

The UN Regional Commissions as Orchestrators for the Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

In 2015, the United Nations agreed on seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These SDGs are not legally binding and lack strict enforcement mechanisms. International organizations that seek to implement these goals therefore rely on soft tools to influence governments and other actors, which is often described as “orchestration.” This article focuses on regional governance and studies the yet unexplored role of the five UN Regional Commissions. These commissions seek to link the global ambitions of the SDGs with regional actors, contexts, and priorities. Drawing on extensive

document analysis and a series of semistructured expert interviews, the article analyzes the orchestration efforts of all five Regional Commissions, focusing on agenda setting, coordination, and support. It concludes that instead of a unified orchestrating role, Regional Commissions play in practice a balancing role for agenda setting, a sharing role when it comes to coordination, and a conforming role in terms of support.

Keywords

Sustainable Development Goals – UN Regional Commissions – orchestration – agenda setting – coordination – support – global governance

1 Introduction

In 2015, the 193 Member States of the United Nations agreed on the 2030 Agenda, centered on seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). (See Figure 1.) The SDGs are not legally binding, partially qualitative, lack global enforcement mechanisms, and often require further translation to regional and local realities.¹ International organizations that seek to help implement and to steer actors toward achieving the goals thus need to rely on soft tools of influence, which are often described as “orchestration.”² Earlier research focused on the role of the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development as the global orchestrator for the SDGs, showing its political conflicts, limited resources, and fundamental institutional deficiencies.³

The purpose of our study was to analyze potential UN-affiliated orchestrators at the regional level, namely, the five UN Regional Commissions: the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNECLAC), UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), and UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA).⁴ (See Table 1.) In the multilevel governance of the SDGs,

1 Vijge et al. 2020.

2 Abbott et al. 2015; Schleifer 2013; Widerberg 2017; Bäckstrand and Kuyper 2017; Chan and Amling 2019; Bendlin 2019; Hickmann et al. 2021.

3 Beisheim and Fritzsche 2022; Qerimi 2022.

4 We could not find studies based on a Scopus search using “Sustainable Development Goal” or “SDG” and the names of any of the five UN Regional Commissions. This search was lim-

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



FIGURE 1 The seventeen Sustainable Development Goals

SOURCE: UNITED NATIONS [HTTPS://WWW.UN.ORG/SUSTAINABLEDEVELOPMENT/NEWS/COMMUNICATIONS-MATERIAL/](https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/news/communications-material/)

these commissions form an interface between global ambitions and regional realities. The outcome document of the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) has thus emphasized the importance of such regional mechanisms for the follow-up, and the Regional Commissions in turn have expressed their ambition to steer regional policy processes.⁵ The Regional Commissions have even noted missed opportunities for engagement during the period of the earlier Millennium Development Goals (MDGs 2000–2015) and have called for a “strong regional dimension to analysis and policy-setting” for the SDGs.⁶

And yet, will these Regional Commissions be able to act as orchestrators in their regions and steer actors toward implementing the SDGs? What is their policy impact, and how can we account for (potential) transregional variation among commissions? By exploring these central questions, this study makes three contributions: 1) a new framework for more fine-grained assessments of orchestration; 2) novel empirical insights on orchestration practices in the

ited to social science and multidisciplinary works published in English between 2015 and 2022.

5 UN 2015.

6 Regional Commissions 2013.

TABLE 1 The five UN Regional Commissions

UNECA	UNECE	UNECLAC	UNESCWA	UNESCAP
Algeria	Albania	Antigua and Barbuda	Algeria	Afghanistan
Angola	Andorra	Argentina	Bahrain	Armenia
Benin	Armenia	Bahamas	Egypt	Australia
Botswana	Austria	Barbados	Iraq	Azerbaijan
Burkina Faso	Azerbaijan	Belize	Jordan	Bangladesh
Burundi	Belarus	Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Kuwait	Bhutan
Cape Verde	Belgium	Brazil	Lebanon	Brunei Darussalam
Cameroon	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Canada	Libya	Cambodia
Central African Republic	Bulgaria	Chile	Morocco	China
Chad	Canada	Colombia	Oman	Korea, Democratic People's Republic of
Comoros	Croatia	Costa Rica	Palestine, State of	Fiji
Congo	Cyprus	Cuba	Qatar	France
Democratic Republic of Congo	Czech Republic	Dominica	Saudi Arabia	Georgia
Djibouti	Denmark	Dominican Republic	Somalia	India
Egypt	Estonia	Ecuador	Sudan	Indonesia
Eritrea	Finland	El Salvador	Syrian Arab Republic	Iran
Eswatini	France	France	Tunisia	Japan
Ethiopia	Georgia	Germany	United Arab Emirates	Kazakhstan
Equatorial Guinea	Germany	Grenada	Yemen	Kiribati
Gabon	Greece	Guatemala		Kyrgyzstan
Gambia	Hungary	Guyana		Lao People's Democratic Republic
Ghana	Iceland	Haiti		Malaysia
Guinea	Ireland	Honduras		Maldives
Guinea-Bissau	Israel	Italy		Marshall Islands
Côte d'Ivoire	Italy	Jamaica		Micronesia, Federated States of
Kenya	Kazakhstan	Japan		Mongolia
Lesotho	Kyrgyzstan	Mexico		Myanmar
Liberia	Latvia	the Netherlands		Nauru
Libya	Liechtenstein	Nicaragua		Nepal
Madagascar	Lithuania	Norway		Netherlands, the
Malawi	Luxembourg	Panama		New Zealand
Mali	Malta	Paraguay		Pakistan
Mauritania	Monaco	Peru		Palau

