UNIVERSITY OF BRASILIA
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GREGORY ROSA

THE UNITED NATIONS' QUEST FOR STATUS AMID

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION:

THE 2030 AGENDA CASE

Brasilia, 2024

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A BUSCA DAS NAÇÕES UNIDAS POR *STATUS* EM MEIO À COOPERAÇÃO INTERNACIONAL: O CASO DA AGENDA 2030

Dissertation presented to the Postgraduate Programme in International Relations of the University of Brasilia as a requirement for the degree of Master (MSc) in International Relations

Advisor: Professor Ana Flávia Granja e Barros (PhD)

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Brasilia, 2024

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"We conform to ineffective stablished practices for its longing promises and because going against it is a ruthless pilgrimage out of comfort zones that very few endured. Have the courage to endure, for real development is there."

For my soon-to-be-born daughter, Lola.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APFSD – Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development

ARFSD – Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development

CELAC – Community of Latin America and Caribbean States

ECOSOC – United Nations Economic and Social Council

ESCAP – United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

FAO – Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

GDP – Gross Domestic Product

HDI – Human Development Index

HLPF – United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

ICPD – International Conference on Population and Development

IDFC – International Development Finance Club

ILO – International Labour Organization

INC – Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for a Framework Convention on Climate Change

IUCN – International Union for Conservation of Nation

IUU – Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated

LDCs – Least Developed Countries

MDGs – Millenium Development Goals

ODA – Official Development Assistance

SCP – Sustainable Consumption and Production

SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals

SE4ALL – Sustainable Energy for All Initiative

SIDS – Small Island Developing States

TST – United Nations System Technical Support Team

UN – United Nations

UNCED – United Nations Conference on Environment and Development

UNCHE – United Nations Conference on the Human Environment

UNCTAD – United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

UNDP – United Nations Development Programme

UNECA – United Nations Economic Commission for Africa

UNEP – United Nations Environment Programme

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNFCCC – United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

UNICEF – United Nations Children's Fund

UNIDO – United Nations Industrial Development Organisation

UNSC – United Nations Security Council

USA – United States of America

UK – United Kingdom

USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

WFP – World Food Programme

WHO – World Health Organization

WTO – World Trade Organization

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ABSTRACT

What are the outcomes of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)? How can they be measured – in terms of the interrelation and flow between indicators, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impact? Who designed and is responsible for implementing them? Is there a budget allocated to each goal to ensure their execution? Who is accountable for their progress, success, or failure? And what happens after 2030 – will the UN have achieved its purpose, or will an "Agenda 2050" emerge? These questions inspired me to begin this research, highlighting the lack of systematic sources and clear answers for those interested in studying the construction process of the 2030 Agenda. Recent data and upcoming global events suggest that the Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by most countries, faces challenges and unpredictability in achieving its goals by 2030. Despite this, the United Nations (UN) remains committed to keeping the agenda active, as evidenced by initiatives like the upcoming 2024 Summit of the Future. However, little to no academic effort has been devoted to investigating the construction process of the 2030 Agenda and the impetus behind it. I hypothesize that the SDGs were designed as a strategic response by the UN to maintain their status, legitimacy, and operational framework, driven by the demands from the Global South, the UN's struggle to stay relevant, and the saturation of traditional development approaches. To test this, I conducted an exploratory qualitative research analysis on major UN events leading to the Agenda's formation, focusing on key players to understand this complex and multifaceted topic. Agenda setting and status seeking theories proved to be the most suitable lenses, framing the SDGs as a dual-purpose endeavor: providing a framework for global action and acting as a mechanism for status seeking. This dual role helped the UN regain prominence in the second decade of the 21st century, amid critiques of its post-aid development effectiveness. However, to maintain relevance, losing once again, the UN must assess its sustainability and adapt its structures and operations, moving beyond reliance on past prestige. This evaluation is crucial not only to prevent the UN from fading into irrelevance but also to ensure it can effectively lead global development efforts. As of today, the UN appears to be sustaining only its "successful failures," a pattern that is unsustainable for the institution, and for people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnerships alike.

Keywords: 2030 Agenda; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); Agenda setting; Status-

Seeking; Sucessful failure; Future of International Cooperation.

RESUMO

Quais são os resultados dos Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável (ODS)? Como podem ser medidos — em termos de inter-relação e fluxo entre indicadores, atividades, outputs, resultados e impacto? Quem os projetou e é responsável pela sua implementação? Existe um orçamento alocado para cada meta para garantir sua execução? Quem é responsável por seu progresso, sucesso ou fracasso? E o que acontecerá após 2030 — a ONU terá cumprido seu propósito, ou surgirá uma "Agenda 2050"? Essas perguntas me inspiraram a iniciar esta pesquisa, destacando a falta de fontes sistemáticas e de respostas claras para aqueles interessados em estudar o processo de construção da Agenda 2030. Dados recentes e eventos globais futuros sugerem que a Agenda para o Desenvolvimento Sustentável, adotada pela maioria dos países, enfrenta desafios e imprevisibilidade quanto ao cumprimento de suas metas até 2030. Apesar disso, as Nações Unidas (ONU) permanecem comprometidas em manter a agenda ativa, como evidenciado por iniciativas como a Cúpula do Futuro de 2024. Contudo, poucos ou nenhum esforço acadêmico foram dedicados a investigar o processo de construção da Agenda 2030 e os motivos por trás dela. Minha hipótese é de que os ODS foram projetados como uma resposta estratégica da ONU para manter seu status, legitimidade e estrutura operacional, impulsionados pelas demandas do Sul Global, pela luta da ONU para manter sua relevância e pela saturação dos modelos tradicionais de desenvolvimento. Para testar essa hipótese, realizei uma análise qualitativa exploratória sobre os principais eventos da ONU que levaram à formação da Agenda, focando também nos principais atores para compreender este tema complexo e multifacetado. As teorias de agenda setting e busca de status mostraram-se os melhores enquadramentos teóricos, interpretando os ODS como um esforço de dupla finalidade: fornece uma estrutura para ação global e agir como um mecanismo de busca de status da ONU. Esse papel duplo ajudou a instituição a recuperar destaque na segunda década do século XXI em meio a críticas sobre sua eficácia na era pós-*aid*. No entanto, para manter sua relevância, se perdendo mais uma vez, a ONU deve avaliar sua sustentabilidade e adaptar suas estruturas e operações, indo além da dependência do prestígio acumulado no passado. Essa avaliação é crucial não apenas para evitar que a ONU caia na irrelevância, mas também para garantir que ela possa liderar efetivamente os esforços globais de desenvolvimento. Até o momento, a ONU parece estar sustentando apenas seus "fracassos bem-sucedidos", um padrão insustentável para a instituição e para as pessoas, o planeta, a prosperidade, a paz e as parcerias.

Contents

Introduction

A major contradiction in modern development is that this wondrous project of improving prosperity and peace globally has seen both remarkable success and significant failures (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2017). The world has experienced remarkable success, as evidenced by the fact that by numerous measures, it has never been in a better state. Despite what the daily news might suggest, on average, we now live longer, earn higher salaries, are better educated, enjoy greater political freedoms, and are safer than at any point in history. Most developing nations have met or even exceeded the Millennium Development Goals – the eight targets set by the international community in 2000 – ahead of schedule. Plagues, famine, and disease, which were once a constant affliction, have largely become a thing of the past. Wars, too, have become smaller in scale and have resulted in fewer fatalities than those of the first half of the 20th century.

However, despite these achievements, and as an employee of the United Nations during the past decade, I have seen we have failed in a significant way because we have only accomplished the easy part. The key to making further progress – establishing institutions capable of executing increasingly complex and controversial tasks at scale are under pressure – is not improving and is, in fact, steadily declining in most developing countries.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development came as a miraculous framework to respond to the Global South's demand (Mahler, 2017) for clarity and collective action on the world's most important development issues. It has proven to be a complex and challenging process that requires careful examination of how to move forward from the present status of contemporary development. Investigating **how was the construction process that led to the 2030 Agenda and the impetus behind it** is essential to understand the future of global development and how to improve next decades' international agendas. This process of analyzing this construction will be interpreted through the theoretical lenses of agenda setting, mainly, and status seeking. The United Nations as the main driving force behind the product of 2030 Agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), must pass through a disruptive innovation process if it wishes to maintain its position as the leading organization in international development, especially if 2030 SDGs continue to lag behind[1].

The primary sources of information for my research are United Nations (UN) documents,

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[1] United Nations. (2023). Promise in peril: SDG indicators. Retrieved from
https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/Promise-in-peril/

with a specific focus on key events, mainly those precursory to the establishment of the SDGs, and documents related to the evolution of the concept of development within the institution. This focus allows me to understand the negotiating process and motives that ultimately led to the creation of the 2030 Agenda. In addition to these documents, my research has also benefited from the documented content from UN Senior Officials and policymakers, as well as archives on the process of building the Agenda, which was formalized during the RIO+20 conference in Brazil. I have carefully selected and analyzed these sources to gain a comprehensive understanding of the topic and to ensure the reliability and validity of my findings. The use of primary sources of UN documents in my study provides a unique and in-depth perspective on what is behind the establishment, in 2015, of the first worldwide development agenda and all its nuances for the United Nations.

In the first chapter, I explain my theoretical approach, which centers on agenda setting and status seeking theories to frame the analysis, also addressing the emerging lens of "governance through goals" often applied in studies of SDG implementation – though not the primary focus here. Chapter two is designed to democratize academic knowledge, offering those less familiar with UN history a background on how the concept of "development" has evolved, from its founding principles to the 2030 Agenda. Despite suggestions to omit this chapter, I found it essential for reader comprehension and for the text to stand independently and as an accessible academic resource.

The core of my thesis is to showcase how the Agenda's (consequently the SDGs) patchwork was done and who were its main craftsmen. My contribution here is to provide readers with a clear and comprehensive understanding of how Agenda 2030 came to be, sparing them the need to comb through thousands of UN archives to uncover the process and determine whether it truly aligns with its marketed goals and portraited motives to come to life. In chapter four, I provide my insights on necessary actions, reforms, or continuations leading up to 2030, offering a critical perspective on whether the SDGs remain humanity's best approach to addressing unsustainable development. The section on "sustainable development isomorphism" exemplifies areas needing systematic reflection and action to advance sustainability.

My goal is to provide an accessible and comprehensive exploration of the complexities and challenges of global development, with a particular focus on the construction of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the pivotal role played by the United Nations in shaping this international development agenda

Therefore, this work is intended to be a valuable resource for policymakers, scholars,

international development practitioners, donors, and anyone interested in gaining a deeper understanding of these critical issues.

1. Applying agenda setting and status seeking theoretical perspectives

The agenda setting theory discusses how the mass media influences in making a certain issue as a public agenda (McCombs & Reynolds, 2022)[2]. Nevertheless, political attention is important. In essence, the agenda emerges as a political construct, reflecting the prevailing forces and interests of the time rather than being arbitrarily determined. The mass media information serves as a testament to the powerful societal position[3], the result of the forces acting at that moment. This principle applies to both the Millennium Agenda and the 2030 Agenda, wherein the scope of each Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) had to be negotiated at length.

Writing on the subject, Zahariadis (2016, p.3) defined the relevance of agenda studies by listing five main reasons: a) investigating the agenda helps us understand the social values at a given historical moment; b) it allows us to see potential gaps between priorities of the government and society; c) studying the agenda makes visible both winners and losers in the political game, revealing the priorities of different social groups; d) it broadens our understanding of policy options, decisions and choices; and, finally, e) studying the agenda allows us to see a broad set of actors and institutions, sometimes beyond those that are formally defined.

Although understanding agenda setting is fundamental for understanding the exercise of influence by international players, agenda setting studies are relatively recent in international relations literature and, as we shall see, are still not explored when studying the role of international organizations – one of my objectives here. However, this theoretical approach is not enough when answering my research question on how was the negotiation process that led to the 2030 Agenda and the impetus behind it.

Consequently, status seeking theory applied in understanding the global commitment to the ambitious Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) "as a global call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity"[4]

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[2] McCombs, M; Reynolds, A (2002). "News influence on our pictures of the world". Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research.
[3] Harjuniemi, T. (2024). The mediatization of the economist profession: How economists use the media to promote political and economic interests. European Journal of Communication, 0(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231241228962
[4] United Nations. (2015). Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

(United Nations, 2015) will give more clues to the process by which this agenda was established and what intentions are lying in the backstage of this mammoth venture. Moreover, it helps to assess the UN motivations for ongoing negotiations concerning the near future, such as the UN Summit of the Future, to be held in September, 2024.

Status seeking is among the most basic human motives (Anderson, Hildreth, & Howland, 2015; Maslow, 1968; Neel, Kenrick, White, & Neuberg, 2015). Evolutionary scholars have suggested that status seeking provided survival and reproductive benefits throughout evolutionary history (e.g., Buss, 2008; Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg, & Schaller, 2010). Within peers, status seeking may be associated with a number of rewards such as positive social attention (e.g., being awarded international sports events), enhanced privilege (e.g., have a voice or a vote in major decision-making organs), greater influence and control (e.g., lead major UN agencies), and access to scarce resources (e.g., special economic tariffs on basic goods and commodities)[5].

Therefore, there is no single theory that can be used to answer the question stated in this work (how was the construction process that led to the 2030 Agenda and what motives were behind it?), but a variety of theories and explanations based on status seeking and agenda setting, for instance, with significant differences between them. My approach will navigate between them based on my hypothesis that the goal of UN establishing an international agenda with a "shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet now and into the future"[6] (United Nations, 2015) was in retaining its influential power which increasingly is deteriorating over the course of the 21st century. In a world where interdependence (economic, in particular) has become the most important key determinant of world politics[7], elaborating a state binding agenda is a mastermind way to regain status (resources too), and address international issues in a cooperative and multilateral manner, if widely followed.

1.1 How do International Organizations achieve status?

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https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld
[5] Highhouse, S., Brooks, M. E., & Wang, Y. (2016). Status seeking and manipulative self-presentation. International Journal of Selection and Assessment, 24(4), 352-361.
[6] United Nations. (2015). Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld
[7] Keohane Robert O. (2020). International Institutions and State Power: Essays in International Relations Theory. Oxford, UK: Routledge.

Here we define status as high rank or social position based on acceptance, deference (Renshon 2017, p.33-35) and prestige by peers. That is, status brings influence, access to resources, and a heard voice. Yet motivation to attain status may not necessarily lead to actual status attainment, as actual status attainment relies on social consensus among peers.

Likewise, Larson, Paul and Wohlforth (2014) argue that "status cannot be attained unilaterally; it must be recognized by others."[8] There exist the so-called "status markers" which allow for a good estimation of a state's status, and if a state is actively trying to seize any number of them, then the state is said to be seeking status.[9] Status markers in the current international system include "membership in elite clubs such as the Group of 8, permanent membership in the UNSC, leadership positions in international organizations, hosting international sports events, formal state visits, summit meetings, and inclusion in informal problem-solving groups."[10] Other markers include major military programs, space programs, promotion of a state's soft power in cultural and educational affairs, efforts to surpass others' economic growth rates, and major diplomatic initiatives that increase the diplomatic traffic to a country.[11]

When we think of the United Nations it is not very different. Their importance, work and standing relies on UN`s added value recognition by key international stakeholders, mainly states (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004).

The UN as we know today was a second attempt to create a union of nations for the purpose of establishing non-violent and cooperative relations between countries after World War II. The first attempt occurred with the establishment of the League of Nations, in 1918. The organization was structured to prevent another world war by addressing the underlying conditions that had led to the previous two conflicts. Its purpose extended beyond establishing an institution solely for military control; it instead aimed at the supranational creation of mechanisms responsible for ensuring "the maintenance of international peace and security, to develop friendly relations among nations, and to achieve international cooperation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character"[12].

One wise mechanism created to mark its status, was the establishment, and acceptance by states, of state-binding organs to achieve its purposes: the **General Assembly**, composed of

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[8] Paul, Larson and Wohlforth, Status in World Politics, p.10.
[9] Ibid.,
[10] Ibid., p.10-11
[11] Ibid., p.10-12
[12] United Nations Charter, Chapter I: Purposes and Principles (article 1)

all member countries; the **Security Council**, made up of five permanent members (USSR, USA, UK, France and China) and ten non-permanent members elected by the General Assembly; **the Secretariat**, chaired by the Secretary-General and responsible for managing and organizing the institution; **the Economic and Social Council**, to which several bodies are linked, such as Unicef (United Nations Children's Fund); and the **International Court of Justice**, the UN's legal body based in The Hague, the Netherlands.

Since its conception, the United Nations engaged in status seeking by presenting itself as a neutral instance where states can achieve international coexistence standards and compliance through multilateral initiatives. Much of which was a reflex of the Allies, status seeking interests, under the leadership of Washington, of how the game should be played after 1945. That is confirmed by analyzing the very nature of the General Assembly, which is a space where countries put forward their economic, environmental, political, security and other interests, and some of them are put into voting processes. For instance, throughout the decades, countries clearly complain about why certain states deserve to have a permanent seat at the Security Council, despite 21st evidence that an update would be beneficial for the absolute majority. Nonetheless, the `big boys club` (the five permanent members of the Security Council) is firm in arguing otherwise, freezing any relevant movement of changing UNSC status quo. Moreover, when an agenda is blocked within the UNSC realm, it may be sent to the UNGA, as it was the case of the recognition of the Palestine as a full UN member in 2024[13].

There is no better international arena where status seeking is blunt and carefully thought out than in the United Nations organs; unfortunately, close to none studies in international relations have focused on that. Nonetheless, this research acknowledges there are "informal governance" groups that need to be considered, notably in the case of great powers' competition (Prantl, 2006).

To secure its identity and establish its desired status in the international order, an aspiring major power, in this work the UN, must be recognized as such by the established powers. When a rising power is recognized, its identity is brought into existence, its status as a political actor is secured and as a result, it can act in the international sphere in ways consistent with the role of major power (Murray, 2019). The case of Germany and Japan are telling examples. They invested a lot of diplomatic resources to be recognized at the UN after

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[13] https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/04/1148351

they lost World War II. Afterwards, they joined Brazil and India to promote the UNSC reform so that they could be granted the status of permanent members.

For being an institution found already endorsed by the winners of World War II, its recognition came with no struggle. However, how to maintain the status of an international organization and its identity over the years, but with 193 interests? Especially since the balance of power and international agenda has significantly shifted since 1945 due to the rise of China, among other factors.

I argue that status can be attained via two different routes (Cheng, Tracy, Foulsham, Kingstone, & Henrich, 2013; Maner & Case, 2016). Prestige-based routes (United Nations tactic) to status involve gaining rank by sharing expertise, possessing skills, or realizing socially valued achievements. Such distinctions promote others' respect and voluntary deferral. This corresponds best to the concept of soft power and the different resources of power as described by Rael (2022). Dominance-based routes to status involve fear gained by intimidation and coercion. Such strategies are characterized by power and control over subordinates and can occur despite their resistance, being closer to the concept of hard power (Rael, 2022). Both prestige-based and dominance-based routes to social status involve different tactics, interpersonal behaviors, and outcomes, but both afford social rank and influence.

In 1992, for example, Agenda 21 was established as a non-binding, voluntary action plan to be implemented globally, nationally, and locally by organizations of the United Nations System, governments, and major groups in all areas where human activities have an impact on the environment (Agenda 21, 1992). Consequently, the aim of this initiative was to promote sustainable development and cooperation among different stakeholders, on a very broad base and under the Brazilian leadership. At that time, an integrated approach to truly promote "Environment and Development" was thought, rather than an initiative focused in pursuing a prestige-based agenda to attain UN status. Despite being a comprehensive and wearisome document with 40 chapters outlining an action plan for sustainable development, its primary achievement was the inclusion and consolidation of the concept of development beyond human environment and towards the idea of sustainable development, with its three dimensions of economic, social, and environmental sustainability.

Thirty years later, sustainable development has evolved into a globally accepted concept, although it has also become an overused and empty phrase (Kotzé, Adelman and Dube, 2023). Despite this, recognizing the need for international cooperation to address global environmental, economic, and social challenges can help all live a healthier and more

productive life. It is important to maintain a focus on the three dimensions of sustainable development and strive for their simultaneous advancement, as achieving progress in one dimension at the expense of another could undermine overall sustainability. Therefore, we must continue to promote and improve sustainable development initiatives through meaningful, inclusive, and equitable participation of all stakeholders, including governments, civil society, the private sector, and local communities.

Considering contemporary perspectives and the concept of status markers put forth by Paul, Larson, and Wohlforth (2014), it is evident that the United Nations (UN) has demonstrated numerous indicators of status in relation to its development agenda over the course of the past three decades. Some of these markers include: a) Influence and Authority – The UN's authority to convene high-level meetings and summits on global governance and development underscores its influence in shaping this agenda. More recently, by being the institution to captain to establish and oversee the implementation of global development goals, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reinforces that; b) Expertise – The UN possesses significant resources to offer its fixed employees an attractive remuneration package with competitive pay and benefits, which makes an institution with technical expertise and human capital. This enables the UN to play a leading role in being a knowledge hub for the development of policies and programmes which can serve as a framework for jointly promotion of sustainable development; and, c) Legitimacy and Credibility – The UN enjoys a high degree of legitimacy and credibility as it remains the only forum where almost all nations come together to discuss and address global challenges. As such, it serves as a platform for promoting international cooperation and dialogue among countries with diverse backgrounds, interests, and priorities. However, the UN's perceived inability to enforce its decisions and its complex bureaucracy and decision-making processes can also impede its effectiveness and responsiveness.

Historically, the United Nations (UN) has employed a variety of methods to foster respect and voluntary deference to its authority and influence in the realm of development. These have included providing financial incentives and aid to countries in need following World War II, on the condition that they adhere to specific development policies and programs promoted by leading UN member states. Additionally, the UN has offered technical assistance, expertise, and guidance to countries formerly under European colonial rule on how to align their development policies with western global goals and standards. Diplomatic and political pressure has also been leveraged by the UN, such as through cajoling and public shaming of countries that fail to comply with UN development goals or provide sufficient

support, financial specially, to the UN's programmes and agencies. Collaborating with powerful global actors, including major corporations and international financial institutions, is another means by which the UN has sought to promote its development agenda and enhance its legitimacy and influence on the international stage. These strategies continue to be employed by the UN to this day[14] (Hator, 2019).

