver a global sustainability transformation in practice.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the *Global Studies Quarterly* data archive.

Funding

This research was funded by H2020 European Research Council Grant Number 788001.

Data availability

The documents analyzed in this work were compiled from the publicly available Open Knowledge Repository of the World Bank Group. Accessible via https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/.

Author contribution

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Data were collected by Melanie van Driel. All authors contributed to the analysis of the data. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Melanie van Driel. All authors participated in the further writing, review, and editing process. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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