TABLE 1 The five UN Regional Commissions (*cont.*)

UNECA	UNECE	UNECLAC	UNESCWA	UNESCAP
Mauritius	Montenegro	Portugal		Papua New Guinea
Mozambique	Netherlands, the	Saint Kitts and Nevis		Philippines, the
Morocco	Norway	Saint Lucia		Korea, Republic of
Namibia	Poland	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines		Russian Federation
Niger	Portugal	Republic of Korea		Samoa
Nigeria	Republic of Moldova	Spain		Singapore
Rwanda	North Macedonia	Suriname		Solomon Islands
São Tomé and Príncipe	Romania	Turkey		Sri Lanka
Senegal	Russian Federation	Trinidad and Tobago		Tajikistan
Seychelles	San Marino	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland		Thailand
Sierra Leone	Serbia	United States		Timor-Leste
Somalia	Slovakia	Uruguay		Tonga
South Africa	Slovenia	Venezuela, Bolivarian Republic of		Türkiye
South Sudan	Spain			Turkmenistan
Sudan	Sweden			Tuvalu
Tanzania	Switzerland			United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
Togo	Tajikistan			United States
Tunisia	Türkiye			Uzbekistan
Uganda	Turkmenistan			Vanuatu
Zambia	Ukraine			Vietnam
Zimbabwe	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland			
	United States			
	Uzbekistan			

Note: UNECA, UN Economic Commission for Africa; UNECE, UN Economic Commission for Europe; UNECLAC, UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean; UNESCWA, UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia; UNESCAP, UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

context of global goal setting; and 3) a new understanding on the role of the UN Regional Commissions in sustainable development.

The article proceeds as follows. In Section 2, we present the analytical framework and research methods. In Section 3, we discuss the findings. We provide our conclusions in Section 4.

2 Research Design and Methods

Orchestration in global governance has been extensively studied for over a decade. It is defined as a form of soft and indirect steering characterized by a reliance on voluntarily recruited intermediaries.⁷ Orchestration is expected to fill governance deficits by complementing existing regimes and approaches.⁸ Given their relatively weak formal power base, intergovernmental organizations have been well studied as potential orchestrators, especially regarding the conditions that might lead to orchestration and the criteria that could explain successful orchestration.⁹

Among other findings, orchestration has been found to be more likely when actors lack capabilities to achieve goals through other governance modes, which implies that one cannot compare the macroefficiency of orchestration to more classic command and control approaches.¹⁰ Causal inferences about links between actors and the goals of the orchestrator are mostly indirect.¹¹ Assessments of the effectiveness of orchestration must thus consider the details of a specific case.¹²

To study the UN Regional Commissions as orchestrators, we used a gradient of potential roles that they might play for three orchestration activities; namely, 1) *agenda setting*, 2) *coordination*, and 3) *support*. These three orchestration activities are derived from the orchestration literature, (re-)organized to serve our specific research interests.¹³ Although distinct categories, in practice, these categories are not (always) mutually exclusive. For each orchestration activity, we studied how they were performed and conceptualized, using different roles as gradients for each activity.

We defined orchestration through *agenda setting* as the attempt of an orchestrator to shape or prioritize the goals of other actors.¹⁴ This might occur through the provision of information about available policy options, nudging toward priorities or strategic decisions that align with the orchestrator's goals, or legitimizing and encouraging external support to particular organizations. For the SDGs, successful agenda setting would occur if the orchestrator steered

7 Abbott et al. 2015; Pegram 2015.

8 Chan and Amling 2019; Gordon and Johnson 2017; Abbott et al. 2015.

9 Abbott et al. 2015; Abbot and Hale 2014.

10 Schleifer 2013.

11 Abbott et al. 2015; Bendlin 2019; Partiti 2017; Widerberg 2017.

12 See also Henriksen and Ponte 2018; Klingebiel and Paulo 2015; Nasiritousi and Grimm 2022; Bäckstrand and Kuyper 2017; Schleifer 2013; Hickmann et al. 2021.

13 Abbott et al. 2015, 14–16; Abbott and Bernstein 2015, 228.

14 Abbott et al. 2015.

actors toward aligning their policies with the seventeen goals as an integrated and holistic agenda.¹⁵ The alternative would be mere coexistence; that is, when target actors continue to pursue their existing agendas and priorities. Between these two extremes of *full coherence* and *mere coexistence* is a gray area with mixed roles. Cherry-picking, for instance, would describe a situation where an actor promotes action on the SDGs, but only for those goals that they already prioritized,¹⁶ as may be the case with some of the carryover from the MDGs. An orchestrator might also combine earlier agendas with the new SDG agenda; for instance, by steering toward those areas that already show some degree of convergence, overlap, or synergy.¹⁷