1.2 Towards a common narrative: The role of agenda setting

Despite not having enough elements to assure Agenda 21 was a thought tool for the United Nations to position itself as the leading responsible for assuring global sustainable development, it is known that all discussions until 1992 did not hold the North responsible for its unsustainable pattern of production and consumption. Also, the outcomes from environmental summits until this point in time are valid for economic and commercial interests of the industrial world. The 'big boys club' clearly did not consider the dimensions of economic and social sustainability, which can be attested by US's position, for instance, in not ratifying many key international agreements[15], such as:

- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women: The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women is a human rights treaty adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979. While the US signed the treaty in 1980, it has not ratified it.

- Convention on Biological Diversity: The Convention on Biological Diversity is an international treaty that aims to conserve biodiversity and promote sustainable use of natural resources. While the US signed the treaty in 1992, it has not ratified it.

- Kyoto Protocol: The Kyoto Protocol is an international treaty that aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. While the US signed the treaty in 1998, it never ratified it.

- World Trade Organization (WTO) Tariffs: While the US has been the key member of the WTO since its inception in 1995, it has occasionally taken actions that are

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[14] Private Funding of the United Nations, Consequence and Future of The World Intergovernmental. Kossi H. Hator

[15] For additional supporting information I am making, please refer to the following references:
United Nations. (1992). Agenda 21: Programme of action for sustainable development. United Nations.
Sachs, W. (1993). Global ecology: A new arena of political conflict. Zed Books.
Dauvergne, P. (2004). Globalization and the environment: Risk assessment and the WTO. International Affairs, 80(3), 421-439.
Newell, P. (2005). Citizenship, accountability, and community: The limits of the CSR agenda. International Labour Review, 144(3), 347-365.
Stevis, D. (2007). Globalization and environmental governance: Toward an accountable framework. Global Governance, 13(1), 73-91

inconsistent with the organization's principles, such as imposing tariffs on goods from other countries.

- Paris Agreement: Although the US played a key role in negotiating the Paris Agreement in 2015, the Trump administration announced its intention to withdraw from the agreement in 2017. The US officially left the agreement in 2020, but in 2021, the Biden administration rejoined the agreement.

- Convention on the Rights of the Child: The US was involved in drafting the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a human rights treaty adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989. However, the US is one of only two countries that has not ratified the treaty (the other being Somalia).

The United Nations, established to prevent future conflicts and foster international cooperation faced a new challenge as emerging countries from the Global South, as well as Germany and Japan as aforementioned, demanded a greater role in being part international agenda. Hence, agenda setting theory suggests that those with the power to frame issues and set the agenda can exercise significant influence over policy decisions, and the Global South's push for greater participation reflected a desire (Schleicher and Barros-Platiau, 2023)[16] to break free from traditional top-down decision-making that had characterized the era of foreign aid after the bipolar order.

Agenda setting theory was developed in 1972 by Maxwell McCobb and Donald Shaw as they saw a connection between what voters found important and what the media was talking about. Agenda setting does not state that the media has all the power and is a puppeteer of its listener, by no means controls our thoughts and actions, but deeply influences what we should think about at a present time. In practical terms, McCobb and Shaw (1972) found out how media does not tell people what to think on that particular issue, but rather, had the power to determine what issues should be talked about – often times marginalizing key agendas for no "apparent" reasons.

The initial development of agenda setting theory was centered on traditional media formats, particularly newspapers and television. However, the landscape of communication has evolved significantly in recent years, with public authorities utilizing a range of communication channels that mirror the characteristics of traditional media, now including a substantial presence of digital platforms. Consequently, this study does not explicitly

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[16] Schleicher and Barros-Platiau (2023) (Eds). Cooperação Sul-Sul para o Desenvolvimento pós-pandemia: Desafios e oportunidades para o Brasil e o mundo. Revista Tempo do Mundo, n 31, IPEA.

distinguish between different media types, encompassing both traditional and digital platforms within its analysis.

It is crucial to emphasize that this analysis extends beyond the conventional focus on large corporate media entities (often referred to as traditional mainstream media). Rather, the study acknowledges the broader spectrum of media utilized by public political authorities and institutions in disseminating information and shaping public discourse.

While the broader discourse surrounding the evolution of media landscapes exceeds the specific scope of this research, recognizing the diverse array of media channels employed by public entities is essential for contextualizing the study's relevance and applicability. This acknowledgment underscores the dynamic nature of contemporary media environments and their role in influencing public perceptions, including the United Nations' efforts to leverage media platforms for enhancing its visibility and status on global issues.

Countries from the North are major players in the global economy and rely heavily on exports to generate economic growth and sustain their high standards of living. Unsustainable development practices can lead to environmental degradation, resource depletion, and other negative impacts that can ultimately harm economic growth and social well-being. By taking a more balanced and integrated approach to development (making it sustainable), countries can avoid these negative consequences and promote sustainable economic growth and social well-being in the long term.

Likewise, unsustainable practices in the Global South[17], can have far-reaching consequences for global social and economic stability, affecting not only local communities but also global markets and economies. For example, the exploitation of workers and the use of environmentally damaging practices can lead to social and political unrest, resulting in economic and political instability that can have negative spillover effects on the global economy (Kolk & Levy, 2016). Studies have shown that these negative impacts can be significant, with unsustainable practices in the Global South contributing to a wide range of challenges, including poverty, inequality, and political instability (United Nations, 2015) which can negatively impact migration flows, global trade and investment.

This can be particularly important for Northern countries that rely heavily on exports to the global market, as unsustainable practices can lead to reputational damage and reduced demand for their products. At the last decades of 20th Century, there was a rising discussion

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[17] Here I use the term as referring to poor and/or socio-economically marginalized parts of the world that are in Africa, Latin America, and the developing parts of Asia. These regions are generally the decolonized nations located to the south of the former colonial powers. As stated by C. Raja Mohan (2023) in Foreign Policy magazine, the category is emotionally powerful but fundamentally flawed.

and general understanding that the capacity of ecosystems to sustain current levels of consumption and production were at its full (Pagotto & Gonçalves-Dias, 2020), so a new agenda to tackle these issues was not only just for show, but an economic necessity[18].

In 1988 this theory was expanded to include a concept called framing. Framing is when the media is trying to get the viewer to follow a certain line of thought. Once they have an end goal in mind, a strategy takes place to conduct the viewer to come to a certain predetermined conclusion. The facts put on our table are not what the media have had access to, but a limited menu of information is offered to the viewer to come to an 'expected conclusion'. The goal of framing is to purposefully provide the viewer with information within the mould, but with a twist: each spectator's conclusion needs to come naturally, by their "own" thinking. Nevertheless, the way the narratives are presented shifts the conversation and most likely influences what the viewer needs to talk about and how all that should be interpreted.

During the "golden age" of foreign aid, spanned from the end of the Second World War in 1945 to the 1970s, in particular, it became clear that developing countries faced a significant problem in capital formation, as noted by Degnbol-Martinussen and Poul Engberg-Pedersen (2008). They explain that according to early economic growth theories, the private and public savings of developing countries were insufficient to finance large-scale investments, such as economic infrastructure, necessary to initiate growth processes. Private foreign investments were also inadequate to undertake this task, and very few developing countries were attractive to investors from wealthy industrial nations. In this context, it became crucial for affluent states to provide official aid transfers to support capital formation in the Global South. Therefore, giant national banks started investing more in financing for international development, somehow connected to the UN rules, but rather autonomous from them. They created the International Development Finance Club (IDFC) to focus on sustainability priorities while responding to the need of financing (Orliange and Barros-Platiau, 2020).

They continue by explaining that several economic theorists argued for the possible beneficial effects of capital aid based on the two-gap model. Developing countries faced a double problem, as they mobilized too few resources internally to cover the need for investments and too few resources in the form of foreign exchange to finance the imports of machinery and other capital goods required to buy from foreign markets. If foreign aid were

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[18] According Pagotto and Gonçalves-Dias (2020) the impact of human activities on the Planet's resources ("ecological footprint") has exceeded its capacity for renewal ("biocapacity") since the 1970s (CAVALCANTI, 2012; WWF, 2014).

provided in the form of foreign exchange or direct financing of necessary imports of means of production, it could help to close both gaps. Therefore, the main message of the leading economic growth theories in the 1950s and 1960s was that foreign aid could contribute significantly to capital formation in developing countries.

Certainly, the information menu presented had significant differences between declared motives and real ones at that time. When it comes to international aid, cooperation for development or South-South cooperation and so forth official statements and appeals by authorities tend to exaggerate and frame information within the moral and humanitarian motives, emphasizing initiatives focused on achieving sustainable development goals. In contrast, the national security and economic motives underlying these efforts are often understated or blurred.

We can see this theory broken down in the following way into a simple model: first we are going to have reality; this is what is happening within society, these are the things that are going on the day-to-day level. Second, we have what we call gatekeepers, these are the media gurus who are deciding what to choose and to avoid, which stories to cover and what content is to be put on their agenda. Third, all the information gathered until now is strategically framed to be presented to become a public agenda[19]. Fourth, the framed public agenda will be distilled by people until it eventually turns into a policy agenda. Now the policy agenda is composed of the demands that policymakers agree to consider. It is not the sum of all political demands and is ranked according to the political priorities of the policy decision-makers. Several individuals or groups can try to get their issues into the policy agenda, including leaders, groups, mass organizations or protests, media, etc[20].

Looking at how the SDGs were conceived through a complex process involving various actors and stakeholders, we can apply the five-step model of agenda setting theory to understand how the SDGs were placed on the global agenda:

1. Reality: The origins of the SDGs can be traced back from Agenda 21 until the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, which was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 2012. The conference was an effort from Southern countries, which aimed to switch the top-down and dominance-based driving force that was used by the UN to respond to the 20th century's issues, to build something truly global beyond the achievements of the previous Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

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[19] Here we will not explore if it will be accepted or not by the public.
[20] https://home.csulb.edu/~msaintg/ppa590/agenda.htm

2. Gatekeepers: The United Nations played a significant role as gatekeepers in setting the SDGs agenda. In 2013, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon established the High-level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, which was co-chaired by Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and UK Prime Minister David Cameron. The panel was tasked with providing recommendations for a new development agenda that would succeed the MDGs. In addition to the panel, the UN also launched a global consultation process to gather input from various stakeholders, including civil society organizations, private sector actors, and academics.

3. Strategic framing: The inputs gathered through the consultations were strategically framed into the 17 SDGs and 169 targets, based on the principles of universality, integration, and "leaving no one behind". The framing emphasized the need for a global partnership to achieve the SDGs and the importance of addressing environmental, social, and economic issues in an integrated manner. The SDGs were developed through an inclusive and participatory process that involved diverse stakeholders, including governments, civil society, and the private sector.

4. Public agenda: The SDGs were presented to the public through the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit held in September 2015. The summit was attended by world leaders, including US President Barack Obama, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Chinese President Xi Jinping, India President Narendra Modi and Brazil President Dilma Rousseff, who welcomed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which included the SDGs. The adoption of the SDGs marked a historic moment in the global development agenda, with leaders committing to working towards a more equitable, sustainable, and prosperous world. The Global South supported the new Agenda with its majority, given that the Millennium Agenda had limited country participation in its construction and was considered a classic top-down agenda.

5. Policy agenda: The SDGs became a policy agenda when they were included in the policies and plans of various countries, organizations, and stakeholders. The SDGs have since become a driving force behind global development efforts, with countries, international organizations, and civil society groups using the SDGs to guide their policies, plans, and actions towards sustainable development. The

SDGs are also monitored through a set of indicators, which were developed through a multi-stakeholder process led by the UN Statistics Division.

We should not forget that agenda setting is not a rational process, but a struggle over the definition of the problem. All interests are not equally represented in this struggle, and some problems/issues are more likely to reach the agenda than others.

This pattern is often followed when we look throughout the agenda setting theory lens. In detail, a specific issue is taken from reality, scanned, and framed by the media. Then, its gatekeepers assess which information details will be passed on or be left out of this frame, according to their strategic purposes. That exercise will generate a story, most elaborated with logical narratives (truths or fallacies) and other rhetorical gimmicks that make it easy for the public to understand it, but hard to distinguish how close from reality it is. Next, the information from the media agenda directly feeds what will be on the public agenda. So, an accepted public agenda has the power to become a policy agenda, once the narrative is endorsed by politicians, mass media, influencers, and organized groups. Finally, there is an ongoing cycle between media agenda (information framed) and policy agenda – it is difficult to pinpoint who influences the other more. Finally, the choice not to highlight crises like famine, poor purchasing power, or low quality of life (even when unrelated to unemployment rates) supports these assumptions, as the silence of observers reveals the selective priorities of the gatekeepers.

As viewers (observers), we are exposed to information from various sources, including our subjective perception of reality, media presentations, and other communication channels. Much of this information is strategically presented not to dictate our thoughts or actions, but to direct our attention towards specific issues deemed important. This phenomenon is particularly relevant in the context of development agendas, where the dissemination of information serves to prioritize certain topics for public consideration. This aspect will be further explored in Chapter 3, illustrating the parallels between media influence and the shaping of development priorities.

1.2.1 Goal setting in the Anthropocene

According to Biermann, F., Kanie, N., & Kim, R. E. (2017) governance through goals has emerged as a novel approach to global governance, exemplified by the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 by the United Nations. The SDGs promise a new

form of governance that is distinct from traditional international law-based regimes, and is characterized by weak institutional arrangements, global inclusion, and national discretion. This approach to governance is particularly relevant in the Anthropocene era, where global environmental and social challenges are increasingly complex and interlinked.

The SDGs are non-legally binding and were established through a UN General Assembly 70/1 resolution[21] of 25 September 2015. This means that governments are not legally bound to formally transfer the goals into their national legal systems. However, the SDGs are grounded in international law and are aligned with other international legal instruments, such as the Paris Agreement on climate change. This unique characteristic of the SDGs distinguishes them from most other goals or targets on sustainable development that are enshrined in legally binding treaties (often not followed by leading countries, as seen in the previous chapter). Governance through goals is also marked by weak institutional arrangements at the intergovernmental level, which sets it apart from the more specific governance domains such as climate or biodiversity dialogues. The institutional oversight over the SDGs implementation at the global level is vague and will be oversighted by High-level Political Forums.

The United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), for instance, was established in 2012 following the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), as an outcome of "The Future We Want" document. The framework and organization of the HLPF are detailed in General Assembly resolution 67/290[22].

This forum meets annually under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to review progress towards the SDGs, follow up on the 2030 Agenda, and address new and emerging challenges.

Various regions worldwide host their own high-level political forums dedicated to discussing regional progress and challenges in sustainable development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These forums play a critical role in fostering regional collaboration and addressing unique developmental priorities.

One prominent example is the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD), organized by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). APFSD serves as a platform for countries in the Asia-Pacific region to come together and strategize on the regional implementation of the SDGs. By facilitating

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[21] United Nations General Assembly. (2015). Resolution 70/1: Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Retrieved from https://undocs.org/A/RES/70/1
[22] See more here: https://hlpf.un.org/

dialogue and cooperation, APFSD enables countries to share experiences, identify common challenges, and coordinate efforts towards achieving sustainable development.

Similarly, the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development (ARFSD) is convened by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). ARFSD is specifically designed to address Africa's unique sustainable development issues and challenges. The forum provides African countries with an opportunity to discuss strategies, policies, and initiatives aimed at advancing sustainable development within the continent. ARFSD plays a crucial role in promoting regional cooperation and mobilizing collective action towards the SDGs tailored to Africa's context.

These mentioned regional forums are examples of officially recognized by the United Nations and serve as integral components of the broader international framework for sustainable development. They complement the global efforts led by the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) by focusing on regional perspectives and fostering tailored solutions to achieve the SDGs within specific geographical contexts. Through these forums, countries may leverage regional partnerships and resources to accelerate progress towards sustainable development goals.

However, its bottom-up (Global South response against the MDG agenda), non-confrontational, country-driven, and stakeholder-oriented aspects of governance are seen as key potential success factors. The global inclusion and comprehensiveness of the global agenda setting process is another unique feature of governance through goals. The SDGs were agreed upon in a public process that involved input from at least 70 governments as well as numerous representatives of civil society. Unlike the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the SDGs address both industrialized and developing countries and identify no country as 'developed' in terms of sustainability.

National discretion is also a characteristic of governance through goals, as governments retain maximum freedom in interpreting and implementing the goals. The 169 targets that guide the implementation of the 17 goals are often qualitative and leave much freedom for governments to determine their own ambition in implementing the goals. Even when quantitative and clearly defined targets have been chosen, governments can still rely on the non-binding nature of the goals. While the character of the SDGs as non-binding global aspirations with weak institutional oversight arrangements and high levels of national discretion may appear to be a cause for concern, there is potential for this approach to advance public policy and private efforts towards an ambitious sustainability agenda.

This potential is even more critical in the Anthropocene era[23]. The global community is faced with an ever-growing list of complex and interlinked economic, environmental, and social challenges. Despite the existence of international law-based regimes, these challenges remain inadequately addressed as states prioritize their own interests over the achievement of common goals. The traditional approach of relying solely on binding international treaties has been insufficient in addressing these challenges due to the limited scope of the treaties and the reluctance of states to take necessary actions. However, it is also important to note that non-binding and country-driven approaches may suffer from similar limitations, as they rely on the willingness of individual states to prioritize collective goals over their own interests. Therefore, the efficacy of the SDGs in achieving real change by 2030 remains uncertain, and it will depend on the commitment and actions of individual states, as well as the effectiveness of governance leadership and deference through goal setting.

Undoubtedly, the United Nations cannot be regarded as a black box; it is not a monolithic entity that operates in isolation from its member states and the broader global community, working as an ideal global governance entity in a mythical manner. Rather, the UN is a complex organization made up of a range of actors, including powerful decision-makers, member states, specialized agencies, programmes, funds, and other entities, each with their own mandates, priorities, and interests. This complexity can make it difficult to understand how the UN operates and how it can effectively implement its mandates, including the philosophy of leaving no one behind.

The philosophy of leaving no one behind (including not leaving itself behind into forgetfulness and without resources) is a key principle of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and emphasizes the need to ensure that development is inclusive and benefits all members of society, particularly the most marginalized and vulnerable. The 5Ps - people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership – provide a framework for achieving this goal by addressing the interlinked social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. To effectively implement the philosophy of leaving no one behind and the 5Ps, it is important to recognize that the UN has its own status aspirations and engagement with the various actors, entities and its gatekeepers and its many non-marketed impetuses within the global governance agenda.

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[23] Rockström, J., Kotzé, L., et al. (2024). The planetary commons: A new paradigm for safeguarding Earth-regulating systems in the Anthropocene. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (PNAS)

Measuring progress towards SDGs related to effective sustainable development governance and transparency requires formal accountability relationships between principals and agents. The World Bank's World Development Report 2004 outlines the four design elements of any formal accountability relationship: delegation, finance/support, information, and motivation (World Bank, 2004). These design elements structure agents' choices, and the agent's performance is endogenous to them but cannot be directly controlled.

Delegation refers to the specification of what is wanted from principals (donors) to agents (UN agencies and outsourced implementing partners), while finance/support represents the flow of resources from principals to agents. Information is created when the agent carries out the required task, and this information is available to the principal. However, the essence of a principal-agent problem is that the information is necessarily incomplete as many other factors determine success or failure at the observable output/outcome than just the agent's effort. Finally, motivation is based on the information provided (created narrative) to the principal, which can affect the agent's intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

The design elements of formal accountability relationships are important in measuring progress towards SDGs related to governance and transparency (UN's Achilles' heel). For example, improving information transparency and sharing can help to address information asymmetry between principals and agents, while providing financial incentives can help to motivate agents to perform better (Besley & Ghatak, 2003). To effectively measure progress towards SDGs related to governance and transparency, an integrated data platform and data-gathering tool could also be useful. These tools can help to cross data from different sources and improve data quality, which is important in addressing the limitations of measuring progress towards these goals (Gibson et al., 2017).

In conclusion, the use of data monitoring is crucial in achieving the SDGs. Formal accountability relationships between principals and agents, in this case the UN member states and other donors to the UN itself with its agencies, are important design elements in measuring progress towards these goals. However, information asymmetry can hinder implementation. Improving information transparency and sharing, as well as providing financial incentives, can help address these limitations. An integrated data platform and data-gathering tool can improve data quality by bringing together data from various sources, thereby promoting more effective measurement of progress towards sustainable development.

1.3 Benefits and shortcomings of this approach

One benefit of combining status seeking and agenda setting as the conceptual framework to answer the research question is that it provides an innovative approach to studying international negotiations. This approach can offer insights into the complex power dynamics that exist within international negotiations and cooperation initiatives, shedding light on how actors work to achieve their goals, and what factors influence their success or failure.

Using status seeking and agenda setting to analyze the negotiation process towards 2030 Agenda presents a valuable opportunity to advance our understanding of how actors within the United Nations work to shape the agenda and outcomes of international negotiations, especially in the context of sustainable development. This is a critical area of study given the importance of the 2030 Agenda in shaping global sustainability efforts and addressing the challenges facing our planet. The lack of previous research examining the combination of these two concepts in the context of the United Nations further underscores the potential for new insights.

However, one of the main shortcomings of using status seeking and agenda setting is the lack of a well-defined theoretical framework in international relations. As a result, researchers may struggle to accurately measure and assess the impact of these concepts on negotiations specially with status seeking lens. This can lead to a lack of consensus on how they interact with other variables in international relations. This limits the usefulness of this approach as a tool for analyzing negotiations and understanding how they work.

