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Greening labour? The role of the SDGs in fostering sustainability integration within trade unions

Francesco S. Montesano [ID], Frank Biermann [ID], Agni Kalfagianni [ID] and Marjanneke J. Vijge [ID]

Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

The effective integration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainability by actors in all sectors is a core objective of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Do trade unions, as important socio-economic actors, contribute to this agenda by aligning with environmental concerns? We conducted a qualitative content analysis of primary documentary sources from the International and European Trade Union Confederations focussing on the 2012–2022 period. We complemented this with in-depth interviews from The Netherlands and Belgium. We found that trade unions have been 'greening' their discourses and initiatives, and cooperating more with environmental movements. They also use the SDGs not only as discursive frames, but also to shape concrete initiatives. However, they overwhelmingly see greening still in instrumental terms rather than as a transformative prioritization of environmental concerns. This is reflected in their engagement with the SDGs, as unions shape the implementation of the SDGs according to their priorities.

1. Introduction

In a global context where human activities and the natural world are increasingly interlinked, overcoming siloization and integrating the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainability has become a central governance and policy challenge (Bhaduri et al., 2015; Mandelli, 2022; Tosun & Lang, 2017; Visseren-Hamakers, 2015). To foster such 'sustainability integration', the United Nations launched in 2015 seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), mostly to be achieved by 2030. The United Nations define these SDGs as 'integrated and indivisible and balanc[ing] the three dimensions of sustainable development' (UNGA, 2015, p. 3); they are widely seen as the most ambitious attempt at sustainability integration to date (Tosun & Leininger, 2017).

Yet for these 17 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 mobilize around environmental issues, but also to their engagement in alliances with environmental actors

(Nugent, 2011, p. 59; Nitsche-Whitfield, 2022). Labour environmentalism stems from the awareness that environmental changes affect jobs, which makes trade unions inevitable stakeholders in environmental policies (Rosemberg, 2010; Sustainlabour, 2010). Labour actors have indeed a long track record of engaging with environmental issues (Olsen & Kemter, 2012; Stevis & Felli, 2015), and trade unions are widely credited for introducing the concept of 'just transition', defined as one 'towards a world of work that respects and contributes to environmental sustainability' (ILO, 2013, p. 335; see also Stevis & Felli, 2015; McCauley & Heffron, 2018). Also international organizations in this field, such as the International Labour Organisation, have started to 'green' their policies (Montesano et al., 2021).

So far, labour environmentalism has been studied largely at the national level (Mayer, 2009; Nugent, 2011; Räthzel et al., 2018), 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 conceptualize diverse ways of how trade unions engage with environmental agendas (for a notable exception, see Stevis et al., 2018). 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 navigate the structures of 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. After developing a 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 article proceeds as follows. In section 2 we conceptualize 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.

2. Conceptualization

In terms of conceptualization, we refer in this study to the integration of 'the environment' into the economic and social agendas of organizations, such as trade unions, as 'greening'. 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 (Stevis & 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

Table 1. Different approaches to greening.

Features	Approach to greening	
	Reformist	Transformative
Role of humans	Anthropocentrism	Ecocentrism
Form of integration	Balanced integration	Hierarchical integration
Degree of substitutability between dimensions	Weak sustainability	Strong sustainability

Image sources: Terracon ecotech (Anthropocentrism, Ecocentrism) ; Wikimedia commons (balanced integration); the authors (Hierarchical integration); Montesano et al., 2021 (Weak sustainability, Strong sustainability).

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 prioritization of human well-being over ecological integrity. Anthropocentrism is an instrumental and exemptionalist under-standing of the environment, whereby natural capital is to be preserved only insofar as it advances human interests (Helne & Hirvilammi, 2015; Kopnina 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 (Kareiva & Marvier, 2012; Sarkar, 2005; 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 been 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, characterized 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 (Mol, 2002). Reformist perspectives hence follow the optimistic model of the environmental Kuznets Curve (Baek & Kim, 2013; Maler, 2001). This optimism is often strongly tech-driven (Hovardas, 2016) and speaks to more conservative approaches of ecological modernization where techno-fixes coupled with market incentives are seen as minimizing disruption to the socio-economic system (Barca, 2019). Also stronger versions of ecological modernization 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 (for an in-depth discussion of the various strands of ecological modernization, see Christoff, 1996).