We conceptualized orchestration through *coordination* as the attempt of an orchestrator to steer the *interactions* of policy actors toward joint achievement of the SDGs. Coordination includes initiatives to synchronize,¹⁸ balance, or align¹⁹ the relations of actors by engaging them in collective action.²⁰ Initiatives might aim at building trust and a common culture of cooperation among heterogeneous actors or aim at improving linkages between domestic and global policies and at reducing fragmentation through new institutional structures or policies.²¹ It might thus include support for, and the active shaping of, networks.²² The orchestrator might become part of network itself,²³ but can also bring others together in networks and working groups, or stimulate them to host joint activities.²⁴ Support in practice might vary from providing legitimacy to an existing network to playing an active role in setting up and resourcing novel structures. Successful orchestration would here be successful coordination toward the purposeful alignment for coherent SDG implementation.²⁵ This type of coordination would require a set purpose for coordination efforts, and an active role of the orchestrator in shaping interactions toward that purpose.²⁶ Unsuccessful orchestration would be a platform role, where aims are defined only broadly and where the orchestrator does not define the

15 UN 2015, 63.

16 Forestier and Kim 2020; Heras-Saizarbitoria, Urbietta, and Boiral 2022.

17 Nilsson and Weitz 2019.

18 Abbott et al. 2015.

19 Chan and Amling 2019.

20 Klingebiel and Paulo 2015.

21 Klingebiel and Paulo 2015.

22 Klingebiel and Paulo 2015; Nasiritousi and Grimm 2022; Pengram 2015.

23 Henriksen and Ponte 2018; Bendlin 2019.

24 van der Lugt and Dingwerth 2015; Abbott et al. 2015.

25 Christensen and LÆgreid 2018; see also van Driel et al. 2022.

26 See also Galperina and Kyian 2021, 10.

terms of engagement. To some extent, this platform function has been observed for the High-Level Political Forum.²⁷ Also here, many gradients are possible where the role of orchestrator stands between *successful coordination* and a mere *platform*; for instance, when an orchestrator brings actors together in an attempt to steer toward alignment while remaining unable to shape this process effectively.²⁸

We defined orchestration through *support* as the attempt of an orchestrator to assist intermediaries and target actors through ideational and material resources.²⁹ Such support includes (project) funding, the provision of operational capacity,³⁰ information or other knowledge (through shared databases or broader programs), or access to third parties.³¹ These types of support might be provided using a range of different tools. To help build capacities for the SDGs, for instance, the orchestrator might use any technique ranging from education to awareness raising, providing equipment, strategic planning, or consulting.³² Successful support would help to *transform the capacities* of others to implement a coherent SDG agenda.³³ The converse is mere *confirmation*; that is, when an orchestrator lends support only within the framework of existing demands. In between these extremes of transformation and confirmation is, for instance, when an orchestrator supports only some parts of the agenda by identifying missing capacities, yet without leading toward a holistic, coherent, and transformative capacity.³⁴

Methodologically, we followed a comparative case study approach to gain meaningful and contextualized observations about the five Regional Commissions. First, we analyzed the mandates of UN Regional Commissions and their expectations in the context of the SDGs. Documents included resolutions and declarations from the commissions, the UN General Assembly, and the UN Economic and Social Council; various terms of reference, annual reports, and work plans; and reporting from the Regional Commissions New York Office. We also looked for earlier agendas in which the commissions developed regional priorities, as well as parallel regional agendas with a time line that partially overlapped with that of the SDGs.

27 Beisheim and Fritzsche 2022, 8.

28 Bäckstrand and Kuyper 2017.

29 Abbott et al. 2015.

30 Mattli and Seddon 2015; Klingebiel and Paulo 2015.

31 van der Lugt and Dingwerth 2015.

32 Lempert 2015.

33 Sachs et al. 2019, 812.

34 See Bester 2015.

Second, we studied substantive documentation on the initiatives, agendas, and mechanisms of the Regional Commissions for achieving the SDGs since 2015. We found relevant information, first, in seven databases. These include SDG portals of all commissions (which convey SDG priorities, assessment tools, and knowledge products), the UN Development Account Portal (thirty-seven capacity-building projects from 2016 to 2022 on governance and institutions and statistics), and the UN System SDG Implementation Database that includes a survey of each Regional Commission's contribution to the 2030 Agenda. Additionally, we found information in the documentation of the Regional Fora on Sustainable Development (twenty-eight sessions post-2014); evaluation reports of Joint Inspection Unit of the United Nations System and the Office of Internal Oversight Services (nineteen relevant reports); and recurring reports for each of the five commissions, for instance, on Regional Collaborative Platforms (pre-2019), Regional Coordination Mechanisms (post-2019), and Financing for Development. We also included documentation from Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanisms. We focused on documents informing about activities after the establishment of the SDGs.

Third, we conducted eighteen semistructured expert interviews between May and December of 2022. Interviewees from the Regional Commissions included civil servants working in SDG units and those involved in organizing regional fora, sustainable finance mechanisms, capacity building or the integration of regional priorities with the SDGs. Some interviewees were also from organizations that cooperate with the Regional Commissions, including the Regional Commissions New York Office and regional civil society actors. We supplemented our initial results with insights gained after conducting the set of interviews, which complemented our overall assessment.

3 Results

We now present our findings regarding the role of the UN Regional Commissions as potential orchestrators for the achievement of the SDGs in terms of regional agenda setting, coordination, and support.