Another shortcoming of the approach is the lack of hard data analysis. The use of status seeking and agenda setting relies heavily on qualitative data, which can be difficult to measure and compare across different contexts. This can limit the reliability of the findings and their generalizability to other contexts. Moreover, the lack of hard data can make it challenging to test the accuracy and reliability of the approach, and to determine its effectiveness in predicting outcomes. Nevertheless, framing issues within the five elements of agenda setting (see item 1.2), together with examining the motives that led one to seek prominence (see item 1.1) offers a robust framework for analyzing international cooperation and negotiation processes. Both approaches combined reveals critical and underlying drivers to interpret reality without necessitating overly complex theoretical or statistical models.

What is not going to be analyzed

This proposed theoretical framework will be used to answer the research question on how

was the construction process that led to the 2030 agenda and UN's impetus behind it. Accordingly, several areas will remain outside the scope of this analysis, including: (1) current international crises and geopolitical dynamics – such as the ongoing conflicts between Israel and Lebanon, Russia and Ukraine, the US-China trade tensions, and climatic crises – though these undeniably impact global stability and influence the SDGs indirectly; (2) the internal structure, agency, and distribution of decision-making authority within the UN itself, which, while integral to the institution's function, falls beyond the framework's primary focus; (3) broader debates regarding the UN's effectiveness, such as whether an imperfect UN remains humanity's best hope for global governance or if it is perceived as increasingly bureaucratic and inefficient; this thesis does not venture in an in-depth investigation of cases that led to recent common-sense critiques on the UN's cost-effectiveness or efficiency; (4) the roles played by Secretary-General António Guterres and his predecessors, whose leadership may shape institutional priorities but does not directly influence the structural analysis herein; (5) the influence of the Global South and other significant emerging powers in reshaping the UN agenda, a crucial factor but not the central focus of this study; (6) legal, normative, and economic analyses are not within the scope of this research, which is focused on tracing the negotiation processes and underlying motivations that directly contributed to the formalization of the 2030 Agenda.

By delineating these exclusions, this thesis hones its analytical focus on the UN's role and intentions in sewing the 2030 agenda and "developing" the SDGs, without extending into wider geopolitical or structural critiques in international development, South-South cooperation and global alliances.

2. The evolution of development agenda

The concept of development will be explored here from its embryo in the Charter of the United Nations to what is understood in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The concept of development has long been a central concern in international relations, yet it remains difficult to define due to its complex and multidimensional nature. Scholars have noted that the traditional economic development approach, which focused primarily on increasing Gross Domestic Product (GDP), has limitations in addressing broader concerns such as poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation (Escobar, 1995; Sen, 1999). As a result, there has been a shift towards a more holistic approach to development that recognizes the interdependence of economic, social, political, and environmental factors (Goulet, 1995; Hettne, 1995). The United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index

(HDI) is a notable example of this multidimensional approach, measuring not only economic growth but also factors such as education, health, and gender equality (UNDP, 2020). Overall, the lack of a simple definition of development in international relations reflects the complexity of the concept and the need for a more nuanced understanding of the multidimensional nature of development[24].

During the early years of the UN, technical assistance through aid and the work of specialized agencies marked a significant step towards the development of global measures. The need to establish mechanisms that would prevent new international conflicts and promote social progress and better living standards for humanity was recognized by major countries worldwide. With the accession of more member states from diverse regions, new perspectives on development were brought to discussions at the UN[25]. This brought about an expansion in the scope and complexity of the debates on global development, as new voices contributed their views and experiences to the emerging discourse on development.

What we know as development studies is an interdisciplinary field that has undergone significant evolution over time, shaped by changing global realities and critical engagements with existing theories and practices. The classical perspective, which emerged in the post-World War II period, focused on the economic growth of nations through modernization and industrialization (Rostow, 1960; Hirschman, 1958). This perspective assumed a linear path of development and sought to replicate the experiences of developed countries through policies such as investment in infrastructure, education, and technology. However, this approach was challenged by critical scholars who argued that development was not just about economic growth but also involved social, cultural, and political factors (Pieterse, 2010; Sen, 1999).

The global perspective, which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, critiqued the assumptions of the classical perspective and acknowledged the unequal power relations between developed and developing countries (Frank, 1978; Wallerstein, 1974). This perspective highlighted the ways in which global capitalism exploited the resources and labor of developing countries for the benefit of developed countries, resulting in a cycle of dependency and inequality. The global perspective sought to address these issues through strategies such as trade reform, debt relief, and development assistance, but its effectiveness was often constrained by geopolitical interests and structural inequalities (Chang, 2014;

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[24] Escobar, A. (1995). Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the Third World. Princeton University Press. Goulet, D. (1995). Development ethics: A guide to theory and practice. Apex Press. Hettne, B. (1995). Development theory and the three worlds: Towards an international political economy of development. Longman. Sen, A. (1999). Development as freedom. Oxford University Press. UNDP. (2020). Human development index (HDI). Retrieved from http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi
[25] https://research.un.org/en/docs/dev/1946-1959

Escobar, 1992). In response to the limitations of both the classical and global perspectives, the post-development perspective emerged in the 1990s. This perspective challenged the concept of development itself, arguing that it was based on a Western-centric and modernist view of progress (Sachs, 1992; Escobar, 1995).

Post-development scholars advocated for alternative approaches to development that were more participatory and context-specific, recognizing the diversity of cultural and social practices in different societies. This perspective emphasized the importance of local knowledge and agency in development processes and sought to decolonize development through a critical engagement with power relations and the politics of representation (Gaventa, 1995; Ferguson, 1990).

Development studies itself have evolved from a narrow focus on economic growth to a more nuanced understanding of development that acknowledges the complexities of social, cultural, and political factors. These perspectives continue to shape the field of development studies today, as scholars grapple with the ongoing challenges of poverty, inequality, and sustainable development in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. These perspectives continue to shape the field of development studies today, as scholars grapple with the ongoing challenges of poverty, inequality, and sustainable development in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. In order to organize the main arguments of this dissertation, the 1972 UN conference on Human Environment will be the starting point.

2.1 From Stockholm to Rio (1972-1992)

The Stockholm Conference in 1972 and the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 were hallmarks in the history of global development policy. These conferences were innovative in their approach to sustainable development and the interrelation between economic development, social well-being, and environmental protection. The Stockholm Conference was the first major international gathering to address environmental issues at a global level, and its impact on the global development agenda cannot be overstated (Meadows et al., 1972). The conference brought attention to the limits of the planet's resources and the need for sustainable actions, emphasizing the potential for environmental degradation to undermine economic progress.

The 1992 Rio Earth Summit built upon the momentum generated by the Stockholm Conference and introduced several new concepts and approaches to a sustainable development. It was a landmark event in the development of global environmental policy, as it helped to bring attention to the importance of a more holistic view on sustainable

development and the need for international cooperation to address environmental challenges. Despite initial resistance from some developed countries[26], the voices and perspectives of developing countries played a crucial role in shaping the outcomes of the conference. The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development emphasized the importance of balancing economic, social, and environmental objectives in development policy, which has become a cornerstone of global development policy.

In addition to their conceptual innovations, both conferences played a crucial role in promoting international cooperation and creating global development frameworks. The Stockholm Conference led to the establishment of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which aimed to coordinate international efforts to protect the environment. The Rio Summit produced Agenda 21, a comprehensive action plan for sustainable development that called for the integration of economic, social, and environmental policies (UNCED, 1992). These agreements established a common language and framework for global development policy, laying the foundation for future international cooperation on environmental and development issues. The impact of these conferences can still be felt today, as countries continue to work towards a more sustainable future.

2.1.1 Setting the ground for a development agenda[27]

In 1960, the United Nations admitted 17 new members, marking the beginning of development as a central theme for UN action. The newly independent countries dramatically changed UN membership. The priority was reducing world hunger, led by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) through its "Freedom from Hunger" Campaign launched on July 1st, 1960. The campaign aimed to address hunger in newly independent African and Asian countries, as well as other affected members, by seeking support from governments and NGOs.

On 27th October 1960, the UN General Assembly invited the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) to draw up plans to provide the maximum amount of surplus food to fight hunger in the least developed countries (LDCs). However, they acknowledged that the ultimate solution to hunger was the acceleration of economic growth. To achieve the goals set

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[26] It is important to note that the idea of holding the Rio Summit in Brazil was not initially supported by Western developed countries, since Sweden insisted on a Stockholm +20. According to some scholars, there was pressure to hold the summit in a developed country, as many policymakers believed that developing countries did not have the capacity or expertise to effectively address environmental issues (Gupta, 1998).

[27] The sources were taken from The Dag Hammarskjöld Library. It provides research and information to support the work of United Nations Member States, and as an integral part of the UN Organization, the Library also aids in the dissemination of UN information to a wider public audience through online services, and a global depository library network. See more here: https://www.un.org/en/library

out in the resolution, the Assembly established the World Food Programme (WFP) on 19th December 1961 with a three-year trial period and a £100 million voluntary fund. The WFP, run by both the UN and the FAO, would be supported by an annual pledging conference held at UN headquarters in New York. Additionally, on 15th December, the Assembly established the United Nations Capital Development Fund to tackle the capital development needs of LDCs.

In 1961, the UN declared the 1960s as the "Development Decade" to address underdevelopment beyond just hunger. Developing countries aimed for a 5% growth rate of their national income and aimed to eliminate illiteracy, disease, and poverty. The 1962 Conference on the Problems of Economic Development in Cairo, organized by developing countries, aimed to ensure their perspectives were reflected in the international development campaign. The UN was recommended to follow the principles of the Cairo Declaration for addressing development in developing countries.

In 1963, the United Nations General Assembly called for support for a worldwide initiative to fight hunger, disease, and illiteracy. The initiative was to be led by non-governmental organizations in the latter half of the Decade. To promote better market opportunities for developing countries' primary exports, the UN created the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in 1964. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was formed in 1965 through the combination of the Expanded Programme for Technical Assistance and the United Nations Special Fund. Additionally, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) was established.

Even Pope Paul VI expressed support for reducing world hunger by addressing the UN General Assembly in 1965, calling for sufficient food for all. The WFP was expanded, aiming to raise $275 million in contributions. Despite efforts, limited progress was made, and the UN declared the Second Development Decade in 1971, emphasizing the importance of official development assistance (ODA) and a minimum 0.7% GDP contribution from developed countries. However, the decade faced challenges in its implementation.[28]

The UN's efforts during the first development decade were focused on economic growth, poverty reduction, and improving social welfare in developing countries. These efforts were reflected in the Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1974. The declaration called for a more equitable

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[28] https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/prehistory-millennium-development-goals-four-decades-struggle-development-united-nations

international economic system and the establishment of a global partnership for development. The first development decade laid the foundation for a new agenda of global development awareness and action that would be further developed in subsequent decades.

Several studies have examined the UN's role in development during its first decade. For instance, Rostow (1960) argued that the UN's development initiatives should be centered on economic growth, while Prebisch (1962) advocated for the establishment of a new international economic order that would promote the interests of developing countries. Similarly, Streeten (1970) emphasized the importance of addressing social welfare concerns in addition to economic growth. These studies reflect the diverse perspectives on development and highlight the complexity of the UN's development agenda during its first decade.

Critics of the UN's efforts during the first development decade argued that the focus on economic growth as the solution to poverty and underdevelopment was too simplistic. They argued that development was not simply a matter of increasing national income but required a more nuanced approach that considered social and political factors. They also criticized the focus on top-down solutions and the lack of participation and empowerment of local communities and people in the development process. This criticism only grew with time, decade after decade, showing to the UN Secretary-general how vital it was to change course towards more participatory processes. In 1992, Secretary Boutros Boutros-Ghali presented an Agenda for Peace, which can be considered as a response to that scenario. Then, in 2023 Secretary Antonio Guterres published New Agenda for Peace [29]

Despite these criticisms, the UN's first development decade made significant progress in raising global awareness of development issues and catalyzing action towards reducing poverty and hunger. The establishment of key organizations such as the World Food Programme, UNCTAD, UNDP, UNEP, and UNIDO, were some UN's markers to provide a framework for addressing development challenges and promoting international cooperation.

However, much more work remained to be done to address the persistent challenges of poverty, inequality, and underdevelopment around the world. The UN's subsequent development decades and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that followed have built on the foundation laid during the first development decades and seek to address the shortcomings and limitations of earlier efforts. The SDGs emphasize a more comprehensive and integrated approach to development that considers social, economic, and environmental

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[29] https://dppa.un.org/en/a-new-agenda-for-peace

factors and prioritizes the participation and empowerment of local communities and marginalized groups in the development process.

In addition to the initiatives established during the first development decade, there were also innovative ideas that emerged during this period. One such idea was the concept of "basic needs," which emphasized the importance of providing people with access to basic necessities such as food, shelter, healthcare, and education. This idea was popularized by the International Labour Organization's (ILO) World Employment Programme and gained support from both developing and developed countries. The basic needs approach recognized that economic growth alone was not enough to address poverty and that a more holistic approach was needed that prioritized the well-being of people.

Another innovative idea that emerged during the first development decade was the concept of "participatory development."[30] This approach emphasized the importance of involving local communities and people in the development process, recognizing that they were the experts on their own needs and priorities. Participatory development sought to empower people to take control of their own development and to work collaboratively with external agencies and organizations.

Despite these innovative ideas, the first development decade faced several challenges, including the persistence of poverty and underdevelopment in many countries, the lack of resources and political will to address development issues, and the negative impacts of the global economic system on developing countries. The subsequent development decades and the 2030 Agenda that followed sought to address these challenges and build on the progress made during the first development decade.

The UN's first development decade (1960-1970) played a critical role in raising global awareness of development issues and catalyzing action towards reducing poverty and hunger. The establishment of key organizations and the emergence of innovative ideas provided a framework for addressing development challenges and promoting international cooperation[31]. While there were criticisms of the UN's efforts during this period, it laid the foundation for a new agenda of global development awareness and action that would be further developed in subsequent decades.

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[30] See more here: https://research.un.org/en/docs/dev/1960-1970
[31] See more here: https://research.un.org/en/docs/dev/1960-1970

2.1.2 Human Environment x Environment and Development[32]

<u>Stockholm Conference</u>

The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE), also known as the Stockholm Conference) was held in 1972 to address growing concerns about the negative impact of human activities on the natural resources.

Several factors led to the organization of the conference. Firstly, there was increasing public awareness and concern about environmental issues, such as air and water pollution, deforestation, and loss of wildlife. Secondly, the publication of influential reports, such as the 1968 report of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which highlighted the growing environmental problems and their consequences. Additionally, there was growing international cooperation and recognition ('pressure') of the need for collective action on environmental issues, as well as the need for better coordination and management of environmental resources. Moreover, concerns about the future scarcity of natural resources such as coal and minerals, led to the conclusion that the development of the Southern countries should be controlled, because they were responsible for the "demographic bomb".

The data that provided the framework to place environmental issues at the forefront of international concerns was primarily generated by international scientific and environmental organizations, such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), as well as government agencies and research institutions from various countries. Also, the pressure of non-government organizations (NGOs) and environmental activists who were working to raise awareness about environmental issues and to push for action on these issues were key in putting the environment on the international agenda. To put it simple, the UNCHE represented a collective effort to compile and analyze data on environmental issues to set an international agenda, and to present a comprehensive picture of the state of the planet and the impacts of human activities in the environment.

The very name of the Conference was a strong indicative to reflect the focus of the time: the relationship between humans and the environment, and the importance of considering both in addressing environmental issues, but not development as a priority. The name was

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[32] The sources were taken from The Dag Hammarskjöld Library. It provides research and information to support the work of United Nations Member States, and as an integral part of the UN Organization, the Library also aids in the dissemination of UN information to a wider public audience through online services, and a global depository library network. See more here: https://www.un.org/en/library

intended to emphasize the importance of considering both human needs and the health of the environment in promoting North-prone solutions to environmental challenges – not in human development and well-being.

<u>The Rio Earth Summit</u>

Now, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the Rio Earth Summit, was a landmark event in the history of international environmental diplomacy (Lago, 2013). However, the reactions to the conference were mixed, with delegates from developed countries expressing concern about the state of the environment primarily for economic reasons, while those from developing countries emphasized the need to address long-standing economic grievances and social injustices.

Environmentalists from developed countries hailed the conference as the "last chance to save the planet," highlighting the urgency of addressing the pressing environmental challenges facing the world. However, their concerns were often intertwined with economic interests, with many developed countries seeking to maintain their dominant position in the global economy while also addressing environmental issues but disconnected from primary social concerns such as hunger and poverty. On the other hand, delegates from developing countries saw the conference as an opportunity to address their long-standing economic grievances and social injustices. They emphasized the need to focus on the development of the most vulnerable populations, rather than solely on environmental protection, which they viewed as a means of satisfying the economic demands of the rich.

Despite the recognition given to the need to tackle over-consumption in industrialized states, poverty and resource scarcity in the developing world, many least developed countries were disappointed with the outcome of the conference. They felt that the developed countries had not done enough to address the root causes of environmental degradation, such as unsustainable consumption patterns and unequal distribution of resources. Moreover, they believed that the developed countries continued to prioritize their own economic interests over the broader global goals of sustainability and social justice. At least, the Rio Earth Summit represented a critical moment in the history of global environmental diplomacy (Le Prestre, 2011).

The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment and the Rio Earth Summit represented two significant events in the history of international environmental diplomacy. The former established the international recognition of the need for collective action on environmental issues and paved the way for environmental protection as a key global agenda.

The latter expanded this recognition to include the need for sustainable development, addressing not only environmental issues but also economic and social concerns. In other terms, while in 1972 Northern countries set the agenda according to their priorities, the Rio Summit marks the agenda promoted by the South, with Brazil seeking status within the UN arenas. As a result, the UN gained relevance in 1972 due to the Northern leadership, namely Swedish, but in 1992 it was because of Southern countries leadership, notably Brazil.

From an agenda setting perspective, both conferences reflected the growing public concern and scientific knowledge of the environmental challenges facing the world. The efforts of international scientific and environmental organizations, government agencies, research institutions, and non-government organizations were crucial in placing environmental issues on the international agenda. The incorporation of the development issue into the agenda of the Rio Earth Summit was, however, partly motivated by a desire for status seeking among developing nations, as they sought to redress protracted economic disparities and social inequities.

The Rio Earth Summit was a complex negotiation process, reflecting the competing interests and priorities of developed and developing countries. Developed countries sought to address environmental issues primarily for economic reasons and to maintain their position in the global economy, while developing countries emphasized the need to focus on the development of vulnerable populations in their countries. The conference recognized the need to tackle over-consumption in industrialized states and poverty and resource scarcity in the developing world, but many developing countries were disappointed with the final outcome, feeling that developed countries had not done enough to address the root causes of environmental degradation. Although there were two declarations, two umbrella conventions, one Agenda and myriad promises, the UNCED did not deliver significant transformations, as it was highlighted in the 2002 Sustainable Development Summit in Johannesburg.

From a status seeking perspective, the inclusion of development in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development's agenda can be seen as a reflection of developing countries' growing power and influence in the international system to ensure their voices were heard in international negotiations. However, the focus on economic development for all and social justice did not necessarily align with the interests of developed countries, which continued to prioritize their own economic interests over broader global goals of sustainability and social equity.

One could mention how the concept of sustainable development gained more attention and acceptance after the Rio Earth Summit, as evidenced by the adoption of the United

Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. Furthermore, one could argue that the Stockholm Conference and the Rio Earth Summit were both opportunities for countries to assert their influence and authority on the global stage by shaping the international agenda on environmental issues. For instance, developed countries such as the United States and Japan played a significant role in setting the agenda at the Rio Earth Summit, by emphasizing the importance of market-based mechanisms such as emissions trading to address environmental issues while maintaining economic growth (Kanie & Haas, 2004). On the other hand, developing countries such as Brazil and India used the Rio Earth Summit to highlight their own development concerns, including poverty reduction and national sovereignty over their own resources. They argued that environmental protection cannot be achieved at the expense of development, and that a more equitable distribution of resources was needed to ensure social justice (Le Prestre, 1995).

Overall, the Stockholm Conference and the Rio Earth Summit illustrate the interplay between agenda setting and status seeking in international diplomacy. They demonstrate how different actors, including governments, NGOs, and media, can shape the multilateral agendas on environmental issues, and how countries can use these opportunities to advance their own interests and assert their influence on the global stage.

Ultimately, the challenge remains to find a path towards sustainable development that balances North-South interests and environmental protection, economic growth, and social justice for all.

2.2 A blueprint for global development[33]

The 1990s had some important UN conferences and summits that shaped discussions on overall development. The Earth Summit (1992) also known as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo, Egypt (1994), the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China (1995) and the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) held in Istanbul, Turkey (1996) were the major ones. These conferences addressed a range of global issues including environmental protection, sustainable development, population and reproductive health, women's rights, and

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[33] It is a comprehensive plan or framework designed to guide and facilitate progress towards sustainable development on a global scale. It encompasses a set of goals, strategies, and initiatives aimed at addressing key challenges such as poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, health issues, education, and economic growth across nations and regions. A blueprint for global development outlines specific objectives and targets to be achieved within a defined timeframe, along with mechanisms for monitoring progress and mobilizing resources.

urban development. The outcomes of these conferences continue to shape global policies and efforts in these areas until nowadays.

Yes, there were other important events besides those UN landmarks that addressed a range of global issues in the 1990s: the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War which marked a significant change in international relations and opened up new opportunities for international cooperation on a range of issues, the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 – important step towards increased economic globalization and the liberalization of trade and also the end of apartheid in South Africa in 1994 which made a significant turning point in the struggle for racial equality and human rights. These events and others national ones helped to create a new international environment that was more favorable for cooperation on a range of global issues.

All of them were responsible to build momentum and create a sense of global urgency around these issues, especially once the term 'development' was placed at the forefront of Conference`s name, shifting from the attention given to the environment and how human beings impact it to their social well-being and development[34].