'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 hierarchization 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 (Hickel & Kallis, 2020; Newell, 2013).

Table 1 summarizes this conceptualization of reformist and transformative approaches towards the greening of labour organizations. 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 revolutionize 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 prioritized *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).

To study how these approaches to greening are actually operationalized, we distinguish two analytical levels where reformist or transformative greening can be observed (drawing on (Montesano et al., 2021, 2023)). 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.

3. Methods

Based on this conceptualization, we studied how trade unions have changed their internal understanding of the environment and whether and how this translated into operational changes, following either the reformist or transformative approach. We also looked at what the role of the SDGs was therein. To look at operational changes, we focused on 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 (the predecessor of the International Trade Union Confederation, disbanded in 2006), 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 organizations 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 reflects 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 operationalized, 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, we focused on Dutch and Belgian trade union confederations. In addition to accessibility and language-related reasons, this choice was also due to 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 national contexts with different degrees of unionization. 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, particularly with regard to the concrete implementation of greening initiatives. 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, while our focus on international trade union centres is intended to increase the value and applicability of our findings across a large number of unions, it is likely that minoritarian, 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.

4. Findings

We used the conceptualization of greening as a spectrum to qualify our findings about trends in labour environmentalism. In order to study the role of the SDGs in this greening, we divided

our findings into pre- and post-2012. For each period, we looked at developments in terms of both internal understanding and operational engagement with greening, both internally and with external actors and governance frameworks.

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 and thus reformist. 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 (Montesano et al., 2021, p. 9).

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).

As for the emergence of coalitions between trade unions and environmental movements, early efforts were sporadic and predominantly at the national level. The Australian 'green bans' of the 1970s, where building industry workers withdrew their labour from environmentally irresponsible projects (Burgmann, 2000; 2012), were exemplary in this sense. Further 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 organizations became aware of their interdependence in a globalized context and realized that their interests were likely to be damaged by the same neoliberal production model (Silverman, 2006). Furthermore, globalization 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 recognized 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 emphasizing the cruciality of decent work to combat poverty, which was the first aim of the Millennium Development Goals (ILO, 2012; ITUC, 2010). Efforts from both the ILO and international trade union confederations paved the way for a new decent work target to be officially added to MDG 1 in 2007 (MacNaughton & Frey, 2010). 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'.

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 prioritizing 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 globalization, 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.

While rejecting 'an exclusive focus on economic growth' (ITUC, 2010, p. 32), however, 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) (ETUC, 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, prioritizes 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 organizational level, specific environmental sustainability dossiers and working groups are beginning to emerge, and specialized 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 (ETUC, 2019; ITUC, 2010, 2014). 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 organizational 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 organizations 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 organizations, 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 mobilization 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 mobilization to include more substantial cooperation (interview ITUC #1). For example, trade union centres and civil society organizations 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 wat to push for deeper reforms, including on environmental protection (ITUC, 2010, p. 36). Cooperation is seen an offering an opportunity for building broader support for trade union positions, while allowing the concerns of environmental organizations 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 mobilization 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 organizations 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 organization 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 criticize environmentalists for not considering the social costs of what they advocate (interview FNV #2). Very few environmental organizations have policies on work and workers, and change in this direction has been very slow. For example, The BlueGreen Alliance in the United States has brought together unions and environmental NGOS for close to 20 years now but only one of said NGOs – the Sierra Club – has a labour policy.

Furthermore, there are tensions surrounding the 'ownership' of certain concepts. Trade unions argue that they should be the only actors responsible for social dialogue and collective bargaining 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 institutionally – and constitutionally – protected 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.

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 policy-making 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 legitimizing 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 Montesano et al., 2021), 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 and therefore far removed from transformative greening. '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 prioritized 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 (Montesano et al., 2021), 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 emphasize 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 prioritize 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).