3.1 *Agenda Setting*

Formally, all Regional Commissions are committed to steer the regional agendas toward policy coherence for the SDGs.³⁵ In practice, however, when it

35 Regional Commissions 2013.

comes to agenda setting, the Regional Commissions mostly seek to balance the new global agenda with their regional priorities and prior agendas. No Regional Commission has in its founding mandate a reference to sustainability or to the environmental dimension of development; the key goal is to “raise the [regional] level of economic activity” (Joint Inspection Unit 2015). This definition was then stretched to include sustainable economic development. While the work programs of the Regional Commissions have been formally adapted to support all dimensions of sustainable development,³⁶ the programs are still not always supported by adequate resources to implement the full SDG agenda.³⁷ We now detail this general findings for each Regional Commission.

First, the Economic Commission for Europe has presented a set of SDG priorities, which resulted from a mapping and prioritization of its existing activities against the goals.³⁸ These consist of most SDGs except for SDG 10 (on reduced inequalities), SDG 14 (on life below water), SDG 1 (on poverty reduction), SDG 2 (on hunger), and SDG 4 (on quality education). The social dimension is mostly absent, as can be expected since unlike UNESCWA and UNESCAP, UNECE does not include the “social” agenda in its name. Additionally, the commission actively tries to use existing regional norms to accelerate SDG implementation.³⁹ This is visible in the mapping, where each SDG focused on is linked to one or more guidelines and conventions.⁴⁰ Efforts to use existing norms to set the agenda impact not only the themes that are focused on, but also the efforts to mobilize more regional actors; for example, through standards for the Sustainable Development Goals. This initiative has mobilized public and private actors to map existing standards against the SDGs.⁴¹ The commission further stimulates the integration of the SDGs into existing instruments. The Environmental Impact Assessments of the Economic Commission for Europe are utilized for this purpose. However, the commission has early on recognized that the relevant goals or targets “would [mostly] be environment related.”⁴² In practice, early reviews indeed focused mostly on environmental goals, covering only 40 to 65 of the 169 SDG targets.⁴³ The

36 Regional Commissions 2013, 2.

37 Joint Inspection Unit 2020, 7.

38 UNECE n.d. b; Interview 1.

39 Interview 1.

40 UNECE n.d. a.

41 UNECE 2022a.

42 UNECE 2017a, 6.

43 IISD 2020.

commission also asked countries to refer to “relevant” SDGs in their voluntary commitments to the Pan-European Framework for Greening the Economy.⁴⁴ By focusing on existing activities, norms, and instruments, the Regional Commission for Europe thus runs into challenges when attempting to balance economic and environmental priorities with the social dimension of development.

Second, in Asia Pacific, the Regional Commission’s road map on coherent SDG implementation has not prioritized specific SDGs, but rather it has identified priority areas. Third-party consultations have fed into this road map, which also aimed to activate third parties, such as UN funds, specialized agencies, and regional organizations, to provide more support to Member States.⁴⁵ The road map has structured the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific’s support for the SDGs, but has in practice been superseded by discussions following the Covid-19 pandemic.⁴⁶ UNESCAP⁴⁷ has increasingly emphasized the need to strengthen systems thinking and policy coherence for the SDGs, especially for national planning efforts. The commission furthermore engages with other regional actors to link their agendas to the SDGs. One example is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Community Vision 2025. To steer toward coherence between this regional agenda and the SDGs, and to “efficiently draw on limited resources,” a joint initiative between the Regional Commission, ASEAN, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand was set up to identify complementarities.⁴⁸ And yet, parts of Vision 2025 were not deemed synergistic with the SDGs such as the Political-Security Chapter. For other regional agendas—for instance, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation’s (APEC) Vision 2040—steering toward synergies is also being considered. A challenge is that regional agendas outside the SDG framework are continually evolving, as exemplified by the new ASEAN Recovery Framework and ASEAN’s Vision 2040.

Third, in the African region, we note that the UN Economic Commission for Africa seeks to balance the global SDGs with prior regional agendas that are supported by governments. Notably this is done for Agenda 2063, which was agreed on by the African Union a few months before the launch of the SDGs. While the executive secretary of UNECA stated that the SDGs and Agenda 2063 would “converge” and that it would be easy to infuse the SDGs

44 UNECE 2016.

45 UNESCAP 2017a, 7.

46 UNESCAP 2018.

47 UNESCAP n.d.

48 UNESCAP 2017b.

into national plans for Agenda 2063,⁴⁹ Agenda 2063 still includes many priorities not covered by the SDGs. To better integrate the two agendas in country plans and activities, UNECA has developed an online tool indicating synergies and trade-offs and an integrated planning and reporting toolkit.⁵⁰ In terms of gaps, three of twenty Agenda 2063 goals do not align with any SDG (notably the goals on the establishment of continental financial and monetary institutions and on regional peace and stability, although perhaps these can be caught in a broad definition of SDG 17).⁵¹ Conversely, SDG 12 (on sustainable consumption and production) shows only weak alignment with Agenda 2063. Implementing Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2030 simultaneously is seen as potentially resulting in mutual gains, but it is not yet clear if countries are indeed focusing on the “synergy” between the two agendas.