2.2.1 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development – Rio 92[35]

Several milestones took place leading up to UNCED in 1992. In 1987, the Brundtland Commission released its report "Our Common Future," which defined sustainable development and laid the foundation for the conference. In 1990, the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee was established to prepare for UNCED. Over the next two years, several preparatory meetings were held to negotiate the final documents and set the agenda for the conference.

The period spanning from 1990 to 1992 was a pivotal time for international environmental negotiations, culminating in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in June 1992.

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[34] Here is a list of some of the major UN conferences and summits that focused on environmental issues: The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (Stockholm Conference) in 1972, which was the first global conference to address environmental issues. The World Population Conference held in Bucharest, Romania in 1974. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) held in Santiago, Chile in 1976. The United Nations Conference on Desertification held in Nairobi, Kenya in 1977. The United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries held in Paris, France in 1981.
[35] Text base on the following documents: 1) United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. (1992). Retrieved from https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/conveng.pdf 2) Convention on Biological Diversity. (1992). Retrieved from https://www.cbd.int/doc/legal/cbd-en.pdf United Nations. (1992). Agenda 21. Retrieved from https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/Agenda21.pdf 3) United Nations. (1992). Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. Retrieved from https://www.unep.org/resource/rio-declaration-environment-and-development 4) World Commission on Environment and Development. (1987). Our common future. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

The Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for a Framework Convention on Climate Change (INC) was established in 1990 to negotiate a framework convention on climate change. The aim was to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system. The INC held several meetings between 1990 and 1992, with key gatherings taking place in March 1991 in Geneva, Switzerland, June 1991 in New York, USA, October 1991 in Geneva, Switzerland, February 1992 in Geneva, Switzerland, and May 1992 in New York, USA. Key participants in the INC negotiations included representatives from all UN member states, international organizations, and NGOs. The negotiations resulted in the adoption of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) at the UNCED in Rio de Janeiro.

The Preparatory Committee for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (PrepCom) was established in 1990 to prepare for the UNCED in Rio de Janeiro. The PrepCom held several meetings between 1990 and 1992, including meetings in August 1990, February 1991, September 1991, and March 1992 in Geneva, Switzerland. As with the other negotiations, representatives from all UN member states, international organizations, and NGOs participated in the negotiations. The negotiations resulted in the adoption of Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration at the UNCED in Rio de Janeiro.

The negotiating process leading up to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the Rio Earth Summit, involved a wide range of actors, including governments, international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and civil society[36]. Key countries involved in the negotiations included the United States, European countries, and developing nations, which formed a coalition called the Group of 77 to advocate for their interests. These countries played a significant role in shaping the conference's agenda and negotiating the final documents.

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[36] According to Maurice Strong, who was Secretary General of the Earth Summit: "We got engagement of more people and more constituencies and more organizations that have ever actually participated in the preparation of any world conference. That was both in the preparatory process and that was carried forward to Rio itself. Where we got them out. We got the leaders out, more leaders than have ever participated in a world event. More, and in supporting those leaders delegations of much greater weight in terms of in the case of several ministers, not just environmental ministers. And media, we had more media accredited to the conference, by more than double as a matter of fact. By a factor of more than two than have ever been accredited to any international conference. So in that sense of engagement. there was a broad engagement right from the very top, the leadership, right to the grass roots. So in that sense, that insured that the issues really did get focused. Deriving from that, even the coverage, the media coverage that was negative, could not ignore the relationship between poverty, underdevelopment in the Third World and environmental issues. For the first time, we actually made that link." Interview "The 1992 Earth Summit: An inside view" of Maurice Strong by Philip Shabecoff retrieved from Mauricestrong.net https://www.mauricestrong.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=206&Itemid=104

International organizations, such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Health Organization (WHO), also played an important role in the negotiations by providing technical expertise and scientific data on environmental and health issues. NGOs and civil society played a crucial role in raising public awareness about environmental and sustainable development issues, publicizing the event and in pressuring governments to act. Major NGOs, such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, were active in the negotiations, providing input and advocating for stronger environmental protection.

Overall, the negotiations and decisions made in the INC for the Framework Convention on Climate Change, the INC for the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the PrepCom for the UNCED all contributed to the development of the Rio 92 agenda. This agenda included the adoption of the UNFCCC, the Convention on Biological Diversity, Agenda 21, and the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. The UNFCCC was a vital outcome of the INC negotiations as it was the first international agreement that recognized the need for action to address climate change and called for "stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system." The Convention on Biological Diversity recognized the importance of biodiversity and the need for its conservation and sustainable use.

Agenda 21 was a comprehensive plan of action that aimed to achieve sustainable development in the 21st century, with a focus on poverty reduction, changing consumption and production patterns, and protecting and managing the natural resource base. The Rio Declaration was a set of principles based on the Stockholm Declaration and that recognized the right to a healthy environment, calling for the integration of environmental concerns into development policies.

2.2.2 Rio +5[37]

Rio+5, also known as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED+5) was important to review the progress made since the 1992 Earth Summit. The conference aimed to assess the implementation of Agenda 21, the action plan adopted at the Earth Summit, and to consider new and emerging environmental challenges. One of the key outcomes of Rio+5 was the adoption of the "Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21," which provided a framework for continued action on sustainable development.

The speech by Martin Khor, Director of Third World Network, reflected much of the

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[37] https://archive.globalpolicy.org/social-and-economic-policy/the-environment/the-rio-process/45453-rio5-and-the-global-ecological-crisis.html

reality at the time, which was not the narrative after passing through the gatekeepers that promoted Agenda 21.

He reflected on the state of global affairs five years after the Rio Earth Summit, where global civil society had hoped for a new global partnership to combat ecological disasters and support sustainable development in developing countries and poor communities. Nevertheless, Global South countries had a deep disappointment that the spirit of Rio had vanished, aid had fallen, and financial resources continued to be sucked out from developing countries through debt servicing and declining terms of trade.

Khor (2004) cited an example of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa losing 15 percent of their GDP through declining terms of trade at the end of the 1980s[38]. Instead of promised technology transfer, the new intellectual property rights agreement at the WTO created new barriers to the South's access to environmentally sound technology. Furthermore, bio-piracy was increasing, where genetic resources and the knowledge of local communities on the sustainable use of biodiversity were hijacked and transformed into patented products for the profit of large corporations.

The main victims of this situation, according to Khor (1997) were the poor communities and ordinary people who endure environmental destruction and poverty. The link between the growing power of globalization and the undermining of the sustainable development agenda was highlighted. The prevailing form of globalization is inequitable, benefiting a few while marginalizing the many. Commerce and the need to be competitive in the global market have become the top priority in many countries, downgrading the environment, welfare of the poor, and global partnership on the agenda.

It is difficult to pinpoint the most influential gatekeepers that shaped Rio+5 and progress towards Agenda 21, as it was a complex and multifaceted process with many actors involved. However, some key players included: 1) Maurice Strong: As Secretary-General of the 1992 Earth Summit, Strong was instrumental in shaping the agenda for Rio+5. He was also involved in the creation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the establishment of the Commission on Sustainable Development; 2) Kofi Annan: As Secretary-General of the United Nations at the time of Rio+5, Annan played an important role in promoting the sustainable development agenda and advocating for global cooperation to address environmental challenges; 3) Al Gore: As Vice President of the United States under President Bill Clinton, Gore played a key role in promoting the

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[38] Khor, M. (2004, August 30). Break the "conspiracy of silence" on commodities. Global Trends. Retrieved from https://twn.my/title2/gtrends26.htm

sustainable development agenda and pushing for action on climate change; 4) Brundtland Commission: The World Commission on Environment and Development work helped to shape the sustainable development agenda and provided a framework for the Rio Earth Summit; 5) NGOs: A range of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) played an important role in shaping the agenda at Rio+5, including environmental groups, development organizations, and social justice advocates. These groups advocated for issues such as poverty reduction, environmental protection, and social equity; 6) Developing countries, notably Brazil, south Africa and India: Representatives from developing countries played an important role in shaping the agenda at Rio+5, advocating for issues such as technology transfer, debt relief, and support for sustainable development in their countries. They also sought to ensure that the agenda was not dominated by the interests of developed countries and 7) Developed countries: Representatives from developed countries also played a key role in shaping the agenda at Rio+5, including the United States, European Union, and Japan. These countries sought to balance environmental concerns with economic growth and development, and to promote their own interests in areas such as trade and investment.

The manipulation of information for public consumption is apparent in various instances, including the 1994 Marrakesh Agreements of the World Trade Organization (WTO), for example. These agreements exacerbate the issue by creating new barriers for environmentally sound technology access in developing countries. This occurrence highlights the increasing influence of large corporations, which are monopolizing the economy and extending their influence on policy-making bodies. The inability of the conference to achieve significant progress emphasizes the urgent need to challenge outdated and unsustainable production, technology, consumption, and lifestyles. It is the responsibility of every nation, especially those with unsustainable practices, to undertake this challenge on behalf of humanity, particularly those in local communities.

Although the conference received criticism for its lack of progress, from its Resolution 19/2 of 19 September 1997 it showcased a foundation for future action towards sustainable development and raised awareness of the significance of balancing economic growth, social well-being, and environmental protection[39].

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[39] UN General Assembly A/RES/S-19/2 of 19 September 1997, for more details see here:
https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n97/774/73/pdf/n9777473.pdf?token=Q0ArhSvdnjBtOyjQlp&fe=true

2.2.3 Two Thousand and Two[40]

The 1990`s were a troubling time for a common development commitment, since there was none on a global scale. Africa suffered a generation of stagnation, with rising poverty and child deaths, resulting in drops in life expectancy. Economic crises and the threat of growing inequality plagued Asia and Latin America. The anti-globalization movement gained such force that in November and December 1999, at what has come to be called "the Battle in Seattle," street protesters forced the World Trade Organization to cancel major meetings midstream (Gillham, P.F., & Marx, G. T., 2000).

The suspicions on the part of civil society carried over into policy debates. In the late 1990s, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development proposed "international development goal" benchmarks for donor efforts. The OECD's proposal was later co-signed by leaders of the IMF, the World Bank, and the UN. In response, Konrad Raiser, then head of the World Council of Churches, hardly a fire-breathing radical, wrote UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to convey astonishment and disappointment that Annan had endorsed a "propaganda exercise for international finance institutions whose policies are widely held to be at the root of many of the gravest social problems facing the poor all over the world." (McArthur, J. W., 2013).

That proposal never got off the ground, but the international community made other progress in the lead-up to 2000 that helped set the groundwork for the MDGs. Most notably, G-8 leaders took a major step forward when they crafted a debt-cancellation policy at their 1999 summit in Cologne, Germany. Under this new policy, countries could receive debt relief on the condition that they allocated savings to education or health. This helped reorient governments toward spending in social sectors after many years of cutbacks.

At the 2000 UN Millennium Summit, which was the largest gathering of world leaders to date, heads of state accepted that they needed to work together to assist the world's poorest people. Here we see UN's status seeking mechanism in practice once again. To enhance its status and credibility, the United Nations engaged prominent consultants, such as Jeffrey Sachs, to conduct technical studies shaping the Millennium Agenda. This strategic move aimed to leverage the expertise of renowned scholars to formulate a comprehensive development framework. By not involving Global South stakeholders, the initiative reflected a top-down agenda, lacking the participatory elements essential for its inclusive global policymaking.

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[40] The sources were taken from United Nations website section on Conference (Environment and sustainable development). See more information here: https://www.un.org/en/conferences/environment

Looking at the challenges of the new century, all the UN member states agreed on a set of measurable, time-bound targets in the Millennium Declaration. In 2001, these targets were organized into eight MDGs: eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and forge global partnerships among different countries and actors to achieve development goals. Each goal was further broken down into more specific targets.

In practical terms, the MDGs were launched in March 2002, at the UN International Conference on Financing for Development, in Monterrey, Mexico. The attendees, including heads of state, finance ministers, and foreign ministers, agreed that developed countries should step in with support mechanisms and adequate financial aid to help poor countries committed to good governance meet the MDG targets.

To be sure, the MDG framework is imperfect. Several issues, such as gender equality and environmental sustainability, are defined too narrowly. The education goal is limited to the completion of primary school, overlooking concerns about the quality of learning and secondary school enrollment levels. In addition, some academics, such as the economist William Easterly, argue that the remarkable ambition of the goals is unfair to the poorest countries, which have the furthest to go to meet the targets, and minimizes what progress those countries do achieve. Sure enough, if the child survival goal were to cut mortality by half, instead of by two-thirds, 72 developing countries would already have met the target by 2011. (McArthur, J. W., 2013). Instead, the two-thirds goal has been achieved by only 20 developing countries so far (McArthur, J. W., 2013). In addition, the MDGs' emphasis on human development issues, such as education and health, sometimes downplays the importance of investments in energy and infrastructure that support economic growth and job creation.

Nonetheless, the framework has provided a global rallying point. In 2002, with a mandate from Annan and Mark Malloch Brown, then the administrator of the UN Development Program, the economist Jeffrey Sachs launched the UN Millennium Project, which brought together hundreds of experts from around the world from academia, business, government, and civil-society organizations to construct policy plans for achieving the goals (McArthur, J. W., 2013). Sachs also tirelessly lobbied government leaders in both developed and developing countries to expand key programs, especially in health and agriculture, in order to meet the MDG targets (McArthur, J. W., 2013).

In the lead-up to the 2005 G-8 summit, in Gleneagles, Scotland, advocacy organizations

worldwide championed the MDGs. In developing countries, NGO leaders, such as Amina Mohammed, Kumi Naidoo, and Salil Shetty, encouraged civil-society leaders to hold their governments accountable for meeting the goals (McArthur, J. W., 2013). This effort was crucial in pushing for commitments to poverty reduction and sustainable development (Hulme, D., 2010).

The involvement of civil society and advocacy groups played a vital role in maintaining pressure on governments and ensuring that the MDGs remained a priority (Fukuda-Parr, S., 2010). Moreover, the emphasis on global partnerships and accountability mechanisms reflected a broader recognition of the need for inclusive and participatory approaches to development (Kenny, C., 2011). These efforts were instrumental in highlighting the interconnectedness of global challenges and the necessity of collective action (Sachs, J. D., 2012)

In developed countries, organizations such as ONE, co-founded by the activist Jamie Drummond, the rock star Bono, and others, petitioned politicians and conducted public awareness campaigns to demand that world leaders step up their efforts to meet the targets. At the summit, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, then British chancellor of the exchequer, put the MDGs and foreign aid commitments at the top of the agenda. Leaders at Gleneagles committed to increasing global aid by $50 billion by 2010 and set the groundwork for larger commitments to be made by 2015. However, one powerful player on the world stage, the United States, remained hesitant to embrace the MDGs agenda.

Another milestone that defined the course of what we now know as sustainable development also happened in 2002, ten years after the Rio Summit. The World Summit on Sustainable Development or Johannesburg Summit, built upon the work of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), by reinforcing the commitment to sustainable development and further defining its priorities.

The Johannesburg Summit was held in September with the aim of addressing global sustainability challenges and advancing the agenda for sustainable development. Some of the key outcomes of the Johannesburg Summit include:

- The adoption of the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, which provided a comprehensive framework for implementing sustainable development at the national and international levels.

- The launch of several new initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable development, including the Clean Development Mechanism, the Global Environment Facility, and the Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Partnership.

- The strengthening of partnerships between governments, the private sector, and civil society to promote sustainable development.

- The recognition of the importance of access to water and sanitation as a basic human right and the launch of the Water for Life decade to improve access to these essential services.

- The recognition of the importance of sustainable consumption and production patterns and the launch of the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns.

The inclusion of the term "sustainable development" in the name of the World Summit on Sustainable Development was a significant step in shifting the focus of the global development agenda towards a more holistic and integrated approach that recognizes the interdependence of economic, social, and environmental sustainability. being, and environmental protection in a manner that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (McArthur, J. W., 2013).

Hence, it seems that by including "sustainable development" in the name of the summit, the organizers signaled a commitment to prioritizing this concept and to ensuring that economic, social, and environmental sustainability are integrated into all aspects of the development process. This shift in focus away from a solely environmental or economic development agenda to an approach to development that takes into consideration the long-term impact of current decisions and actions on future generations. This approach recognizes that economic, social, and environmental sustainability are interdependent, and that sustainable development must address all three dimensions in a coordinated and harmonious manner.

2.2.4 Rio +20

The 2012 Rio+20 Conference on sustainable development, organized under the auspices of the United Nations, provided a platform for international leaders, scientists, and non-governmental organizations to deliberate on a range of pressing global challenges. Despite significant investment in environmental treaties and organizations, the Conference's focus

was centered on the global economy and its fragility. However, the event was nonetheless an opportunity to reflect on the world's progress and continued challenges in promoting sustainable development, notably after the 2008 global financial crisis created in the United States.

Rio+20, held two decades after the landmark 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, did not generate the same level of attention and enthusiasm as its predecessor. However, the conference represented a critical moment in rethinking environmental governance in the 21st century. There is a need to move away from traditional forms of environmental governance towards a model that recognizes the role of the private sector in promoting sustainable development. In this context, the conference represents an opportunity for a shift in global environmental governance to address the shortcomings of past efforts (Donoghue, D., Dodds, F., & Leiva Roesch, J., 2016).

One potential shift is the recognition that the private sector can play an instrumental role in promoting sustainable development. This approach has gained significant traction in recent years among scholars of international relations, particularly those in the subfield of global environmental politics. For instance, scholars have argued that the private sector has a critical role to play in shaping environmental governance in developing countries, which have traditionally been excluded from participation in global environmental governance (Bäckstrand, 2006)[41].

Moreover, the economic benefits of a sustainable approach to development have been increasingly emphasized by scholars and international organizations. The United Nations Environmental Programme has advocated valuing ecosystem services, such as the storage of carbon in trees or the pollination of crops by insects. (UNEP, 2011). Such an approach recognizes the economic benefits of environmental protection and creates an opportunity for the private sector to become a bigger stakeholder in global environmental governance.

However, the challenge remains in finding a way to engage the private sector in promoting sustainable development without compromising environmental protections. This is particularly critical as the private sector has frequently been criticized for exploiting natural resources and promoting environmentally unsustainable practices. Nevertheless, such concerns must be balanced with the recognition that the private sector has the resources, expertise, and innovation capacity required to effectively address global environmental challenges. As such, the role of the private sector in global environmental governance should

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[41] For further details, see the works of Peter Dauvergne and Jessica F Green on the role of the private sector.

be viewed as an opportunity rather than a threat.

3. Agenda 2030 negotiating process

The forthcoming chapters of this research comprise its core, where the theoretical framework of agenda setting, mainly, status seeking, and governing through goal, previously expounded in Chapter One, will be employed separately or combined to practically investigate the creation process that led to the 2030 Agenda and its underlying impetus. From the extant literature, it appears that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were conceived as a "hail mary" strategy by the United Nations (UN) to preserve its status and legitimacy. The UN delegated the responsibility of achieving the SDGs to member countries, while maintaining a vague stance on how to attain them, thus precluding transformative change. Rather than driving the development agenda, the UN positioned itself as a coordinating and problem-solving body. This strategy was a departure from the top-down approach of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which, although productive in terms of numerical development achievements, was perceived as top-down and exclusionary. The SDGs emerged largely because of demands from the Global South to participate in the development of the next international sustainable agenda, and to gain decision-making power within the UN. Proponents of the SDGs advocated for an agenda that would "leave no one behind," particularly since the most vulnerable populations, as aforementioned.

The 20th century's grand finale was fast approaching, and the world was in disarray. Global inequality, financial crises, HIV, and cancer epidemics all running rampant. How did the world get here and did the UN have a solution?

Despite Agenda 21's good reception, it failed. Large organizations did not embrace sustainable development, and many developing countries thought they were predominantly drafted and represented by policymakers from rich developed countries. Adding on to this, global problems were starting to pile up. All of this led to mistrust towards the UN because of how they handled the economic situation in the 80s and 90s. Despite the UN's mixed track record in the twentieth century, its core premise of "one country one vote" still gives them enough legitimacy to continue to reframe global debates.

Finally, the year 2000 had arrived a momentous calendar event what better time than this thought the UN to revise the terms of global cooperation. The UN used its renewed spirit to make a global promise to reduce poverty and human deprivation at historically unprecedented rates using different nations' collaborative action. The world would come to know this global commitment to the Millennium Development Goals. 191 United Nations member states and

22 international organizations came together on the 8th of September 2000 in New York, pledging to achieve the eight MDGs by 2015 (Donoghue, D., Dodds, F., & Leiva Roesch, J., 2016).

The MDGs received a mixed reception. People either viewed them as an optimistic blueprint for global equality or believed that they did not have any meaningful targets, policies, or actions. The MDGs were even seen as a new rationale for rich developed countries to promote the ideology of capitalism and globalization disguised as aid for developing countries (Donoghue, D., Dodds, F., & Leiva Roesch, J., 2016). Despite this mixed reaction, the MDGs have still become the world central reference point for development cooperation. It packaged global critical issues on poverty, hunger, disease inequality and environmental degradation into easily understandable goals which in turn promote global awareness. However, the MDGs were limited to the developing world, as if the high-income countries had no responsibility to take nor role to play.

Despite the achievements of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), overall, according to Ritchie & Roser (2018)[42] the world achieved 3 and a half targets and the misses vary between several near misses and a few very clear and alarming failures (see table below), they faced substantial criticism from various quarters. Civil society organizations expressed strong discontent over the absence of explicit targets related to women's reproductive health issues, political conflicts, employment, and economic growth within the MDGs framework. This criticism underscores broader concerns about the limitations of the MDGs in addressing complex social and economic challenges comprehensively (Zu, L., 2004).

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[42] Ritchie, H., & Roser, M. (2018). Now it is possible to take stock - did the world achieve the Millennium Development Goals? Our World in Data. Retrieved from https://ourworldindata.org/millennium-development-goals

Table 1 – Did we achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)?