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. These explanatory factors are not only relevant the internal conceptualization and operationalization of greening within trade unions, but also affect their external engagement with both environmental movements and sustainability governance frameworks. 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 globalization, 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, subsidize 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 operationalize, 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 mobilization purposes (interview FNV #1). The form of the SDGs, with targets and formalized indicators, also seems to make them more popular with union management and marketing departments than on the work floor (interview FNV #4; interview ACLVB).

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. 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 a number of environmental movements. Since their adoption, they have also recognized the SDGs as important frames. Although a more in-depth comparative analysis would be needed to ascertain causality, we did observe that the direction and nature of changes after 2012 were fairly consistent across ITUC and ETUC. This adds weight to the hypothesis of a link between these changes and the changed governance context heralded by the SDGs.

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. Despite the harsh words about the ecological responsibilities of the global establishment, 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. The engagement of unions with the SDGs reflects this trend, and the goals have been largely used as tools to advance anthropocentric labour priorities.

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 and thereby reformist view of nature, as something that contributes to (or hinders) socio-economic welfare but is not an equally worthy self-standing entity (Räthzel & 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 many trade unions with other actors and global debates on environmental issues. Alliances between trade unions and several environmental organizations 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 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 prioritization 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 – could also be seen as further confirmation of their enduring belief in the advantages of capitalism for their welfare-oriented mandate. At the same time, in light of the instrumental approach discussed earlier, the way unions 'endorse' the SDGs could also reflect their strategic use of dominant discourse at the global and national level. On the other hand, trade unions have also criticized 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 is 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. At the same time, our conceptualization emphasized how reformist and transformative features are not mutually exclusive, but rather qualifiers that help locate different approaches along the greening spectrum. It therefore helps contextualize the aforementioned ambivalences as less of an anomaly and more as normal variations along this continuum. 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, as well as into how these factors affect the political dynamics within different union confederations, both national and international.

Second, our operationalization 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 conceptualization of processes of change (see e.g. Montesano et al., 2021). The link we draw between a clear conceptualization of greening and a dynamic operationalization of change also offers a valuable starting point for future research on sustainability integration by a wider range of actors.

Third, our conceptualization 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 tools, 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, as the SDGs tend to lean more heavily on the balanced component of reformism, while trade unions clearly prioritise its more anthropocentric features. 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 discursive distance is also likely to complicate their ability to be fully embraced and implemented by actors at both ends of the greening spectrum.

6. Conclusion

This article 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 characterized by an instrumental approach to the environment that prioritized socio-economic concerns of unions. Cooperation between national trade unions and environmental movements dates back more than 50 years. However, the first steps beyond the national level in the 1990s were driven by the desire on both sides to find allies to counter the dangers posed by neoliberal capitalism to 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, with increasing prominence of environmental concepts in labour concerns such as decent work (see also ILO, 2013). However, this emerging 'labour environmentalism' has remained strictly anthropocentric and thus rooted in reformism, 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.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributors

Francesco S. Montesano is PhD candidate within the GLOBALGOALS project at the Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, Utrecht University, The Netherlands. Within the GLOBALGOALS project, he

draws on IR-based theoretical and analytical frameworks to study the steering effects of the SDGs at the international level, with special emphasis on whether and how they affect processes of change towards integrated sustainability.

Frank Biermann is research professor of Global Sustainability Governance with the Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, Utrecht University, The Netherlands. Biermann's current research examines multilateral institutions, options for reform of the United Nations, global adaptation governance, SDGs, and conceptual innovations such as the notion of the Anthropocene.

Agni Kalfagianni is associate professor of Transnational Sustainability Governance at the Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, Utrecht University, The Netherlands. She specializes in the effectiveness, legitimacy and ethical and justice considerations of private and transnational forms of governance in the sustainability domain.

Marjanneke J. Vijge is assistant professor of Sustainability Governance in the Developing World at the Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, Utrecht University, The Netherlands. Her research focuses on policy coherence around climate and food security governance in developing countries, in particular regarding the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and climate goals.

ORCID

Francesco S. Montesano 🔵 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1894-0506
Frank Biermann 🔵 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0292-0703
Agni Kalfagianni 🔵 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3568-8012
Marjanneke J. Vijge 🔵 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3024-8838

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