Fourth, in Latin America and the Caribbean, a mapping of the Regional Commission’s activities to the SDGs shows that its current work emphasizes four SDGs; namely, SDG 17 on partnerships, SDG 8 on decent work, SDG 10 on reduced inequalities, and SDG 16 on peace and justice.⁵² The least prioritized SDGs are SDG 14 (life below water), SDG 15 (life on land), and SDG 11 (clean water and sanitation). In practice, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean⁵³ strives toward its own regional paradigm, called Global Environmental Keynesianism, which promotes multidimensional equality as the purpose of development. The commission seeks to balance the new SDGs with its earlier focus on equality and to better emphasize the environmental dimension of economic development.⁵⁴ In addition, the UNECLAC also aims to balance the SDGs with the subregional agenda on the Caribbean. While complementary with the characteristics of Small Island Developing States the two agendas pose slightly different challenges, and resources are lacking to report on both agendas consistently.⁵⁵

Fifth, in West Asia, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia established a bottom-up list of SDG priorities in the context of regional agenda(s) with a time line that surpasses the SDGs. The commission’s Regional Priorities for the SDGs arise bottom up by linking various official documents of regional governments to the seventeen SDGs.⁵⁶

49 Lopes 2015.

50 Interview 2.

51 UNECA n.d.

52 Joint Inspection Unit 2020.

53 UNECLAC 2016b, 12.

54 UNECLAC 2016b, 169.

55 Uitto, Kohlitz, and Todd 2017.

56 UNESCWA n.d. a.

This prioritization includes as its top SDG 8 (economic growth), SDG 11 (sustainable cities), SDG 5 (gender equality), and SDG 4 (quality education). Thus far, the commission based its work on Vision 2030,⁵⁷ which built five priorities based on emerging insights about potentially (un)successful interventions in the region. At the time, it was recognized that the SDGs might be more ambitious than this regional agenda. Since then, however, the commission has developed an SDG-Interlinkages Toolkit to prioritize financing interventions and has begun to develop a new regional agenda.⁵⁸ The Arab Vision 2045 aims to support long-term sustainable development in the region, with key goals such as security, justice, innovation, prosperity, diversity, and cultural renewal.⁵⁹ A mapping of these goals to the seventeen SDGs will be published once first initiatives and projects related to Arab Vision 2045 are validated, and the commission plans to link the review of these agendas.⁶⁰ We expect that, in practice, this vision will strike a balance between global goals and regional priorities and contexts.

3.2 *Coordination*

As for coordination of SDG-related policies, we found that all five UN Regional Commissions have extended their activities, especially through the Regional Fora for Sustainable Development and novel coordination mechanisms, the latter facilitated by reforms of the UN development system. The commissions bring more actors together to debate progress on the SDGs and to share their experiences. However, especially for the coordination of policies among UN entities, it is not always clear what its eventual aims are, given that mechanisms are still under development while the SDGs are already in their implementation phase.

The Regional Fora for Sustainable Development, a first coordination mechanism, are said to resemble a “mini-High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF)” in the region; they are seen as a key contribution of the Regional Commissions toward the SDGs.⁶¹ Historically, these fora evolved from the Regional Implementation Meetings of the earlier Agenda 21 from 1992 and the MDGs from 2000.⁶² Some regions have also established subregional fora, including the Latin American and Asia Pacific regions. The fora actively

57 UNESCWA 2015.

58 UNESCWA 2021.

59 UNESCWA 2022a.

60 Interview 3.

61 Interview 8; Interview 4.

62 Commission on Sustainable Development 2004.

connect with the global HLPF-review of the SDGs. A key way in which this materializes is through peer-learning sessions based on the SDGs under review each year, at times captured under broader themes.⁶³ The outcome documents of the regional fora have started to cite other global processes and events, moving beyond the review of the SDGs per se.⁶⁴ The Seventh African Forum on Sustainable Development, for example, was followed by efforts to seek more funding for the Congo Basin by taking the conference outcomes to both the twenty-sixth conference of the parties to the UN climate convention in Glasgow and to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.⁶⁵

Compared to their predecessors, the Regional Fora for Sustainable Development have a broader reach in mobilizing actors, which is in line with the broader nature of the SDGs. Participants now include actors from business, civil society, youth, international and regional organizations, academia, parliaments, and local governments.⁶⁶

The fora are also causing rapid innovations in stakeholder engagement.⁶⁷ Civil society engagement is especially notable because of its increased institutionalization. Civil society engagement mechanisms were set up either in anticipation of, or to further streamline, participation in the regional fora. These mechanisms are comparable across regions in terms of constituencies, aims, and organizational structure, except for the somewhat less institutionalized mechanism in West Asia.⁶⁸ Concerning the European mechanism, it is said that “its modality mirrors that of the Major Groups and Other Stakeholder mechanism that supports civil society input into the ... the High-Level Political Forum Process.”⁶⁹ This mechanism, similar to the one in the Asia Pacific region, is now included with a dedicated representative in the list of Major Groups and Other Stakeholders of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA).⁷⁰ The UN Regional Commissions are not just increasing regional engagement; they are also facilitating global recognition of and a global platform for regional actors.