Did we achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)? Our World in Data

Summary of global progress of the United Nations' (UN) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which spanned the period 2000-2015. Shown are the Targets of the MDGs*, levels in the baseline year, the final target level and actual achieved level for each Target.
— Achieved Targets are marked in **green**;
— Missed Targets are marked in **red**.

Millennium Development Goal (MDG) Target	Baseline level	Target level	Achieved final level
MDG1.A: halve share of people living in extreme poverty (<$1.25 per day)	47% in developing regions	Reduce to 23.5%	Fell to 14%
MDG1.B: achieve full and productive employment, as well as decent work for all, including young people and women	62% global working-age population in employment	Full (100%)	Fell to 60%
MDG1.C: halve the proportion of individuals suffering from hunger	23.3% in developing regions	Reduce to 11.5%	Fell to 12.9%
MDG2.A: ensure that children universally – including both boys and girls – will be able to complete a full course of primary education	83% in developing regions	Universal (100%)	Increased to 91%
MDG3.A: eliminate gender disparity at all education levels	Developing regions: 0.87 in primary 0.77 in secondary 0.71 in tertiary	Gender parity index (GPI) between 0.97-1.03	Developing regions: 0.98 in primary 0.98 in secondary 1.01 in tertiary
MDG4.A: reduce the under-five mortality rate by two-thirds	90 per 1,000 live births	Reduce to 30 per 1,000	Fell to 43 per 1,000
MDG5.A: reduce the maternal mortality ratio by 75 percent	380 per 100,000 births	Reduce to 95 per 100,000	Fell to 210 per 100,000
MDG5.B: achieve universal access to reproductive health. *Pregnant women receiving adequate antenatal care visits*	35% in developing regions	Universal (100%)	Increased to 52%
MDG5.B: achieve universal access to reproductive health. *Women aged 15 – 49 in marriage/union, using contraceptives*	55% in developing regions	Universal (100%)	Increased to 64%
MDG6.A: halt and have started to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS	3.5M new cases per year	0 new cases	2.1M new cases per year
MDG6.B: achieve global access to treatment for HIV/AIDS for those who need it by 2010	3% of people with HIV	100% of people with HIV	23% of people with HIV (2010) 45% of people with HIV (2015)
MDG6.C: ceased & started reversal of incidence of malaria & TB. *Incidence of malaria*	158 new cases per 1,000 at risk	Fewer than 158 new cases per 1,000 at risk	Fell to 94 new cases per 1,000 at risk
MDG6.C: ceased & started reversal of incidence of malaria & TB. *Incidence of tuberculosis (TB)*	172 new cases per 100,000 people	Fewer than 172 new cases per 100,000 people	Fell to 142 new cases per 100,000 people
MDG7.A: integrate principles of sustainable development into country policies & reverse loss of environmental resources			Multiple metrics (nearly all deteriorating)
MDG7.B: reduce biodiversity loss, achieving, by 2010, a significant reduction in the rate of loss			Red List Index shows continued biodiversity loss
MDG7.C: halve the proportion of the population without sustainable access to *safe drinking water*	24% without access to improved water source	Reduce to 12% without access	Fell to 9% without access
MDG7.C: halve the proportion of the population without sustainable access to *sanitation*	46% without access to improved sanitation	Reduce to 23% without access	Fell to 32% without access

*MDG8 (Global Partnership) does not have easily quantifiable targets and is therefore not included.
Source: United Nations (UN), the MDG Report (2015) & MDG Monitor.
The data visualization is available at OurWorldinData.org. There you will find further data on this topic.   Licensed under CC-BY-SA by the authors Hannah Ritchie & Max Roser.

Moreover, the MDGs drew criticism from the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights for their failure to fully integrate global human rights standards and principles into their objectives. This critique highlighted the need for a more robust human rights-based approach to development initiatives. The MDG agenda's biggest criticism was how extraordinarily narrow they were (Zu, L., 2004, p. 109). They reflected a top-down process of a North-South aid agenda sometimes referred to as the "minimum Development Goals". Eight out of six MDGs were predominantly relevant to developing countries. This meant the UN and rich developed countries only needed to invest in developing countries and did not have to change the status quo in their own nations. This resulted in the MDGs not being connected to the world's development priorities.

There were eight of these so-called Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with 21 sub-targets, from educating girls to cutting maternal mortality. Overall, the MDGs have a decent record. Some (such as reducing maternal and child mortality) will be missed by miles. But

others, such as cutting by half the share of people who live in abject poverty, have been achieved. The MDGs themselves do not always deserve the credit: the plunge in the global poverty rate has far more to do with growth in China than anything agreed on at the UN. But in other cases, such as boosting access to clean water, the prospect of missing an international target shamed countries into acting better than they might have otherwise.[43]

As 2015 was approaching it was clear that the MDGs desperately needed a successor that was going to overcome the challenges that plagued them.

3.1 Key players and powers[44]

The MDGs were not a monolithic policy following a single trajectory. Ultimately, they are nothing more than goals, established by world leaders and subsequently reaffirmed on multiple occasions. The MDGs were not born with a plan, a budget, or a specific mapping out of responsibilities. Many think of the MDGs as the UN's goals, since the agreements were established at UN summits and UN officials have generally led the follow-up efforts for coordination and reporting. But the reality is much more complicated. No single individual or organization is responsible for achieving the MDGs. Instead, countless public, private, and nonprofit actors-working together and independently, in developed and developing countries have furthered the goals. Amid this complexity, the achievements toward reaching the MDGs are more impressive. The goals have brought the diffuse international development community closer together.

Before the MDGs were crafted, there was no common framework for promoting global development. There is when the discussion of a strategically, comprehensive, and participatory worldwide development goals came in. The MDGs have been successful in framing the conversation on poverty eradication and development. The format of the MDGs was specific, measurable, easy to grasp and communicate[45].

In the pursuit of a more holistic approach following the MDGs, specific individuals and their team have been at the forefront of discussions concerning the goals designed to catalyze transformative change through sustainable development. My choices of names to put in this work are based solely on their assignment in leading the SDG elaboration and on their influence in what came to be the 17 goals[46]. Despite having more than three people involved,

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[43] https://www.economist.com/leaders/2015/03/26/the-169-commandments
[44] Cite UN key documents, reports, action plans that served as a source for the text
[45] Abhijit Banerjee, Professor of International Economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, keynote speech.
[46] Disclaimer: unfortunately, here I could have put easily at least one name of each country that participate in the

those are what I have personally considered the trinity during this process, and below I detail why.

Jeffrey David Sachs is widely recognized for bold strategies and speeches to address complex challenges including debt crises, hyperinflation, the transition from central planning to market economies, the control of AIDS, malaria, and other diseases, the escape from extreme poverty, and the battle against human-induced climate change[47]. He has done more than any single individual to move the issue of global poverty into the mainstream, or in other words, he was capable to make this issue as a public agenda following the five-step model.

Reality: As a world-renowned economics professor and global leader in sustainable development over the last 30 years, has played a pivotal role in addressing complex challenges over the past decades. His work spans various domains, including debt crises, disease control, poverty alleviation, and climate change.

Gatekeepers: As a trusted advisor to UN Secretaries-General, including Kofi Annan, Ban Ki-moon, and Antonio Guterres, Sachs has been a gatekeeper influencing the global development narrative. His roles as Director of the Center for Sustainable Development and President of the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network position him as a media guru shaping the agenda.

Strategic Framing: Sachs strategically frames sustainable development, advocating for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) during 2000-2015. His influential role in designing and launching initiatives such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria showcases his ability to frame global health challenges, which gave him credentials to do the same in other global issues presented in the 2030 agenda.

Public Agenda: Sachs' endeavors, such as chairing the UN Millennium Project and leading the Millennium Villages Project, contributed to the creation of a public agenda. Through research, advocacy, and practical projects, he distills complex development issues into tangible goals, emphasizing health, poverty reduction, and sustainable agriculture.

Policy Agenda: The culmination of Sachs' efforts reflects in the policy agenda, where he advises governments, serves as an SDG Advocate, and directs regional centers of excellence for the SDGs. The SDGs become a priority on the policy agenda, with Sachs actively

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OWG discussions, plus many other technical specialists that gave inputs for the discussions to happen, however, that could be a thesis for itself and in my work that is not the focus. With these names, an interested reader can eventually search who else influenced and actively participated in elaborating the SDGs.

[47] https://www.jeffsachs.org/. Accessed on July 3, 2024.

engaging with governments, international organizations, and regional centers to implement sustainable development strategies.

In summary, he exemplifies the five-step model, translating the realities of global challenges into actionable policies. As a gatekeeper and strategic framer, he contributes to the creation of public and policy agendas that prioritize sustainable development, making him a key figure in making the SDGs what they came to be.

Jeffrey Sachs has made significant contributions to the United Nations' attainment and consolidation of status by aligning with key principles defining status as a high rank or social position based on acceptance, deference, and prestige by peers. His pivotal role in addressing global challenges, particularly in sustainable development, poverty alleviation, and disease control, has played a crucial part in elevating the UN's standing.

A fundamental principle underlying the UN's status gain was Sachs' unwavering commitment to the organization's goals and mission, where he actively shaped them. Serving as a Special Advisor to multiple UN Secretaries-General and taking on leadership roles within the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, Sachs utilized his academic acumen to contribute to the UN's recognition as a knowledge hub and influencer in international affairs.

Sachs also strategically promoted key "status markers" that enhanced the UN's prestige with member state countries. Firstly, he emphasized the UN's Influence and Authority by championing its role in convening high-level meetings and summits on global governance and development. Over the last decade, Sachs advocated for the UN as the captain institution responsible for establishing and overseeing the implementation of global development goals, particularly highlighting its role in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Secondly, Sachs contributed to enhancing the UN's Expertise by being a living case of the necessity of offering attractive remuneration packages, competitive pay, and benefits for its employees and high-level consultants. This strategic investment in technical expertise and human capital positioned the UN as a leading knowledge hub for the development of policies and programs, serving as a framework for the joint promotion of sustainable development.

Lastly, Sachs reinforced the UN's legitimacy and credibility by highlighting its unique position as the only forum where almost all nations come together to discuss and address global challenges. While acknowledging perceived challenges such as an inability to enforce decisions and a complex bureaucracy, Sachs underscored its role as a platform for promoting international cooperation and dialogue among countries with diverse backgrounds, interests, and priorities. His experience serving as an advisor to several Global South governments,

including Bolivia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania, among others, further bolstered this aspect.

Ban Ki-moon, who served two consecutive terms as the Secretary-General of the United Nations from 2007 to 2016, brought a wealth of diplomatic experience to his role. Prior to his appointment at the UN, he held the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade of the Republic of Korea, accumulating 37 years of service with the Ministry. His diverse responsibilities included posts in New Delhi, Washington D.C., and Vienna, coupled with roles such as Foreign Policy Adviser to the President, Chief National Security Adviser to the President, Vice Minister, Deputy Minister for Policy Planning, and Director-General for American Affairs[48]. This extensive background equipped him with a nuanced understanding of diplomatic intricacies, particularly at a time where an Asian Secretary-General capable of navigating the global dynamics and fostering cooperation between the United States and China was needed, as the hegemonic power cycle was shifting to the East.

In 2010, during a summit meeting, member states entrusted Mr. Ban Ki-moon with the task of developing a set of proposals. This marked the commencement of extensive outreach to member states, initiating his march to regaining UN's prestige (see more in item 1.1), which was achieved by sharing its expertise, skills, and socially valued achievements.

The pivotal Rio+20 summit meeting in 2012, held in Rio de Janeiro, became the platform for discussions on the successor to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). By 2012, three years before the MDG target year, efforts were already underway to conceptualize the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Seeking a broad spectrum of perspectives, Mr. Ban Ki-moon's team engaged with nine million individuals globally, spanning various demographics, including young people, women, individuals with disabilities, politicians, business figures, and academics. The resultant diverse responses, primarily from ordinary citizens rather than government officials, provided a substantial pool of ideas, culminating in the formulation of 17 representative goals—an innovative approach that Mr. Ban Ki-moon could rightfully take pride in.

Government officials played a crucial role in this process, contributing significantly to the negotiations. A preparatory committee, led by both developing and developed countries, engaged in intense deliberations. The SDGs, adopted by UN member states in 2012, condensed extensive recommendations into a concise 35-page document, representing a milestone in sustainable development efforts. In 2013, another summit meeting convened to

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[48] https://bankimooncentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Ban-Ki-moon-Long-Biography.pdf

address the Millennium Development Goals and the SDGs, with member states mandating further recommendations as the 2015 target year approached.

In the culmination of these diplomatic endeavors, Ban Ki-moon emerged as the decisive leader, steering the international community towards two remarkable achievements—the formulation and adoption of the SDGs. As the primary driver behind the SDGs, Ban Ki-moon's leadership played a pivotal role in presenting the world with the most scientific, comprehensive, and ambitious set of goals in the history of the United Nations. His commitment and strategic guidance, which involved artists, religious leaders, and prestigious global influencers, were instrumental in navigating complex negotiations, bringing together diverse stakeholders, and putting the UN once again in the top shelf institution in leading messianic frameworks for humanities well-being and sustainable progress.

Paula Caballero, during her tenure as the Director of Economic, Social, and Environmental Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Colombia, played a pivotal role in the preparatory process for the Rio+20 conference. In response to a 2010 survey from the UN sent to all governments, she critically evaluated the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), acknowledging their transformative impact on key development priorities while recognizing their limitations. Dissatisfied with the MDGs' perceived imperfections, she proposed a novel metric that would address the multifaceted nature of development challenges. This metric aimed to acknowledge the interplay between social, economic, and environmental factors, emphasizing the impossibility of addressing social challenges without considering their economic and environmental drivers and opportunities (Donoghue, D., Dodds, F., & Leiva Roesch, J., 2016).

Distinctively, Caballero[49] advocated for universal applicability of these goals, a departure from the MDGs' targeted focus. Despite Rio+20's original emphasis on environmental issues, Caballero's innovative proposal encountered resistance due to concerns about parallel tracks emerging from the conference—one for the MDGs and another for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The initial reluctance to integrate SDGs with the MDGs led to apprehensions that funding might be jeopardized, and that the proposal could divert attention from crucial issues central to Rio+20.

Despite facing objections from various quarters, Caballero persevered, engaging in international forums to present the SDG concept. The turning point came during an informal consultation hosted by Colombia in Bogota in November 2011, where over forty countries,

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[49] Donoghue, D., Dodds, F., & Leiva Roesch, J. (2016). Negotiating the Sustainable Development Goals: A Transformational Agenda for an Insecure World (p.17-18). Routledge.

including influential representatives from different regions, participated. This event marked a crucial juncture in gaining traction for the SDG proposal[50]. Subsequent meetings, notably during the 17th Climate Conference (COP17) in Durban, South Africa, demonstrated a growing inclination towards universal applicability in international agreements.

After a final consultation in New York before Rio+20, a revised version of the SDGs was presented, attracting significant attention and endorsements, with Peru officially supporting the proposal. The inclusion of SDGs in the "zero draft" of the Rio+20 outcome document in January 2022 was a notable victory. However, negotiations leading up to Rio+20 revealed the ambitious nature of achieving a full set of SDGs, prompting a strategic shift for Colombia, Guatemala, and Peru.

> "what was really exciting, a watershed in fact, were the conversations in the hallways. There were many bilaterals, with countries from various regions, who wanted to understand the proposal better and who had started to see this as a real possibility for Rio+20. I remember a very rich and long onversation with the entire EU delegation. During one of these meetings, the representative of Guatemala, Rita Mishaan, confirmed her Government's interest in supporting this proposal. Many CSO's and NGOs were warmly encouraging and asked that Colombia hold the course. It was the first time that there was a real sense of hope that the proposal might prosper."[51]
>
> Paula Caballero

The endgame for these countries shifted to securing agreement on the concept of SDGs, defining preliminary issue areas, and establishing a negotiation process beyond Rio+20. To garner support, Vice Minister Londoño targeted developing countries, particularly the Group of 77 and China, while Caballero and Londoño presented the SDGs to the Indian Government and gained the support of the Community of Latin America and Caribbean States (CELAC). With Brazil leading the way as the host of Rio+20, the negotiation process gained momentum, resulting in endorsements from Peru and the UAE (Donoghue, D., Dodds, F., & Leiva Roesch, J., 2016).

Paula Caballero's pivotal role in challenging the status quo of global goal setting, making goals applicable to all countries, has positioned her as the driving force behind the SDGs. Her efforts addressed critical concerns, including unsustainable consumption patterns, the impact

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[50] https://impakter.com/short-history-sdgs/
[51] https://impakter.com/short-history-sdgs/

of climate change on developing countries and on the planet, the integration of economic and environmental dimensions, and the necessity of broadening consensus across society. In essence, Paula Caballero emerged as the architect and advocate of a new approach to global governance through country-reality-fit goals, solidifying her as the "mother" of the Sustainable Development Goals[52].

3.2 SDGs' patchwork

To enhance the analysis of the SDGs' formation through agenda setting, status-seeking, and governance-through-goals, it is useful to contextualize how these theories illuminate the processes and motivations that led to the formalization of the SDGs within the framework of the Open Working Group (OWG). This prioritization is evident in the Rio+20 outcome document, The Future We Want, which articulated a mandate for the SDGs that would harmonize with the UN development agenda post-2015, demonstrating a deliberate approach to reinforce a sustainable development framework. The document, inter alia, set out a mandate to establish an Open Working Group to develop a set of sustainable development goals for consideration and appropriate action by the General Assembly at its 68th session. It also provided the basis for their conceptualization[53].

The formation of the SDGs also reflects a significant spillover effect from the Global South's aspirations for greater influence and visibility on the global stage, underpinned by a strong commitment to addressing pressing global challenges through comprehensive governance frameworks. Colombia's diplomatic acumen did the hardest part: laid foundational concepts for the SDGs, while Brazil's rising prominence at the end of the first decade of the 21st century positioned it as the "marketing face" of the Global South. Brazil symbolized the region's potential and commitment to development-oriented leadership, positioning the Global South as an active shaper of global development norms rather than a passive participant, as it was "taking off".

Agenda setting theory helps explain how key – issues were prioritized in the creation of the SDGs, where certain global challengessuch as poverty, climate change, and social inequality – were highlighted to secure international consensus and ensure these goals remained a central focus within the UN's broader development agenda. Status-seeking, another critical lens in this analysis, provides insight into the underlying incentives for

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[52] https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/09/who-came-up-with-the-sustainable-development-goals/
[53] https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/focussdgs.html

member states and the UN as an institution to adopt the SDGs as a means of reaffirming their commitment to global leadership in development. The collaborative processes within the OWG, where countries and stakeholders contributed to the SDGs' content, can be seen as a collective move to enhance the UN's legitimacy and leadership in setting normative standards for sustainable development. By including a comprehensive array of themes across social, economic, and environmental dimensions, the UN sought to elevate its role as the chief architect of an inclusive and universally relevant development agenda, thereby aligning with its broader goal of sustaining a central status in global governance. The Global South's status-driven efforts within the OWG ultimately helped secure a universally accepted set of goals that would address poverty, inequality, climate change, and more, reinforcing the UN's standing as the primary arbiter of a new sustainable development framework.

The governance through goals approach further captures how the SDGs were crafted to create a unifying framework, which, rather than mandating binding actions, serves as a set of aspirational objectives that member states can align with based on their own priorities and capacities. This goal-oriented governance, as noted by Wu Hongbo, Under Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, recognizes the SDGs' potential to complement the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by establishing a platform that both builds on past achievements and addresses new challenges. Through this structure, the SDGs are designed to facilitate coordinated efforts across diverse regions and sectors, aiming for a form of governance that is adaptable, encourages accountability, and can drive cumulative progress over time.

Below, I provide a synthesized analysis of each pertinent thematic discussion within the Open Working Group (OWG) leading up to its establishment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This examination aims to encapsulate the key deliberations and considerations that shaped the formulation of the SDGs, reflecting the commitment to addressing a diverse array of global challenges in a comprehensive and sustainable manner. The OWG's journey from thematic discussions to the establishment of the SDGs represents a collaborative effort to create a universal framework for development that encompasses economic, social, and environmental dimensions.

3.2.1 No poverty (OWG second session)

Poverty eradication remained the overarching objective for sustainable development, and there was agreement that poverty eradication should be at the core of the SDG framework. Many stressed that proper attention should be given to the multidimensional nature of

poverty. Many countries insisted that the SDGs were about integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development, with poverty eradication the overarching objective and building upon the MDGs (Second Meeting of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, 2014).On Thursday (18 April, 2013), Abhijit Banerjee, Professor of International Economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, provided the keynote speech, stating that the OWG had the potential to make an enormous difference in future poverty eradication efforts (Second Meeting of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, 2014).

In the MDGs 1 – extreme poverty and hunger – are strongly linked, since each of these is associated with well-defined indicators, and targets are defined in terms of desired value of the indicators relative to their starting points. Although limited in many ways, these indicators and targets for MDG1 retain the virtues of simplicity, objective measurability, easy communicability and – as shown through experience – ease of adaptability to country circumstances. It may be desirable for poverty SDG(s) to retain such characteristics – although in order to achieve eradication, the target(s) would most likely be set in absolute and not relative terms, include non-income dimensions, and encourage disaggregation in order better to understand and address various forms of inequality[54]

There was increasing agreement that the OWG (discussions) needed to go beyond rudimentary measurements and address the multi-dimensional nature of poverty and its inter-linkages to achieve a true paradigm shift for the SDGs.

Co-Chair Kamau noted the emerging consensus to place poverty eradication as the overarching goal of the SDGs. As important as that is, he suggested that poverty eradication could be seen as the starting point of the post-2015 agenda, which should aim at even greater ambition – namely, the transformative change needed to put all countries on a truly sustainable development path, one that secures the irreversibility of social and economic development gains, the well-being of both present and future generations[55].