Another key category of actors mobilized by the Regional Fora for Sustainable Development are UN entities and specialized agencies. Whereas the earlier Regional Implementation Meetings and the first regional fora included

63 Interview 9; Interview 11.

64 Interview 2.

65 Interview 8.

66 See, for example, UNECE n.d. a.

67 Interview 4.

68 See Appendix A.

69 ECE-RCEM 2022.

70 Major Groups and Other Stakeholders Coordination Mechanism 2020; UN DESA 2021.

only a few UN entities depending on the topics, further reforms of the Regional UN Development System and the new custodianship role of many UN entities have given them a more consistent role in the organization of the fora and the preparation of voluntary national reviews.⁷¹ Such preparations for voluntary national reviews have become comprehensive coordination efforts between UN Regional Commissions, UN DESA, the custodian agencies of the SDG indicators, and region-specific institutions. Preparatory workshops in which countries are, among others, invited to share best practices, allow for a more in-depth analysis, discussions, and peer learning than the VNR Labs and workshops at the global level.⁷²

Regional Commissions also coordinate activities and facilitate alignment of the regional UN system through Regional Collaborative Platforms. These platforms unite all UN entities addressed by the SDGs in a particular region.⁷³ Since 2019, each Regional Collaborative Platforms have created issue-based coalitions, chaired by relevant UN entities, on the most pressing regional issues.⁷⁴ Coalitions are expected to build partnerships around multiple SDGs,⁷⁵ and coordinate their cross-sectoral activities. They might do so through interagency guidance notes, common position papers, side events and input at intergovernmental meetings, or operational support. The question has emerged as to whether the coalitions are vehicles for structural coordination or whether they more closely resemble temporary task forces for policy support.⁷⁶ Although it is too early to draw conclusions, we do note relative continuity of issues addressed, and increasing crossregional similarity of topics focused on. Efforts have been made to better integrate the reporting of these platforms with the Regional Fora for Sustainable Development. However, the reports submitted for this purpose do not consistently link issue-based coalitions to the SDGs.⁷⁷

In sum, the UN Regional Commissions do help actors in their region to share experiences and jointly review policies regarding the implementation of the SDGs, but they are not yet firm orchestrators that actively and decisively shape the policies and programs by regional actors. Part of the reason for this is that

71 Interview 8; Interview 11.

72 Interview 2; Interview 9.

73 UN 2020b.

74 UNESCWA n.d. b.

75 Surasky et al. 2020, 18.

76 Interview 12.

77 See The Africa Regional Collaborative Platform 2022; UNESCWA 2022b; UNESCAP 2022a; UNECLAC 7 March 2022b; UN Sustainable Development Group 2022.

institutional structures are still under construction while the implementation phase of the SDGs is well under way.

3.3 *Support*

Many countries have limited capacities to implement, or even measure progress on, the 17 SDGs' 169 targets and 247 indicators. We found that in trying to lend their support, the UN Regional Commissions play mainly a conforming, not a transforming, role, as their support is primarily shaped by the demands of member governments.

One reason is that all five commissions have established novel tools to structure their support to their Member States and others.⁷⁸ Examples include the Regional Commission for Asia and the Pacific's SDG Rapid Response facility, used for individual and shared support requests, and its SDG Helpdesk, which offers a platform with tools, knowledge products, expertise, good practices, advice, opportunities for peer learning, and regional South-South Cooperation. Commissions have also supported the measurement of SDGs by setting targets for indicators that did not have one in the global framework, using a "traffic light" model to indicate progress.⁷⁹ Tools also exist to support subsets of (developing) Member States, including Least Developed Countries and small island developing states.⁸⁰

When it comes to capacity-building projects, most follow the historic focus of the Regional Commissions on capacity building for economic and social development.⁸¹ Of the capacity-building projects for statistics and governance and institution building since the onset of the SDGs, the Regional Commissions mainly have provided support for SDG 17 (global partnerships) and SDG 16 (peace and strong institutions), as well as the two SDGs that focus on economic concerns; namely, SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) and SDG 9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure).⁸² As the SDG (indicators) have led to a further functional differentiation between (custodian) agencies, an existing division of labor provides part of the rationale for the responsibilities for SDG monitoring.⁸³

78 Regional Commissions New York Office n.d.

79 Interview 7.

80 Interview 5.

81 Office of Internal Oversight Services 2017. The commissions led or collaborated on fifteen out of eighteen statistical capacity-building projects, and twenty-two out of twenty-five projects for governance and institution building.

82 UN DESA n.d.

83 Interview 6.

However, the demand-based approach of the Regional Commissions also plays a key role here, as the commissions continue to cater to the demands of Member States. In this context, the commissions support the analysis of and improvement of regional and national measurement of SDGs.⁸⁴ However, some initiatives are starting to arise to create effective demand for data and to fill policy data voids. The Every Policy Is Connected tool of the Regional Commission for Asia and the Pacific, for instance, provides a structured approach for formulating inclusive policies and developing comprehensive indicator frameworks for policy monitoring that link indicators with “issues for action.”⁸⁵

Regional Commissions also make attempts to move beyond small-scale and sectoral projects. One example is a joint project aimed at building comprehensive statistical capacities, costing \$11.4 million, while regular projects ranging from \$400,000 to \$1 million were executed by all Regional Commissions and five other UN entities between 2016 and 2021.⁸⁶

Helping Member States gain funding is becoming an increasingly important category of support, ranging from domestic resource mobilization to funding from third parties. SDG bonds, for example, are monitored,⁸⁷ advised on,⁸⁸ and form the topic of workshops organized by the Regional Commissions.⁸⁹ For public-private partnerships, a novel standard has even been introduced. Previously, multiple commissions noted that public-private partnerships were challenging and produced mixed results.⁹⁰ In 2019, all commissions agreed to cooperate on the topic more closely. The UN Economic Commission for Europe, with its long history of working on public-private partnerships, has taken the lead in introducing a format for public-private partnerships for the SDGs, called “People-Proof” public-private partnerships. After diffusing the idea during yearly conferences, in 2022 the commission launched an evaluation methodology for these partnerships,⁹¹ after which the Regional Commissions for Latin America and the Caribbean and for Africa also indicated their commitment to start implementing this methodology.⁹²

84 For example, UNECE 2017b.

85 Bidarbakhtnia et al. 2019; Interview 7.

86 UN DESA n.d.

87 UNECLAC 2020; 2017.

88 UNESCAP 2021.

89 UNECA 2022b.

90 UNESCWA 2013; UNECLAC 2020; UNECA 2021.

91 UNECE 2021.

92 UNECE 2022b.

The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in more debts for many countries and sparked a global discussion on new financial mechanisms.⁹³ All commissions—except for the one for Europe, given the prevalence of high-income countries in its membership⁹⁴—launched new initiatives, many linked to climate finance. The UN Economic Commission for Africa launched the Liquidity and Sustainability Facility in 2021 to mobilize (private sector) capital, supported by an asset management firm and a collateral management provider.⁹⁵ Its objectives are to support the liquidity of African sovereign eurobonds and incentivize SDG-related investments on the continent.⁹⁶ The Regional Commission for Western Asia launched the Climate/SDGs Debt Swap–Donor Nexus Initiative, directed at debt relief and at enhancing fiscal space of (middle-income) countries.⁹⁷ This mechanism systematizes debt swaps, which allow creditors to convert debt-serving payments into domestic investments for indebted countries. Debtors thereby invest in climate or SDG-related programs, while creditors may claim higher amounts of official development assistance or climate finance without expanding their budgets. The Regional Commission acts here as a liaison between the parties and has set up performance indicators that focus on the SDGs where countries are most behind for the proposal, monitoring, and evaluation of projects.⁹⁸

The Regional Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean has been working on a debt-swap strategy since 2016, currently titled the Debt for Climate Adaptation Swap and Caribbean Resilience Fund.⁹⁹ This fund aims to reduce the debt and fiscal constraints for investment in green industries, stimulate growth, promote economic transformation, and expand fiscal space for public investment such as for the SDGs.¹⁰⁰

Finally, the Regional Commission for Asia and the Pacific seeks to create interaction between debtors and creditors with a focus on the small island states in the Pacific.¹⁰¹ To date, this has been done through a Regional Debt Conference, rather than some more permanent tool.¹⁰²

93 UN 2020a.

94 Interview 9.

95 UNECA 2022a.

96 Interview 8.

97 UNESCWA 2022c.

98 Interview 10.

99 UNECLAC 2016a.

100 UNECLAC 2022a.

101 UNESCAP 2022c.

102 UNESCAP 2022b.

4 Conclusions

Overall, our study suggests that all UN Regional Commissions have expanded their activities to work toward achieving the SDGs. They increasingly include a concern for the environmental and social dimensions of development, along with their traditional economic focus; they have mobilized novel actors, especially through the follow-up and review instruments of the regional fora; and they have set standards for SDG implementation by providing (financial) support through reporting guidelines, performance indicators, and other managerial tools.

However, Regional Commissions also face challenges. Their limited resources force them to prioritize; diverse sets of priorities in the region only partially overlap with the SDGs; UN reforms are still under way as the agenda is being implemented; and priorities of other UN entities, Member States, and global actors must also be considered when taking action.

We also observed differences among the Regional Commissions. For one, the commissions differ in the hurdles they face in moving toward a coherent SDG approach. The systems-thinking approach of the Regional Commission for Asia and the Pacific seems to be challenging, for instance, for the UN Economic Commission for Europe, which is more constrained by its organizational structure and specific legally binding agreements such as on environment protection. Also, parallel agendas impact regions differently. Finally, in regions with many middle-income and high-income countries, financial support mechanisms and UN system coordination mechanisms are less prominent as steering tools.

Overall, the extended activities of the UN Regional Commissions fit with broader trends toward SDG implementation through multilevel governance and localization.¹⁰³ The effect of these activities on SDG attainment, however, remains largely unknown. For instance, the novel financial mechanisms raise questions as to their additionality,¹⁰⁴ and the mobilization of business actors must be evaluated to assess its impact on power (im)balances in the region. One might also question whether the combined follow-up and review of multiple agendas creates a more coherent and efficient SDG approach. The effect of regional coordination mechanisms in shaping priorities, for example, at the Member State level, also forms a topic for investigation.