3.2.2 Zero hunger (OWG Third session)

On the cluster of food security, nutrition, land degradation, desertification and drought, a strong SDG on food security and agriculture was seen as key to poverty eradication and sustainable development. One participant highlighted, that those who face the daily scourge of hunger, the very poor, also face each day struggling for human dignity in a world where

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[54] Technical Support Team issue on Poverty Eradication
[55] Summary OWG – Summary 2nd meeting

they are treated as though the world would be better off without them. Agricultural job creation was also highlighted as a means for poverty eradication. The right to food as a basic human right was emphasized by many along with governments' particular responsibility for ensuring freedom from hunger[56]. Major Groups and other stakeholders also stressed that the whole food chain matters to food security as well as to sustainability; each link must be geared to meeting people's needs for affordable, nutritious food in ways that are environmentally sound. This required consideration of the full food life cycle, including minimization of pre and post-harvest losses and food waste[57]

A common theme during OWG-3 was the need to address cross-sectoral links in a way that promotes inter-ministerial cooperation at the national level as well as cooperation at the international level. This discussion will likely continue at upcoming OWG meetings. Other issues for continued discussion are the importance of building on the lessons learned from the MDGs, the drawbacks of the "siloed" approach, and continual "re-inventing of the wheel."[58]

As the meeting concluded, several participants were cautiously optimistic that this process had the potential to finally define and operationalize sustainable development. However, others warned that it is still early in the process and success is far from certain. While OWG-3 was a step in the right direction, there are still five more sessions ahead where participants will continue to examine and organize the puzzle pieces before negotiations begin and the SDG puzzle will be pieced together.

3.2.3 Good health and well-being (OWG fourth session)

Anarfi Asamoa-Baah, Deputy Director-General, World Health Organization (WHO), argued the importance of health in the development agenda was not in dispute. He observed that consensus is emerging on a single overarching goal in the SDGs, rather than multiple health goals as in the MDGs. He suggested the overarching goal: could be phrased as "maximizing health at all stages of life"; should continue efforts toward the areas addressed by the MDGs; and add NCDs, cover social and economic determinants of health, include all age groups, and address the cost of care.

A WHO representative presented the issues brief on health. She stressed that health is not only a contributor to sustainable development, but also a beneficiary, and should be considered as a key indicator of progress. She said the progress in global health in the MDGs has not been equitable across regions. She proposed maximizing healthy lives and accelerating MDG progress by prioritizing a global health goal.

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[56] OWG_22-24 May 2013_Co-chair meeting with major groups and other stakeholders
[57] OWG_22-24 May 2013_Co-chair meeting with major groups and other stakeholders
[58] https://enb.iisd.org/events/3rd-session-un-general-assemblys-unga-owg-sdgs/summary-report-22-24-may-2013#analysis-heading

3.2.4 Quality Education (OWG fourth session)

There was increasing agreement that the OWG (discussions) needed to go beyond rudimentary measurements and address the multi-dimensional nature of poverty and its inter-linkages to achieve a true paradigm shift for the SDGs.

The unfinished business of the MDGs was a running theme, particularly when it came to the issues of health and education. Delegates pushed the panelists, and each other, to identify the shortcomings of the current goals, and proposed innovative ideas for the future SDGs. Equity, quality, universality, and human rights were repeatedly referenced as key concepts that must frame any new goals and targets.

On education, many delegations began to formulate ideas on goals to ensure good quality education, lifelong learning, and the development of vocational and transferable skills—all issues that were not addressed in the MDGs.

Jorge Sequeira, from the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), introduced the TST Issues Brief on "Education and Culture." He called for the SDGs to include education as a cross-cutting issue across all goals, as well as a specific goal to achieve "equitable, quality, lifelong education for all." He said the new framework must acknowledge culture, a neglected topic, as a driver for sustainable development.

3.2.5 Clean water and sanitation (OWG third session)

Initially based on the discussion of the second sustainable development goal, many participants stressed that the possible goal on water and sanitation should be firmly based in the human right to safe drinking water that can be found also in the Rio+20 Outcome document. It was stressed that the SDGs should tackle water issues from a wider angle than the MDGs have done and also include water efficiency, wastewater treatment, integrated water management, trans-boundary waters, among others.

The issue of whether water and sanitation should be addressed in a single goal, or as a target under many others was tackled by several speakers. They stressed that water and sanitation should have a standalone goal, but also hoped that due to its strong interlinkages with energy, food and agriculture, health, education, among others, it should be reflected in sub-targets for such goals. Stakeholders stressed that choosing proper targets, indicators and monitoring schemes is vital in order to avoid unnecessary tradeoffs. With the sanitation MDG, shared latrines were excluded from the Joint Monitoring Programme to avoid double accounting. At the same time this also meant that in the implementation phase actors were

less incentivized to invest in public latrines in schools and hospitals. On sanitation, several stakeholders noted that universal access to safe water and sanitation could be achieved, provided there was additional effort to meet the sanitation target of the MDGs, which had been lagging behind (Third Meeting of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, 2014).

They also highlighted that women and girls should be prioritized when setting the goals, especially regarding privacy issues and menstrual hygiene and their link to girls' school attendance. Speakers also raised the need to take into consideration the special needs of vulnerable groups, persons with disabilities and indigenous peoples.[59]

3.2.6 Affordable and clean energy (OWG fifth session)

As H.E. Mr. Macharia Kamau of Kenya, summarized that the four sessions so far, have covered mainly the social (MDG-related) agenda of SDGs. The consensus until this point was that the goals needed to build on MDGs, be few in number, easy to communicate, and universal while recognizing different national priorities. They should also address social, economic and environmental dimensions in a balanced way. Now, however, the upcoming four sessions (starting with the discussion of sustained and inclusive economic growth, infrastructure development and industrialization, macroeconomic policy, and the topic of energy) dealt with much more challenging issues such as economic growth, means of implementation, climate change, inequality, the right to development, human rights and governance.

The discussions underscored the pivotal role of energy in fostering sustainable development and concurrently addressing the formidable challenges of poverty eradication and climate change mitigation. Recognizing energy's dual significance, consensus emerged on the imperative integration of energy into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the post-2015 development agenda. A pervasive theme among participating nations was the intricate interlinkages between energy and diverse development facets such as food security, water, health, women's empowerment, and education.

A prevalent sentiment among the majority of countries was the advocacy for a dedicated energy goal within the post-2015 development agenda. This envisioned goal aimed at incorporating targets from the Sustainable Energy for All Initiative (SE4ALL), specifically targeting universal access to energy, doubling the proportion of renewables in the global

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[59] OWG_22-24 May 2013_Co-chair meeting with major groups and other stakeholders

energy mix, and accelerating improvements in energy efficiency by 2030. However, a nuanced perspective from many developing nations, including Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS), emphasized the need for an integrated approach, acknowledging the diverse energy needs across countries and development pathways.

Universal access to energy emerged as a priority for numerous developing countries, particularly LDCs, with an emphasis on the integration of renewable sources alongside traditional energy sources during the transition to low-carbon energy systems. Countries collectively recognized the imperative to address climate change, viewing it as an opportunity to shift towards sustainable, low-carbon energy pathways. This paradigm shift, leveraging renewable resources such as solar, wind, and geothermal power, was seen as essential to navigating future energy demands while mitigating negative environmental impacts.

Social inclusion took center stage in the discussions, with a strong emphasis on ensuring that future Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are inclusive of the poorest and most marginalized, notably women and children. The discourse underscored the pivotal role of decentralized and small-scale energy options in meeting the needs of the 2.6 billion people categorized as energy poor, the majority residing in rural areas beyond the conventional grid (Fifth Meeting of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, 2014) Moreover, participants highlighted the critical role of technology transfer, capacity building, innovative funding mechanisms, and the right policy framework for developing countries to transition toward low-carbon development pathways without compromising energy access for the poor. An underlying theme was the rejection of any trade-off between providing modern energy access to the impoverished and greenhouse gas mitigation.

Lastly, the discussions delved into the challenges faced by Indigenous Peoples due to major alternative energy projects. Issues raised included displacement, destruction of livelihoods, human rights violations, and long-term environmental impacts. A consensus emerged on the necessity to consider these factors, ensuring community participation, ownership, and full stakeholder involvement in energy projects, thereby emphasizing an integrated and holistic approach to sustainable development.

3.2.7 Decent work and economic growth (OWG fourth session)

Greg Vines, Deputy Director-General, International Labour Organization (ILO), introduced the TST's Issues Brief on "Employment and Decent Work." Its recommendations

include improve labor market statistical information; focus on job quality and productivity; a labor market perspective on environmental sustainability; a holistic policy approach; and a full international dimension.

Vines stated that the current lingering economic and social crisis is a concern for families and communities. He said the UN needs to address these fears and that the move towards a sustainable future will require major transformations in how people make their living. He emphasized that closing the gap between young job seekers and available jobs is a top priority and that improved training must build on good education, but children "can't learn when they are hungry" (Fourth Meeting of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, 2014).

3.2.8 Industry, innovation and infrastructure (OWG fifth session)

Economic growth, recognized as a fundamental prerequisite for poverty eradication, emerged as the primary focus, with a commitment to inclusive, sustained, and sustainable growth. The overarching objective remained the reduction of inequalities within and between countries to facilitate the dual goals of poverty eradication and shared prosperity. The discussions acknowledged the transformative impact of rapid and enduring growth in various emerging economies, delineating new realities and possibilities within the global economic landscape.

Industrialization was identified as a pivotal driver for productivity growth and job creation, prompting the proposal for inclusive growth and sustainable industrialization as key goals. The discourse emphasized the importance of resource efficiency, decoupling, and green growth to align industrialization with environmental sustainability. Notably, countries in Africa underscored the imperative of economic diversification, transitioning from reliance on primary commodity exports to value addition. This shift necessitates strengthening productive capacities and technological capabilities, with a particular focus on integrating small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) into national and global value chains as engines for job creation (Fifth Meeting of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, 2014).

Infrastructure was highlighted as a linchpin for industrialization, rural and urban development, with a call for universal access to quality infrastructure, including transport, energy, water, and communications. Successful industrialization policies in newly industrialized countries were attributed to efficient internal financial resource mobilization, underlining the importance of a robust economic framework. Sound domestic

macroeconomic policies were deemed essential for sustained, inclusive, and sustainable growth and development, necessitating support through a revamped global partnership and an enabling international environment (Fifth Meeting of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, 2014).

Despite progress with debt relief, external debt sustainability remained a concern for several countries, warranting continued attention. The role of trade as a growth driver was emphasized, with a call for maintaining and enhancing an open, fair, rule-based, predictable, and nondiscriminatory trading system. Efforts to curb illicit financial flows and tax havens were underscored, with a focus on enhancing domestic revenue mobilization, particularly from the extractive sector in developing countries. The discussions recognized the intricate interplay of economic policies, international partnerships, and global frameworks in fostering sustained and inclusive economic growth.

OWG-5 participants generally agreed on the necessity of industrialization and structural transformation in developing nations. They recognized the threats posed by unregulated global financial markets and sovereign debt. Key factors consistently highlighted for development and poverty eradication included open and rules-based trade, conducive investment environments, and the imperative of truly inclusive growth. Despite this consensus, questions arose among delegates about how to incorporate macroeconomic and growth policies into the new development goals.

Jagdish Bhagwati of Columbia University prompted the group to consider whether these issues were suitable as goal frameworks or are more appropriately treated as general policy priorities, serving as instruments rather than goals. Many delegations echoed this distinction, pondering the feasibility of framing economic ambitions as specific goals. Additionally, while some states recognized links between the economic dimension of sustainable development and poverty eradication, few speakers addressed potential trade-offs between economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion.

3.2.9 Reduced inequalities (OWG fourth session)

Greg Vines presented the TST Issues Brief on "Social Protection," and emphasized the powerful contribution that this issue could make for development. He described the report's recommendation for national "social protection floor" policies, which could address the symptoms and structural causes of poverty, reduce inequalities and vulnerability, empower women and girls, and realize human rights.

Sustainable urbanization emerged as a critical component of the discussion, recognizing that cities, accommodating approximately 40% of the global population, consume about 75% of natural resources. This acknowledgment underscored the indispensability of sustainable cities and human settlements for overall sustainable development, intertwined with various facets like consumption and production patterns, employment, transportation, energy, and sanitation. The importance of collaborative efforts involving local governments, civil society, and both private and public sectors was underscored, highlighting the need for a mobilized approach by all stakeholders. Several speakers advocated for a dedicated Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) on urbanization, emphasizing the requirement for localization, demand-driven applicability, and participatory, inclusive, and transparent governance.

The discourse emphasized sustainable urbanization as a dynamic process, involving a reciprocal interchange between rural and urban areas. The imperative to address the needs of the urban poor and implement social protection measures for equitable human development gained prominence. In a subsequent session focused on sustainable transportation, speakers highlighted the overlooked role of transportation in the design of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and its potential as an enabler for the SDGs. Sustainable, accessible, reliable, and safe transportation was recognized for its impact on reducing road accidents, air pollution, carbon emissions, and improving job opportunities and school enrollment rates.

The importance of technology and policy development synergy was stressed, with existing technologies offering opportunities, such as fuel-efficient vehicles and collaborative transport models like car and bike sharing. Transportation, viewed as a connectivity issue, needed to consider the human dimension, ensuring equitable access for all citizens, including those with disabilities, women, children, and the elderly. Sustainable transportation was positioned not only as an urban concern but also as a multi-dimensional issue encompassing local, regional, national, and global levels with a system-wide approach.

In the broader context, the discussions emphasized that the battle for sustainable development would be won or lost in cities, particularly in addressing the needs of the urban poor in informal settlements and slums. The interconnectedness of cities with larger regions and their ties to peri-urban and rural areas highlighted the need for balanced territorial development within the SDGs framework. The cross-cutting nature of sustainable cities and human settlements necessitated an integrated approach addressing linkages with other sustainable development issues. Key factors contributing to sustainable cities were outlined,

including effective urban design, affordable housing, infrastructure development, sound finances, and policies fostering economic dynamism and social inclusion. Social inclusion was deemed integral, emphasizing the need to overcome restrictions faced by vulnerable marginalized groups. Additionally, transportation's crucial role in sustainable development was acknowledged, with calls for ensuring access to safe, affordable, and environmentally friendly transportation for all through smarter land use planning, improved access to ICT, and a shift towards public and non-motorized transport modes.

3.2.11 Responsible consumption and production (OWG seventh session)

The third day of the session centered on sustainable consumption and production (SCP), emphasizing its relevance for the global population of 7 billion. The overarching goal was to ensure that everyone can lead fulfilling lives within the Earth's resource and carrying capacity limits, advocating for a shift from minimizing negatives to embracing positive options. The discussions highlighted the pivotal role of changing consumption patterns, emphasizing that without such changes, SDGs related to food, energy, water, oceans, and biodiversity would lack enduring impact. Efficiency measures were acknowledged as crucial, but there was a consensus on the need for transformative thinking towards more environmentally sustainable and healthy diets, going beyond mere focus on production efficiency.

Corporate sustainability reporting, especially for large multinational enterprises, was proposed as obligatory, with eco-labeling of products identified as a means to induce behavioral change in consumption patterns. The complex issue of chemicals was emphasized, acknowledging its broader impact on health, food security, land use, sustainable cities, extractive industries, governance, and Indigenous People's rights. While cautioning against a blanket ban on hazardous chemicals, the discussions recognized the sound use of chemicals in areas like medicine, water purification, and housing as solutions to sustainable development challenges.

Debates around SCP's incorporation into the SDGs framework revealed differing opinions. Some delegations favored a stand-alone goal, while others suggested integrating SCP under relevant goals in areas such as energy, water, sanitation, food, agriculture, and health. The cross-cutting nature of SCP received recognition, with proposals for targets on decoupling resource use from economic growth. The implementation of the 10-year framework of programs on sustainable consumption and production (10YFP), established at Rio+20, garnered support, with calls for early and generous contributions to its trust fund.

The importance of sustainable procurement, fiscal instruments, education, awareness-raising, voluntary certification schemes, regulations, standards, and legislation were emphasized as a mix of policies needed to promote SCP. Existing agreements called on developed countries to lead in shifting towards sustainable consumption and production, acknowledging developing countries' leadership in certain areas like renewable energy. The critical role of product design in life cycle management, recycling, and reuse was underscored, with the private sector identified as a key player. Labelling schemes were seen as useful tools, but caution and capacity building were urged to avoid disadvantaging developing country producers.

Addressing the nexus between harmful chemicals and vulnerable populations, particularly in developing countries, discussions highlighted the lack of capacity for sustainable chemical and waste management. Reaffirming commitments to relevant conventions and referencing the SAICM 2020 target were proposed as reference points for possible SDG targets related to chemicals. Overall, the discussions emphasized the centrality of SCP in sustainable development, poverty eradication, and the protection of natural resources and ecosystems.

3.2.12 Climate action (OWG seventh session)

On the fourth day of the session, climate change emerged as a predominant concern, acknowledged as the foremost challenge of our times. Speakers underscored that climate change jeopardized progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), emphasizing that without addressing climate change, the success of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) remained unattainable. While recognizing that the SDGs were not meant to substitute UNFCCC negotiations, there was a strong plea to incorporate climate change in the SDGs, either as a stand-alone goal or integrated into specific targets like energy, food, water, cities, growth, jobs, and resilience. Omitting climate change from the SDGs was deemed to convey a misleading signal to the world (Seventh Meeting of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, 2014). It was, in my opinion, one of the gravest mistakes of the Millenium Agenda.

The importance of a binding climate agreement under UNFCCC was stressed to achieve the 2C-degree target, with actions catalyzed by the SDGs seen fundamental for bridging the gap between 2015 and 2020. A call for a robust goal on sustainable cities or urbanization with a climate component gained traction, recognizing the city level as a crucial arena for effective climate mitigation and adaptation.

Addressing the vulnerability of women, particularly poor rural women, to climate change's negative impacts and natural disasters, discussions highlighted the need for policy planning that considered their unique challenges. The session also tackled disaster risk reduction on its last day, emphasizing the importance of tools for calculating risks and advocating for a political decision on acceptable risk levels. While acknowledging existing science and technology to make development less risky for the poor and vulnerable, participants expressed concern about the inadequate scale of implementation. Some advocated for a disaster risk reduction target focusing on reducing casualties and building community resilience (Seventh Meeting of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, 2014).

The discussions stressed the interconnected nature of climate change and disaster risks, advocating strong actions on climate change mitigation and adaptation as effective means of reducing disaster risks. The urgency of these actions was widely recognized, with climate change perceived as an existential threat for some countries (Seventh Meeting of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, 2014). The support for addressing climate change as a cross-cutting issue without a stand-alone goal was widespread, aligning with principles of equity and common but differentiated responsibilities under the UNFCCC. Targets reflecting challenges in building resilient infrastructure, protecting forests, ensuring sustainable energy, food security, water management, sustainable consumption and production, and promoting low-carbon development paths received substantial support. The role of means of implementation was underscored, emphasizing the need for strong governance and lessons learned from indigenous knowledge in addressing climate change and disaster risks (Seventh Meeting of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, 2014).

3.2.14 Life below water (OWG eight session)

The integration of oceans, seas, and coastal areas into Earth's ecosystem and the legal framework provided by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) were acknowledged. While many targets for oceans have been agreed upon, progress on implementation remained limited. References were made to existing instruments, including the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries and the CBD's three objectives, which could be incorporated into SDGs.

At first, discussing about the ocean was not a unanimity. While some stressed that there was already a consensus on the access to water, others stated that there were already law of

the sea treaties. However, the disproportionate impact of unsustainable resource management on poor and vulnerable groups was emphasized, prompting calls for capacity building, technology transfer, and financing. Science-based policy-making, partnerships, and multi-stakeholder participation were recognized as crucial for implementing sustainable resource management. Participants highlighted the need for new incentives to address ecosystem degradation, acknowledging the accelerating rate of new insights compared to policy development.

Detailed discussions centered on addressing overfishing and Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, with a consensus that traditional fisheries management incentives needed realignment. New approaches, such as annual catch limits with enforceable timetables, were proposed. Initiatives like the Forever Fish program, allocating a fraction of the catch to communities or individuals, were highlighted as effective in aligning short- and long-term incentives (Eighth Meeting of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, 2014).

Addressing perverse incentives leading to deforestation was also emphasized, suggesting the reduction of taxes in forestry sectors and offering cash payments for ecosystem services. Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) reiterated the need for financial and technical assistance in sustainably utilizing their natural resources.

A common call for addressing global commons challenges, such as fisheries on the high seas, biodiversity, and climate change, emerged. Possible instruments, including rights-based management and new technologies like satellite imagery to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, were discussed. The need for coherent and integrated SDGs at both national and international levels was underscored, reflecting a lesson learned from the MDGs.

3.2.15 Life on land (OWG eight session)

Forests play a pivotal role in providing essential resources such as wood, water, medicines, and livelihoods, while also contributing to ecosystem stability, carbon storage, and other vital services. The importance of recognizing the living value of species beyond their commodity values was emphasized, acknowledging the direct and indirect contributions of biodiversity to the well-being of current and future generations.

The discussion highlighted the imperative to recognize and respect the rights of indigenous peoples and other forest dwellers, emphasizing their crucial role in sustainable forest management. Various proposals for goals and targets were presented, with some advocating for clustering oceans, forests, and biodiversity under a comprehensive goal on

healthy ecosystems. Others suggested stand-alone goals, particularly for oceans. Additionally, the cross-cutting nature of oceans, forests, and biodiversity was acknowledged, proposing the integration of related targets into other goal areas such as poverty eradication, food security, health, water, and disaster risk reduction. The disproportionate impact of unsustainable natural resource and ecosystem management on poor and vulnerable groups was underscored.

The OWG-8 discussion reflected a holistic approach, viewing forests, biodiversity, and oceans and seas not only as environmental challenges but also considering their economic, social, and cultural contributions to both local and global communities. While some advocated for a natural resources cluster or ecosystem approach, supporters of each issue argued for their individual "stand-alone" goals, emphasizing their unique contributions to overall well-being.