103 For example, Narang Suri, Miraglia, and Ferrannini 2021; Marx et al. 2021.

104 Michaelowa and Namhata 2022.

Structurally, the role of the Regional Commissions presents a paradox. On the one hand, our observation that there are parallel agendas and multiple regional priorities reflects a commonly held view that the SDGs pretend to be a universal agenda, but are implemented only after being shaped by regional and local preexisting priorities. On the other hand, many commissions do try to increase overall SDG coherence; for instance, by supporting tools to help countries to build comprehensive capacities and not disregarding the politically more sensitive aspects of the agenda. Furthermore, although the SDGs are largely “regionalized” through Regional Commissions, their successful initiatives are often diffused across regions, leading at times to globally harmonized approaches. Examples thereof include the Regional Collaborative Mechanisms and the standards for “People-First” public-private partnerships, both initiated by the UN Economic Commission for Europe. Yet transplanting innovations without ensuring a regional fit is not without risks.¹⁰⁵ Finding the proper balance between regional prioritization and resource constraints on the one hand, and global harmonization and ambition on the other, will thus remain a central challenge for the success of the SDGs as a global policy agenda.

105 Meuleman 2019.

Appendix A: Regional Civil Society Mechanisms

Region	Mechanism	Mobilization	Status and initiation	Aims	Leadership
Latin America and the Caribbean	Civil Society Participation Mechanism in the Sustainable Development Agenda	13 interest groups, 4 geographic regions, 3 thematic groups	Originated during LA Civil Society Meeting convened by ECLAC during first RFSO (2017), constituted (2018) ¹⁰⁶	Facilitate participation of Civil Society in Regional Forum and other processes related to sustainable development, promote acknowledgement of the mechanism	Elected focal points
Europe and Central Asia	Regional Civil Society Coordination and Engagement Mechanism (ECE-RCEM)	14 constituencies and 5 sub-regions ¹⁰⁷	Set up under auspices of ECE, but presented as 'for and by civil society actors' (2018) ¹⁰⁸	Facilitate Civil Society participation in all stages of follow up and review. Work flows into Regional Fora via civil society forum. ¹⁰⁹ Engage with UN entities. Write position papers for HLPF sessions	Elected focal points ¹¹⁰
Asia and the Pacific	Civil Society Coordination and Engagement Mechanism (AP RCEM)	17 constituencies, 5 sub-regions, cross-cutting thematic working groups ¹¹¹	Initiated 'bottom-up' during UNEP Regional Consultation in response to Rio+20 conference (2012), ¹¹² recognized by ESCAP	Enlarging engagement, influence outcomes and become a key platform for engagement on development related projects, aim to engage with international organizations, governments and others in the region ¹¹³	Elected focal points

¹⁰⁶ MeSCALC 2021.

¹⁰⁷ UNECE 2022.

¹⁰⁸ ECE-RCEM 13 December 2022.

¹⁰⁹ For example: ECE-RCEM 2018.

¹¹⁰ ECE-RCEM 19 November 2022.

¹¹¹ AP RCEM 12 December 2022.

¹¹² AP RCEM 6 October 2022.

¹¹³ AP RCEM 12 October 2022.

(cont.)

Region	Mechanism	Mobilization	Status and initiation	Aims	Leadership
Africa	Africa Regional Mechanism of the Major Groups and other Stakeholders (ARM-MGOS)	17 constituent groups	'Independent mechanism' that runs under auspices of ECA, launched during 2020 Regional Forum on Sustainable Development ¹¹⁴	Facilitates major groups and other stakeholders and civil society organizations based in Africa in regional and global UN sustainable development processes, towards implementation, follow-up and review. Liaise with the United Nations and organize civil society preparatory event before forum	Three co-chairs ¹¹⁵
West Asia	Civil society organized, but not (formally) linked	Organized along 6 sub-themes	Involved in preparatory meetings for Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, but not formally linked.	Engaging with Regional Forum, organize CSO preparatory events before forum, but also organizing civil society organizations more broadly	Convened by ANND ¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ UNECA 27 February 2020.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ UNDEF 28 December 2018.

Appendix B: List of Interview References

Date	Name	Affiliation
1. September 30th 2022	Michael Kunz	Economic Affairs Officer, Sustainable Development and Gender Unit, UNECE
2. July 1st 2022	Interviewee 2	Environmental Affairs Officer, Green and Blue Economy Section, UNECA
3. September 20th 2022	Altayeb Aldajani	Senior Economic Affairs Officer, Shared Economic Prosperity Cluster, UNESCWA
4. June 23rd 2022	Maria Yera Ortiz De Urbina Rodriguez	Deputy Director, Regional Commissions New York Office
5. October 17th 2022	Oussama Safa	Chief, Social Justice Section, Gender, Justice, Population and Inclusive Development Cluster, UNESCWA
6. August 9th 2022	Steven Vale	Senior Statistician and Regional Adviser, UNECE
7. August 8th 2022	Arman Bidarbakht Nia	Head, Statistical Data Management Unit, ESCAP
8. July 24th 2022	Nassim Oulmane	Chief, Green and Blue Economy Section, UNECA
9. July 5th 2022	Interviewee 9	Environment Division, UNECE
10. October 3rd 2022	Niranjan Sarangi	Senior Economic Affairs Officer, Shared Economic Prosperity Cluster, UNESCWA
11. July 19th 2022	Hania Sabbidin Dimassi	2030 Agenda and SDG Coordination Cluster, UNESCWA
12. September 2022	Interviewee 12	Staff member of a UN Regional Commission

* All interviewees were speaking in their personal capacity

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