Furthermore, the discussion emphasized the necessity of addressing perverse incentives that promote deforestation. To shift the economic balance towards forest conservation, participants suggested reducing taxes in the forestry sectors and implementing cash payments for ecosystem services. This approach aims to make standing forests economically more valuable than clearing them. Additionally, the imperative for financial and technical assistance in the sustainable utilization of natural resources was reiterated by many Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and Least Developed Countries (LDCs). These nations stressed the importance of external support to navigate the challenges associated with sustainable management and ensure the equitable utilization of their rich natural resources. Finally, the idea of life on land and life below water was the terms chosen to gather support from the majority.

3.2.16 Peace, justice, and strong institutions (OWG eight session)

Addressing poverty comprehensively necessitates acknowledging and tackling its diverse causes. Participants in the OWG-8 discussions stressed that peace, rule of law, and governance are not only fundamental objectives in themselves but also crucial enablers for poverty eradication and sustainable development. Despite the acknowledged importance of peace-related elements, some emphasized that the OWG's focus should remain on the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. The discussions referenced documents like "The Future We Want," as outlined in the Rio+20 Outcome document and drew inspiration from the Millennium Declaration and the 2013 Special Event outcome.

It was widely underscored that conflict and violence pose significant obstacles to development, while peaceful societies are both foundational and resultant elements of sustainable development. Efforts to prevent conflicts and establish lasting peace should address structural drivers, promote participatory decision-making, inclusive economic governance, and equitable resource management. The severe and long-term impact of the lack of physical security on all development dimensions, including rising citizen insecurity, transnational organized crime, and illicit arms trade, was noted (Eighth Meeting of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, 2014).

Open and effective institutions were recognized as essential foundations for sustainable development, with transparency identified as a key component of governance. Some speakers highlighted the importance of inclusive economic growth, access to fair justice systems, and improved public service provision in the context of the rule of law. The international dimension of the rule of law was emphasized, with calls for reforms of international organizations to enhance legitimacy, transparency, accountability, and representation. The complex nature of measuring progress in peace and governance was acknowledged, with differing opinions on whether these issues should be dealt with through specific goals, in a cross-cutting manner, or not at all. The multidimensional nature of these discussions suggests that translating them into consensus goals, targets, and indicators would require diplomatic skills and careful navigation within the OWG.

3.2.17 Partnerships for the goals (OWG sixth session)

The meeting brought together OWG members and other Member States, observers and representatives from UN agencies and Major Groups to address the thematic issues of: means of implementation (science and technology, knowledge-sharing and capacity building); global partnership for achieving sustainable development; needs of countries in special situations, African countries, least developed countries (LDCs), landlocked developing countries (LLDCs), and small island developing states (SIDS) as well as specific challenges facing the middle-income countries; and human rights, the right to development, and global governance.

Initially structured with thirty members, the OWG aimed for an inclusive and transparent "input" stage, fostering discussions on sustainable development. While some participants found the process of listening to prepared statements tedious, others recognized its significance in allowing diverse perspectives to be heard. The seating format unintentionally

curtailed the influence of traditional coalitions, promoting a wider range of ideas. However, questions lingered about the effectiveness of these coalitions in constructive discussions after the initial eight sessions.

As the OWG concluded its first six meetings, attention shifted to a critical phase, requiring the identification of focused and coherent targets to support a limited number of goals. The Co-Chairs urged delegates to avoid broad political statements and concentrate on identifying targets. The path from inclusive views to agreed SDGs posed uncharted challenges, with the Co-Chairs outlining future steps, including five formal meetings post-"input" sessions. The narrative context provided by "The Future We Want" was favored, emphasizing the challenge of setting the international community on a new sustainable development path in 2014.

The evolution in sustainable development diplomacy through OWG's work reflects an acknowledgment of the changing international system. While addressing issues akin to the Rio conference, OWG-6 revealed an increasing resonance of external voices within the UN halls. The discussions showcased varying rates of evolution on different issues, with calls for new partnerships, a rights-based approach, and refreshed interpretations of principles like common but differentiated responsibilities. Distinctions in global partnership definitions emerged, with a shift toward thematic, multi-stakeholder partnerships for specific objectives.

As attention turned to 2015 and the new development agenda, OWG-6 speakers highlighted key events in 2014 that will contribute to the debate. The OWG Co-Chairs urged specificity and operationalization of ideas, signalling a potential shift in development partnership approaches. However, challenges lie in avoiding habitual lowest common denominator agreements and reliance on past negotiations on the path to 2015.

Table 2 – Sessions for the Sustainable Development Goal Establishment

First session; 14-15 March, 2013 – 2 DAYS
Election of officers, adoption of agenda
General discussion (2 days)
Second session; 17-19 April, 2013 – 3 DAYS
Conceptualizing the SDGs (1.5 days)
Poverty eradication (1.5 days)
Third session; 22-24 May, 2013 – 3 DAYS

Food security and nutrition, sustainable agriculture, desertification, land degradation and drought (1,5 days) Water and sanitation (1,5 days)
Fourth session; 17-19 June, 2013 – 3 DAYS
Employment and decent work for all, social protection, youth, education and culture (1.5 days) Health, population dynamics (1.5 days)
Fifth session; 25-27 November, 2013 – 3 DAYS
Sustained and inclusive economic growth, macroeconomic policy questions (including international trade, international financial system and external debt sustainability), infrastructure development and industrialization (1.5 days) Energy (1.5 days)
Sixth session; 9-13 December, 2013 – 5 DAYS
Means of implementation (science and technology, knowledge-sharing and capacity building); Global partnership for achieving sustainable development (2 days) Needs of countries in special situations, African countries, LDCs, LLDCs, and SIDS as well as specific challenges facing the middle-income countries (2 days)
Seventh session; 6-10 January, 2014 – 5 DAYS
Sustainable cities and human settlements, sustainable transport (2 days) Sustainable consumption and production (including chemicals and waste) (1.5 days) Climate change and disaster risk reduction (1.5 days)
Eight session; 3-7 February, 2014 – 5 DAYS
Oceans and seas, forests, biodiversity (2 days) Promoting equality, including social equity, gender equality and women's empowerment (1.5 days) Conflict prevention, post-conflict peacebuilding and the promotion of durable peace, rule of law and governance (1.5 days)
Nineth session; 3-5 March, 2014 – 3 DAYS
Shift from stocktaking to negotiations (3 days) In response to the nineteen focus areas as presented by the Co-Chairs on Sustainable

Development Goals, Major Groups and other Stakeholders made both constituency and thematic based presentations during the Ninth Session of the Open Working Group60.

Tenth session; 31 March-4 April, 2014 – 5 DAYS

Establishment of negotiation clusters and initial discussions and proposals of goals and targets for each of them (5 days)

Cluster 1
- Poverty eradication
- Promote equality

Cluster 2
- Gender equality and women's empowerment
- Education
- Employment and decent work for all
- Health and population dynamics

Cluster 3
- Water and sanitation
- Sustainable agriculture, food security, and nutrition

Cluster 4
- Economic growth
- Industrialization
- Infrastructure
- Energy

Cluster 5
- Sustainable cities and human settlements
- Promote Sustainable Consumption and Production
- Climate

Cluster 6
- Conservation and sustainable use of marine resources, oceans and seas
- Ecosystems and biodiversity

Cluster 7
- Means of implementation/Global partnership for sustainable development

Cluster 8
- Peaceful and non-violent societies, rule of law and capable institutions

Eleventh session; 5-9 May, 2014 – 5 DAYS61

Discussions on 150 potential targets and on focus areas related to the "unfinished business in the MDGs"—poverty eradication, food security, education, health, gender, and water (5 days)

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60 https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/3367OWG%209%20Summary%20Document-%20MGoS%20Inputs_March%2025_final.pdf
61 Based on the OWG-10 discussions, the Co-Chairs released a "working document" on 18 April, to guide delegates' preparation for OWG-11. The new document ('Encyclopedia Groupinica') contained 16 focus areas and approximately 150 targets.

Twelfth session; 16-20 June, 2014 – 5 DAYS[62]
Tradeoffs, formulations, and decisions to create a final set of SDGs and targets, all aimed at promoting balanced and sustainable development (5 days)
Thirteenth session; 14-19 July, 2014 – 6 DAYS
A set of proposed goals and targets has been outlined for presentation to the UN General Assembly (6 days)

Commencing an all-night session to meet the Friday, 18 July 2014 deadline for the Open Working Group's (OWG) task, co-chairs, sleep-deprived and weary after forty-eight hours of continuous work, convened the final meeting at around 1 a.m. on Saturday, 19 July. The room, filled with hundreds of equally fatigued delegates, awaited the outcome. Ambassador Kamau, uncertain of the meeting's trajectory, underscored the delicate equilibrium achieved in the text's final version. He conceded that attaining such balance through alternative means would have been nearly impossible.

While some restlessness prevailed over several issues, delegations, overall, accepted the document's imperfect yet balanced nature. Notably, the G77/China expressed regret over the exclusion of 'foreign occupation' from Goal 16, albeit acknowledged in the text's preamble. The co-chairs officially approved the text, receiving warm applause for the resulting agreement on seventeen Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets, set to be proposed to the General Assembly. The Kenyan and Hungarian ambassadors, along with their staff members Tobias Owgeno, Evens Maturu, Zsofia Tomaj, and Anna Reich, were warmly applauded with profound gratitude expressed.

As the OWG ended, one delegate aptly remarked that the end of this journey marked the beginning of the next. Despite the OWG's conclusion, broader negotiations on the overarching post-2015 development agenda were poised to commence shortly thereafter.[63]

In summary, throughout the Open Working Group (OWG) discussions, the co-chairs maintained a sharp focus on the principle of universality. While the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were global in scope, they lacked universal applicability. Despite a consensus on the importance of universality, developing countries highlighted the disparities in capacity and development levels across nations. Notable cleavages emerged, particularly regarding the

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[62] **In this session the number of 17 goals came to be.**
[63] Negotiating the Sustainable Development Goals, p. 44-46

goal on sustainable consumption and production, which tested (and now 5 years to 2030 is more and more lagging behind) the commitment to a truly universal agenda. Some Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasized a shift in responsibility towards the Global South (such as in education, water, and sanitation), while others, like responsible consumption and production, and decent work and economic growth, were more pertinent to the Global North.

The 2030 Agenda unequivocally states that all goals and targets are indivisible and should be implemented in an integrated manner. However, this new policy framework contrasts sharply with the United Nations' traditional and current modus operandi, characterized by working in silos and sectors. This raises a critical question: Is the UN equipped to implement the 2030 Agenda effectively[64]?

As Sommerer and Liese (2024) note, there is a lack of systematic, large-scale, comparative analyses of the quality of international organization (IO) outputs. While some researchers have explored the quality of specific policy development processes, such as certain agenda setting dimensions (e.g., Copelovitch, 2010; Binder & Golub, 2020; Lundgren et al., 2023), a comprehensive assessment of IO outputs remains necessary. The 2030 Agenda should not be exempt from such scrutiny. Although outlining a methodology for this analysis is beyond the scope of this work, conducting such an assessment would significantly enhance the effective implementation of the SDGs, or at least inform future global agendas to be more results-oriented and pragmatic (2050 Agenda?).

Moreover, there is an urgent need for longitudinal data on global development agendas. Given the recent-evidenced crisis of multilateralism, dating back since 2016, more recent data is crucial (Sommerer & Liese, 2024).

3.3 Sustainable Development Goals in a nutshell: Context, Purpose and Challenges

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) constitute a global agenda aimed at eradicating poverty and hunger universally and provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet. They address the need to rectify disparities both within and among nations, fostering the establishment of peaceful, just, and inclusive societies.

The goals are meant to achieve that with the protection of human rights, the promotion of gender equality, and the empowerment of women and girls. Furthermore, the SDGs

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[64] Here effectiveness refers to international institutions' ability to address global issues successfully, providing improved outputs following set initial criteria in an agreed timeframe.

underscore the imperative of ensuring enduring preservation for the planet and its natural resources. The commitment extends to creating global circumstances conducive to sustainable, inclusive, and persistent economic growth, shared prosperity, and the provision of decent work for all. This endeavor acknowledges the diversity in national development levels and capacities.[65]

Over the past 80 years, since the aftermath of World War II and the establishment of the United Nations, the world has undergone profound transformations. The great acceleration that ensued, fueled by globalization, marketing, tourism, and substantial investments, propelled unprecedented global growth. Cities burgeoned into powerful hubs of creativity, driving improvements in the well-being of millions across a single lifetime. Health, wealth, security, and longevity reached unprecedented levels[66], showcasing the remarkable strides made by humanity.

However, this era of progress is marred by persistent challenges. Amidst the prosperity, a stark reality emerges — one billion people continue to grapple with malnutrition, highlighting the persistent global disparities in development. Furthermore, the future generations will not have the same healthy Planet that existed back in 1992[67].

As we reflect on the immense changes of the past eight decades, it becomes evident that humanity has evolved into a formidable global force, exerting a substantial impact on the Earth's landscape and natural processes[68]. Human activities now surpass natural erosion and river processes, annually moving more sediment and rock. Our influence extends to three-quarters of all non-glacial land, with greenhouse gas levels reaching heights not witnessed in over a million years[69]. The consequences of these changes manifest in rising temperatures, depletion of the ozone layer, biodiversity loss, and the sinking of deltas due to various anthropogenic activities like damming and mining. Sea levels are rising, and ocean acidification poses a real and immediate threat, signaling a concerning alteration of Earth's natural cycles.

[65]https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/4518SDGs_FINAL_Proposal%20of%20OWG_19%20July%20at%201320hrsver3.pdf

[66] Global Health Observatory (OMS). (n.d.). GHE: Life expectancy and healthy life expectancy. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/mortality-and-global-health-estimates/ghe-life-expectancy-and-healthy-life-expectancy

[67] United Nations. (2023). Promise in peril: SDG indicators. Retrieved from https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/Promise-in-peril/

[68] Rockström, J., et al. (2009). "Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity." Ecology and Society, 14(2), 32

[69] Steffen, W., et al. (2016). "The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives." Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences, 369(1938), 842-867

This relentless pressure on our planet has ushered in the Anthropocene, a new geological epoch dominated by human impact. The risks of destabilization are unprecedented, yet amid these challenges, our reservoir of creativity, energy, and industry offers a glimmer of hope.

In this context, that is one of the reasons why the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) stand out as a paramount response to the multifaceted challenges our world faces. Serving as the latest and most universally embraced framework, the SDGs embody a comprehensive global effort. They not only acknowledge the intricate interplay between humanity and the environment but also furnish a meticulous roadmap to safeguard a secure operating space for our collective future. As the global population approaches 9 billion, the SDGs underscore a collective responsibility towards the well-being of both present and future generations, not to mention the wars.

In the instance responsible funnel ideas and good intentions to concrete, measurable goals for human capital and environmental development, Ms. Claire Melamed, Head of the Growth and Equity Unit of the Overseas Development Institute, said that the job of the OWG was partly one of prioritization. From the many issues that could potentially be included in the SDGs, the OWG would have to cut the agenda into something that is manageable, acceptable to society, garners traction internationally and nationally, and that can be successful. The SDGs should be constructed only after the question of "What is the problem that we want to solve with the SDGs?" could be answered. She said that the SDGs could serve three functions: 1) norm-setting, by providing a list of issues that are most important for the world to tackle together, that can float above other issues and provide guidance to the national level and other institutions; 2) coordinating global actions, whereby the SDGs will set priorities for public financial flows, focus on certain problems and organize global actions to solve them; and 3) measure actions and outcomes at national levels, to gauge whether actions are achieving their aims[70]. But do they?

The operationalization of the SDGs has perennially been elusive, constituting their Achilles' heel. While serving as an inspiring menu for local development initiatives, the global significance of these goals remains confined to the sphere of mobilizing efforts among UN Member States. Each passing year sees us falling behind, the annual renewal of commitments and advocacy events, inclusive of discussions involving various stakeholders such as citizens, the private sector, and civil society, serves to keep the goals within the realm

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[70] Summary OWG – Summary 2nd meeting

of discourse in a process of framing the issue and battling to keep it on top of policy discussion by agenda setting mechanisms (see more on item 1.2).

3.4 The end of "traditional" development?

The SDGs were portraited as the end of past century traditional "development", or in other words, after 2030 issues such as starvation, genocide, child labor, lack water and sanitation would be of the past. Therefore, to complete the development journey, we now need to do the hard part: sustainable development.

According to Chang et al (2014), unfortunately on these development tasks, the empirical record in recent years is much more sanguine; indeed, in most developing countries, the quality of institutions presiding over such targets to achieve development progress is flatlining or actively declining. As we shall see, even delivering the mail – a non-controversial and almost entirely logistical task – seems to be beyond the capability of many countries (and not just the poorest ones). Too often countries are being asked to run before they can walk – to implement "green growth," to build an effective justice system, to introduce a progressive tax code and pension systems before they have the resources or capability to fix potholes in the roads (in most Global South countries just to have quality paved roads causes awe).

Despite, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) do address many basic issues related to basic human well-being and development – such as access to clean water, infrastructure improvements, and energy access – the challenge of corruption, for instance, a major obstacle to SDGs progress, in my view is frequently met with insufficiently qualified efforts. Initiatives aimed at improving transparency mechanisms and restructuring public institutions to efficient (lean[71]) ones, remain lacking; and without it no SDG will be achieved.

Although corruption and its relationship to development endeavors are not at any means the focus of analysis here, it is worth noting that for 'traditional' development paradigms to evolve, corruption must substantially diminish in pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It's widely known that in aid initiatives, in its modern form starting in 1940s,

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[71] According to Costa et al. (2020) lean management is a management philosophy aimed at identifying and eliminating waste throughout the value stream of a product, extending not only within the organization but also throughout the entire value chain network (Reference 19). This approach structures the organization by incorporating four key elements: the product development process, supplier management process, customer management process, and policy-focused process

corruption accounted for a quarter, a third, or even half of some GNP-Gross National Product (Rimmer, 2000) in certain countries, such circumstances presented significant opportunities for corruption within those nations.

Achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 depends on understanding and addressing corruption effectively. Despite public commitments by many stakeholders to combat corruption and support the SDGs, there remains a significant gap in comprehending the intricate linkages between corruption and sustainable development (Lerpold & Brytting, 2020).

Corruption can trigger systemic market failures, exacerbate income inequality, impede access to essential services such as healthcare and education, and undermine environmental sustainability. This dynamic creates a complex interplay, reminiscent of a "chicken and egg" scenario, where addressing one issue is essential to tackling the other. For instance, corrupt practices can distort markets, hinder competition, and impede the equitable distribution of resources, which are critical for sustainable development (Lerpold & Brytting, 2020).

According to Lerpold and Brytting (2020) to realize the economic, social, and environmental sustainability envisaged by the SDGs, a nuanced understanding of corruption's impacts on each goal is imperative. Corruption not only hampers economic growth but also exacerbates inequality and impedes progress in improving prosperity and welfare for all. The consequences of corruption can be particularly stark in sectors like healthcare (SDG 3), education (SDG 4), and infrastructure (SDG 6, 9, 11), where public resources are crucial for achieving sustainable development objectives.

Once again, although the topic of corruption is not the issue of this work, I want to make a parenthesis here that addressing this challenge requires concerted efforts to elucidate the specific ways in which corruption undermines SDG attainment and the associated trade-offs. Stakeholders across sectors must move beyond rhetoric and actively engage in anti-corruption measures that align with the SDGs.

To address corruption effectively, we must confront entrenched corruption structures and challenge cultural norms that perpetuate unethical practices. This requires fostering disruptive initiatives and synergies across sectors, including robust anti-corruption policies, transparent governance frameworks, and accountability mechanisms. By empowering civil society, promoting ethical leadership, and leveraging technology for transparency and accountability, we can pave the way for genuine and transformative change. These actions will not only combat corruption but also contribute to sustainable progress and prosperity for all.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aimed to shift global development from a

reactive aid-based approach to a proactive framework focused on sustainable, systemic change. Yet, the SDGs' broad vision and ambitious targets reveal a stark disconnect between their transformative potential and the reality of implementation. Insufficient action to curb corruption and enhance accountability within development organizations – starting with the United Nations itself – casts doubt on the transparency and efficacy of efforts toward these goals. For instance, is there publicly accessible data where do donor funds go, without being vague about ir? How much is invested in marketing efforts and structural/personnel maintenance within the UN compared to actual advancements toward SDG targets?

Without strengthened anti-corruption measures and rigorous accountability, the SDGs risk shamefully surpassing the unfulfilled promises of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which achieved a decent record despite their misleading reputation. That reinforces the very cycles they seek to break. Rather than fostering true autonomy and progress, unchecked reliance on international "aid" can mire developing nations in dependency, market distortions, and cycles of poverty, as highlighted in Dambisa Moyo's Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa. The SDGs' ultimate success hinges on more than their visionary framework; it demands unwavering transparency and a deep commitment to accountable, sustainable development.

4. Preaching to the converted

4.1 Sustainable development isomorphism

Isomorphism, in a general sense, refers to a structural similarity or correspondence between different entities or systems. In various disciplines, including mathematics, sociology, natural sciences, and organizational theory, isomorphism describes the phenomenon where distinct entities or systems adopt similar structures, forms, or behaviors, often due to external pressures or influences.

In sociology and organizational theory, institutional isomorphism is a prominent concept. It suggests that organizations within a particular field or sector tend to become more like one another over time in terms of their structures, practices, and norms (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). This convergence occurs due to various factors, such as institutional pressures from stakeholders, regulatory bodies, professional associations, or societal expectations.

According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983) institutional isomorphism manifests in various forms within organizational settings, primarily categorized into three distinct types. Coercive isomorphism, the first type, emerges from external pressures exerted upon organizations,

emanating from regulations, laws, or governmental policies. In response, organizations adhere to these external mandates to circumvent penalties, bolster legitimacy, or uphold their societal standing. Mimetic isomorphism, on the other hand, materializes as organizations emulate the structures, practices, or strategies of esteemed counterparts within their industry. This emulation often arises from uncertainties or ambiguities within the organizational environment, as entities seek guidance from perceived exemplars of success or expertise. Lastly, normative isomorphism ensues from processes of professionalization and socialization within a given field. Organizations assimilate shared norms, bureaucracies, values, and beliefs propagated by professional networks or industry associations.

In nature, the concept of isomorphic mimicry is a biological phenomenon where a harmless or palatable species evolves to resemble a harmful or unpalatable species. This mimicry allows the harmless species to gain protection from predators by mimicking the warning signals of the harmful species. In isomorphic mimicry, the mimicking species (the mimic) shares similar physical characteristics, such as coloration, markings, or body shape, with the model species. This resemblance effectively deceives predators into mistaking the mimic for the model, thereby avoiding predation.

Here, as argued by Pritchett et al. (2013), isomorphic mimicry (as of nature) will be the focus as it is posited as a crucial "technique of successful failure" that perpetuates capability traps in (sustainable) development. Isomorphic mimicry conflates form and function: "looks like" substitutes for "does" (Pritchett et al., 2013, p. 31).

In the context of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), perceived success can often obscure actual impact. For instance, infrastructure projects intended to advance SDG objectives may appear as progress markers but may inadvertently undermine infrastructure stability elsewhere, creating an illusion of advancement. Similarly, educational initiatives that prioritize enrollment numbers without enhancing educational quality may be deemed successful, even though they fail to improve actual outcomes for students. Organizational sustainability reports, promotional materials, and high-profile events can signal commitment to SDG principles; however, these measures may fall short of translating into tangible organizational reforms or meaningful resource allocations that genuinely support sustainable development.

A striking example of this discrepancy lies in the establishment of seemingly comprehensive legal frameworks aimed at combating issues like child labor, environmental degradation, and abuse of power. Despite these frameworks, enforcement often remains weak, hampered by inadequate institutional mechanisms. In development institutions

especially, decision-making power is frequently concentrated in the hands of a few individuals whose influence can shape outcomes according to their interests, thereby undermining impartiality and accountability. This concentration of power not only restricts the intended reach of these frameworks but also perpetuates a culture where vested interests take precedence over genuine compliance. Consequently, the impact of such measures is muted, revealing the phenomenon of isomorphic mimicry within the SDGs framework – a pattern where superficial achievements are mistaken for substantive progress, risking the dilution of meaningful change in sustainable development.

As Pritchett et al. (p. 31) take on the concept, I argue that the United Nations ecosystem[72] is a fertile environment for isomorphic mimicry. This assertion stems from the establishment of a closed and conformity-driven environment within the organizational framework, wherein both leadership cadres and frontline personnel become used to its operational dynamics. Consequently, traditional avenues aimed at organizational improvement – training, reform, generating better evidence, forcing compliance (Pritchett et al., 2013) – will fail or only check boxes.

This new SDGs policy framework runs contrary to the modus operandi of the organization, which has been working in silos and in sectors. In the work by Bogers et al. (2022), contrary to expectations, she suggests that rather than diminishing, the fragmentation of global governance has intensified under the auspices of the SDGs. The proliferation of sectoral silos presents a looming challenge due to the intricate interconnections inherent in global sustainability issues.

For instance, the research highlights a shift in behavior among international organizations, wherein those focused on poverty reduction display a heightened inclination to engage with counterparts addressing poverty-related issues, as opposed to those tackling sustainable production or climate change (Bogers et al. 2022). Despite the overarching ambition of the SDGs to integrate environmental, social, and economic concerns into a unified agenda, the empirical evidence suggests a divergence from this objective (Bogers et al. 2022). The current UN system, including its intergovernmental bodies, does not promote integration and does not focus enough of its resources on implementation effectiveness per se, although there is considerable progress in terms of interagency efforts. As Pritchett et al. (p. 48-49) states:

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[72] Here I assume 'ecosystem' in its most basic definition: as a community or group of living organisms (in this case UN agencies, ONGs, partner institutions, etc.) that live in and interact with each other in the specific environment (of promoting the Agenda 2030 and navigating in the international scenario)

"What makes a trap a trap is that one can avoid getting into it, but once in, it is difficult to get out. When the ecosystem for organizations in a given domain is closed and novelty evaluated on agenda-conformity then this creates cascading behavior of organizations, leaders, and front-line workers. Organizations adopt strategies that look like successful organizations. Leaders seek organizational survival, continued budgets (and a peaceful life) by complying with agenda conforming standards of legitimacy. Front-line workers choose routine compliance (at best; at worst, often corruption or malfeasance) over concern for the customers and citizens they serve. Once the trap is sprung it creates self-reinforcing conditions from which it is hard to escape.

If there is no functional evaluation of performance then an organization – a schooling system, a police force, a revenue service, [the UN] – has no means of securing its legitimacy through demonstrated performance. If it already occupies a monopoly position, then it can survive (and perhaps even thrive) simply by projecting an appearance of being a functional organization by adopting "best practice" reforms. Once an ecosystem responsible for the organizational/administrative oversight is "stuck" in such a dynamic the options for an organization on its own to engage in successful reform that affects functionality become extremely limited."

By the SDG's targets x progress at five-years' time to the end of 2030, we can attest the UN machinery did not evolve timely to meet the SDGs. One might argue that unforeseen scenarios, such as global pandemics or geopolitical conflicts, have significantly impeded the timely progress towards achieving the goals. These unforeseen challenges indeed can disrupt the implementation of the initiatives and divert resources away from priority areas outlined, however, focusing on those issues is the comfortable zone and very convenient.

The SDGs were born in troubled times, and there will always be transitional times, but if the UN does not promote an optimal well-defined metric for efficacy which the resources allocated is proportionate to the outcome (the clear inputs–activities–outputs–outcomes x resources x responsible agent axiom for programme implementation), its status in the international arena will dimmish more and more.

Currently, governments are increasingly leveraging the SDGs framework to formulate local national actions[73][74], yet these initiatives often fall short of significantly advancing the

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[73] OECD. (2023). A Territorial Approach to the Sustainable Development Goals: Policy Perspectives 5-year

broader objectives of sustainable development. Drawing from past experiences with development agendas mentioned along this work, it's clear that effectively putting the SDGs into action requires strong political will. Unfortunately, this commitment is lacking in many countries, either in their words or in their actual policy enactment.

It appears that the SDGs have achieved their intended effect within the UN (Bogers et al., 2022) and international forums, but that is the easy part. The key issue is how can the set themes marketed with mastery can now be translated into action at various levels, from the global to the local within each nations' architecture or it will remain a prosperous failure?

4.2 Global South acumen

In recent years, the political landscape has witnessed a notable shift in power dynamics, with the Global South emerging as a pivotal force in shaping the global agenda. This newfound prominence stems from a combination of factors, including economic growth, demographic trends, and strategic alliances. The political geniality of the Global South in leading the latest global agenda reflects not only their aspirations for greater influence but also their commitment to addressing pressing global challenges through effective governance frameworks.

At the heart of this phenomenon lies the pursuit of status and preeminence on the world stage. As articulated by various theories of international relations, including Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism, states seek to maximize their power and influence in the international system to secure their interests and enhance their standing among their peers. For many countries in the Global South, achieving greater recognition and respect on the global stage is not only a matter of pride but also a means to advance their economic, political, and security objectives.

One of the primary ways in which the Global South has asserted its political geniality is through the adoption and promotion of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework. By championing the SDGs, countries in the Global South have demonstrated their commitment to collective action and multilateral cooperation in pursuit of a more just, equitable, and sustainable world.

Moreover, the emphasis on governance through the SDGs framework underscores the Global South's recognition of the critical role of effective institutions and policies in driving development and achieving long-term prosperity. By aligning their national strategies with the SDGs, these countries are not only signaling their commitment to good governance but also leveraging the framework to mobilize resources, attract investment, and enhance their legitimacy both domestically and internationally.

Furthermore, the Global South's leadership in advancing the global agenda is characterized by them as a pragmatic approach that prioritizes practical solutions and tangible outcomes. Recognizing the diverse needs and priorities within their own regions, these countries have championed a more inclusive and participatory approach to policymaking, engaging a wide range of stakeholders, including civil society organizations, the private sector, and local communities.

With approximately 40% of global GDP and 85% of the world's population (The Economist, 2024), the Global South has been at the forefront of efforts to reform and democratize international institutions to better reflect the changing dynamics of the global order. From calls for greater representation and voice in global decision-making bodies to initiatives aimed at strengthening South-South cooperation and solidarity, these countries are actively reshaping the architecture of global governance to be more equitable and responsive to the needs of all nations.

China seeks to lead this emerging block, leveraging its economic might to shape the geopolitical landscape. However, China's influence is not without limitations, and its autocratic tendencies may hinder its ascent. For example, it seeks to exploit the Global South narrative to advance its anti-Western agenda, undermining universal liberal values in the process (The Economist, 2024).

Other nations, such as India, Brazil, and Turkey, are also expanding their footprint in the Global South, forging economic and diplomatic ties with regions like Africa and the Gulf states. Yet, the heterogeneity of the Global South presents challenges, making consensus on issues like human rights, climate change, and security elusive. Divergent political systems and economic structures (what really matters on power politics) further complicate efforts to foster deeper integration.

While some argue that common grievances unite the Global South against perceived Western hegemony, the reality is more nuanced. While legitimate criticisms exist, there's a risk of devolving into a form of sophisticated nihilism (The Economist, 2024). As seen in Chapter 3, without the political prowess of many emerging economies we would not have the

far-reaching Agenda where sustainable development is a shared responsibility, including the developed countries in it. This perspective highlights the importance of Southern voices in shaping global discourse and policy agendas, particularly regarding issues that directly impact their populations – from the perspective of priorities and real conditions of life in their countries (Fukuda-Parr, S., & Muchhala, B., 2020).

Nevertheless, as the Global South has not been meeting its promises as a hopeful narrative to make amendments in antiquate and not representative international order between states (Schneider, 2017). Nationally, majority of its countries have been each year delivering a less positive political goods and meeting the minimum standard indicators of life quality to their inhabitants. The Global South has demonstrated remarkable resilience and creativity in confronting the status quo and has as its greatest achievement knitting a true global agenda, but more is needed to untie the North-South divide (Blicharska et al. 2021). Maybe the only possible way to do that is strong alliances between them in issues that matter for the North (trade, natural resources usage and political standing in conflicts).

The United Nations provided an ideal platform for countries of the Global South to assert their voices, attain status, and hold Northern nations accountable for their actions, particularly through the governance-by-goals framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, as we approach the five-year mark leading up to the end of 2030, it may be opportune for the 100-plus nations comprising the Global South to pivot towards articulating the 2050 agenda – a global pact for the future.

4.3 My Bird's-eye View

The United Nations has historically crafted agendas to maintain its visibility and status on the global stage. This strategic positioning, however, is inherently influenced by the prevailing geopolitical context and the interests of influential actors, or gatekeepers. The evolution of the UN's agenda setting process illustrates a complex interplay between asserting authority and adapting to external pressures.

In the Stockholm Agenda, the UN echoed Sweden's priorities, highlighting how national influence can shape international frameworks. Conversely, Agenda 21 saw Brazil champion a globally inclusive approach, engaging civil society extensively as a counterbalance to the dominance of the EU, the US, and Japan. This demonstrated the capacity of less powerful nations to steer the agenda towards broader participation when direct influence is limited.

The Millennium Agenda marked a shift towards centralization, with the UN enlisting experts like Jeff Sachs to streamline the process. Initially, this approach garnered significant status for the UN, but it ultimately faced criticism, particularly from the Global South, for its top-down methodology and perceived neglect of critical issues like climate change (some may say is a narrative or "agenda setting mechanism" as the planet has faced many climate shifts throughout the past centuries and millennia without any influence of human degradation). The centralized strategy, while the most efficient among UN agendas, alienated raising powers, diminishing the agenda's long-term acceptance by countries.

The 2015 Agenda represented a pivotal moment, characterized by unprecedented inclusivity and complexity. Brazil once again fought for its spotlight, being the lead face countries in advocating for the concerns of the South and compelling the North to address issues they preferred to sideline amid the economic downturns of 2008 and subsequent EU crises. This participatory approach lent the 2015 Agenda legitimacy as never seen in international political battleground and heightened unprecedent expectations for a truly effective global framework.

Through these varying strategies, the UN's relevance and status have indeed fluctuated. In 2015, the organization regained significant credibility among Southern nations by championing their interests. However, this came at the expense of its centrality to Northern powers and their financial commitment, reflecting a broader shift in global dynamics.

The UN's agenda setting and status seeking journey underscores the delicate balance between maintaining global visibility and adapting to the evolving demands of international stakeholders. Each agenda reflects a strategic response to the interplay of power, influence, and legitimacy, highlighting the organization's ongoing struggle to harmonize diverse global priorities. The 2015 Agenda stands out as a testament to the potential for inclusive, participatory processes to enhance the UN's relevance, even as it navigates the complex landscape of global politics.

However, the UN has sometimes faltered by attempting to address every pressing global issue, perhaps to expand its portfolio for new funding sources. This approach, while understandable, has made the organization vulnerable and less effective. To maintain its relevance, the UN must reconsider its post-war strategy and modus operandi. It must avoid becoming merely a platform for government soft power or a conduit for 21st-century business investments, even though these can provide valuable resources for short- and mid-term initiatives and organizational restructuring. Instead, the UN should focus on strategic, impactful engagements that reinforce its core mission and values. By doing so, it can

continue to be a pivotal actor in global governance, effectively addressing the challenges of our time.

5. Conclusion

The 2030 Agenda was adopted by most countries, but it is more and more unpredictable whether the goals will be met by 2030, actually it won't. Five years to the lead up to 2030 it's on the path to achieving a percentage of targets and especially the goals less than the MDGs did (see table 2). Nonetheless, the UN keeps trying to maintain the topic on the agenda and keep the ball rolling, as is the case with the 2024 Summit of the Future[75].

From a historical perspective, first, the UN deserves credit and recognition for facilitating the creation of the first true global agenda (the SDGs promised a novel type of governance that makes use of non-legally binding, global goals set by the UN member states). Despite having delegated the responsibility of achieving the goals to individual countries and exempting itself from being held accountable for any transformative change, the UN delivered the Agenda.

Second, the 2030 Agenda represents a strategic response by the United Nations to fuel its technical legitimacy (via agenda setting), status (via status-seeking), and operational capability (via governance through goals). As argued in chapters 1 and 3, based on primary sources from United Nations official documents in the agenda's construction process, the development of this endeavor (agenda setting it) reveals its true dual purpose: serving as both a framework for global action and a mechanism for status seeking (and financial resources). The UN regained the spotlight (status seeking tool) during the second decade of the 21st century, after facing questions about its effectiveness in post-aid development. Furthermore, analyzing UN documents I confirmed the emergence of the SDGs (governance through goals approach) was fueled by and was only established because of the Global South's (at the time of its construction more economically eminant than ever) desire for a more inclusive role in shaping the international development agenda. It was built upon the lessons learned from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the need to keep insisting on means of implementation, pushed by the South.

This dynamic reflects a virtuous circle wherein status seeking and agenda setting mutually reinforce each other. The United Nations' technical ability to strategically frame the agenda was bolstered by its 20th century's status as the only preeminent global institution

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[75] Summit of the Future: Multilateral Solutions for a Better Tomorrow. 22-23 September 2024. Retrieved from: Summit of the Future website - EN | United Nations

capable of doing so. Conversely, its status was fortified by its role as the primary convener and facilitator of global development initiatives, in this case, the SDGs. This symbiotic relationship underscores the importance of status and self-preservation in shaping international governance by the Global South and their representations in the United Nations.

Third, as my hypothesis captured, now it is clear the interwoven relationship between the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a fertile ground to sprout the Global South's demand for inclusion, and the United Nations' strategic response to be its platform and regain status (win-win scenario) and financial resources. However, it remains to be seen whether the United Nations has regained its legitimacy and influential power, as major UN donors, such as the United States of America, Asia, and Europe, appear to be moving in the opposite direction. For instance, Asia has committed to the Chinese new Silk Road and maritime project, and Europe has established the Global Gateway, both of which are mammoth financial commitments that mines their investments in the 2030 Agenda implementation, although some discourses might suggest otherwise.

Fourth, the SDGs proved the UN in the 21st century does not and may never, with its existing heavy and expensive organizational structure and modus operandi[76], have the capacity to lead a broad, coherent agenda for developing the world. It still relies much on its golden decades' prestige, but departing from its previous trajectory is the only way forward for the institution. Otherwise, it will continue to be tossed to and fro dependent on its same-old big sponsors and continue its path of successful failures (see topic 4.1 for more details).

As the UN through the SDGs process skillfully identified no country as 'developed' in terms of sustainability[77], it should now look inward to see how sustainable the UN and its

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[76] Guterres, much like his predecessor Annan, demonstrated courage by tackling pressing global issues head-on. His 2019 Report, along with subsequent ones, focused on drawing attention to the concerns of powerful nations rather than perpetuating a narrative of pity for the Least Developed Countries (LDCs). This strategic shift in focus reflects the evolving dynamics of international relations, where the interests of powerful states often overshadow those of less affluent nations. More than that, some Secretary General`s assertive approaches also showcased UNs flaws, highlighting the complex interplay between power dynamics versus development priorities within the United Nations. Additionally, similar sentiments have been echoed by Guterres and other UN representatives in various forums and speeches, emphasizing the need for a more equitable and inclusive approach to addressing UN structural (especially financial) issues and global challenges. Especially now that Trump should clearly win the presidential election by taking all the swing states, despite what the media is agenda-setting us to believe, and as it seems by also taking-up both chambers of the Congress. The UN is in peril of support as he promised to be out of some major UN agencies like the World Health Organization. More than ever the institution needs to prove its values concretely, for example, it is more likely to have a truce between states (Israel x Hamas or Russia x Ukraine) because of him than by the United Nations actions and that will mine even more the Institution.

[77] To learn more on how to progress in this, see: Jochen Prantl; Ana Flávia Barros-Platiau, Cristina Yumie Aoki Inoue, Joana Castro Pereira, Thais Lemos Ribeiro and Eduardo Viola (2024). Building Capabilities for Earth System Governance. Cambridge University Press (open-access). Link: https://www.cambridge.org/core/elements/building-capabilities-for-earth-system-governance/7F1CDA0C47DD04BCB97550E9F5353703.

agencies structures is to lead this ambitious agenda. This evaluation is especially crucial considering what I believe is the UN's primary objective: to prevent another world war, is faltering. Since it should not be a black box, maybe it is time to take a step back to reevaluate how its accountability is made, and its prominence will be a natural result. If nothing is done, it is checking all the boxes to fade away (see table and text below).

Table 3 – Summary of findings

Research journey by Chapter	Findings
Chapter one – Why agenda setting and status seeking theories?	1) Gives more clues to the process by which this agenda was established and what intentions are lying in the backstage
	2) Elaborating a worldwide state binding agenda is a way to regain status and address international issues in a cooperative and multilateral manner
	3) Provides content (another outlook) for readers to evaluate the differences between declared motives and real ones when it comes to 2030 agenda
	4) Governance through goals – characterized by weak institutional arrangements, global inclusion, and national discretion – has emerged as a theoretical framework to be used
Chapter two – Why was it necessary to once again outline the evolution of the development agenda?	1) Makes the text cohesive and gives a necessary background for the readers not familiar with the subject
	2) Focusing primarily on the concept of development, it pinpoints concisely key events and serves as a menu on

	how it evolved from its foundations until the establishment of 2030 Agenda (the way it was structured helps the ones interested in an in-depth analysis to be guided on his/her research)
Chapter two – What makes my background analysis different?	1) Traces the shift in each major event on the theme on how the global development agenda moved towards a more holistic and integrated approach (economic, social, and environmentally sustainable)
Chapter three – How was the SDGs patchwork done and who were its key craftsmen?	1) Paula Caballero, a name that deserves the spotlight
	2) The Open Working Group role is shaping the formulation of the SDGs as we know today
	3) The new policy framework of the SDGs, with a sharp focus in universal applicability, contrasts significantly with the United Nations' traditional and current modus operandi, characterized by working in silos and sectors
Chapter four – What is there to do, change or continue in the lead up to 2030? Are the SDGs still the world's best hope to tackle unsustainable development with the UN as its orchestrator?	1) Global South countries have been each year delivering less political goods and meeting the minimum standard indicators of life quality to their inhabitants (if compared to promises of 2015)
	2) The UN should refocus/redefine its foundational mission and values by prioritizing strategic, high-impact

	engagements (States, Billionaires, Civil Society). This would help the organization navigate and streamline its internal complexities to demonstrate a clear and impactful purpose for all, as it has effectively done in the past
	3) Successful failures continue to be the norm

The UN matters since it has played key role setting international development agendas and initiatives. The combined, agenda setting, status seeking, mainly, and governance through goals theoretical baselines can explain well and give an answer to anyone who seeks to explore and understand the impetus behind the construction of the 2030 Agenda.

The roll-out of the 2030 Agenda and implementation of the SDGs indeed confirms the UN is unquestionably a bureaucracy in the sense of Barnett and Finnemore (2004). Like any other bureaucracy they are prone to dysfunctional behavior – illustrating that neorealism remains a highly effective lens to interpret global dynamics reality, beyond the narratives often portrayed. Hence, the UN makes it more unresponsive as it prioritizes self-promotion to outcomes, cruising with many competing rudders, obsessed with their own rules at the expense of their primary objective. Ultimately it is producing inefficient and self-defeating behavior.

No team of experts, in their right mind, would design or maintain the UN in its current form – with overlapping agencies, entrenched silos, and inflexible budgets. Unfortunately, the structure as it stands is unable to orchestrate the deliverance of the SDGs, despite claims to the contrary. So, beyond UN's current breadcrumbs and paper-based "reforms", what should be done to fix it? That is a matter for a (my)PhD thesis, until then another question remains: the sustainable development is being sustainable for who again?

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