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GLOBALGOALS
Research for Sustainability

The SDGs as a Transformative Force?
Insights from the Global Goals Impact Assessment

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THE GLOBAL GOALS IMPACT ASSESSMENT

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CAMBRIDGE
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ASSESSMENT STRUCTURE



61 authors (senior and early-career researchers & geographically diverse)



Broad assessment of over 3000 articles, retrieved from Scopus



Closer investigation of 10-20% of these articles



Additional analysis of grey literature

Focus is *not* on achievement of SDGs.

Instead, analysis of three types of steering effects of SDGs:

- *Normative* steering effects, that is, changes in rules, policies, etc.
- *Institutional* steering effects, that is, new institutions, arrangements, etc.
- *Discursive* steering effects



ASSESSMENT DOMAINS

Impacts of the SDGs on:

- Global governance
- Governance at local and national level
- Institutional integration and coherence
- Inclusiveness (international and national)
- Planetary integrity
- Methods



GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

In the practice of international organizations, the effects of the SDGs were largely discursive.

The High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development has not lived up to expectations of becoming an 'orchestrator' in global governance.

The SDGs initiated some peer-learning among governments.

Observable changes often reflect long-term trajectories not causally linked to the launch of the SDGs.



IMPLEMENTATION AT MULTIPLE LEVELS

The degree of policy change at country level varies, with sub-national authorities and non-state actors often assuming pioneering roles.

Domestic steering effects are observable largely at the discursive level.

Institutional change often replicates existing priorities and trajectories.

There is limited evidence for the mobilization of additional funding.



INTERLINKAGES, INTEGRATION AND COHERENCE

There is limited *empirical* data on interlinkages, integration and coherence.

Despite modest advances in institutional integration in some countries, governments overall fall short of enhancing policy coherence to implement the SDGs.

Evidence points to many barriers in public-administrative systems to institutional integration and policy coherence, such as cumbersome bureaucracies, lacking political interest, short-term political agendas and waning ownership of the SDGs.

There are few indications that the adoption of the 2030 Agenda has significantly reduced such barriers



INCLUSIVENESS

Evidence suggests a mismatch between rhetoric and action when it comes to the impacts of the SDGs on inclusiveness.

Within countries, the effects on reducing inequalities vary significantly. The SDGs have not brought additional normative or institutional steering that promotes inclusiveness.

There is no evidence that the SDGs have advanced the political or economic position of the world's poorest countries in global governance.

There is some evidence that civil society organizations increasingly use the SDGs as a reference framework to hold governments to account.

Overall, the academic literature on the relationship between the SDGs and national and global inclusiveness inequality is very limited.



PLANETARY INTEGRITY

The literature raises doubts about the steering effects of the SDGs towards planetary integrity on three grounds: lack of additionality, lack of ambition, and lack of coherence.

There is little evidence of whether normative and institutional change towards planetary integrity would not have materialized without the SDGs.

When it comes to planetary integrity, the SDGs lack ambition and do not call for drastic changes that would be transformative enough.

The SDGs are not yet a radical game-changer in global governance to advance planetary integrity.



METHODS

The assessment reviewed two groups of methods: those that explore the effects of the goals on actors and institutions from global to local, and those that seek to measure whether societies are on track to achieve the SDGs.

While there is some pioneering work that uses mixed methods, more interdisciplinary collaboration is warranted.

We need a better understanding of how the effects of the SDGs on different actors and institutions influence progress towards achieving the goals, and vice versa.

Despite the growing number of researchers who study the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, we still lack data, particularly data on the local level and data on least developed countries.



OVERARCHING CONCLUSION

The SDGs have had thus far only limited political effects in global, national and local governance since 2015.

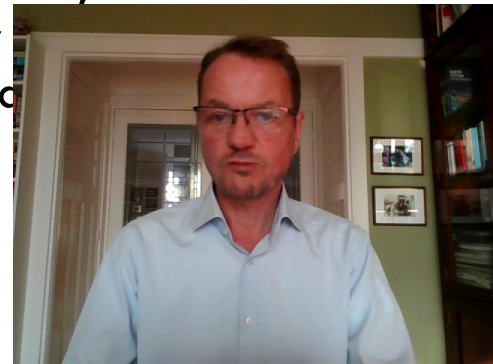
The SDGs have had discursive effects and have given some impetus to normative and institutional reform.

They foster mutual learning among governments and offer new instruments for local actors to organize, to gain more support, or to mobilize international funding.

The SDGs enable civil society and non-governmental organizations to hold governments accountable.

But the SDGs are not (yet) a transformative force in and of themselves.

There is little evidence that institutions are realigned, that funding for sustainable development is (re-)allocated, that policies are becoming more stringent, or that new demanding laws and programmes are established to meet the goals.



IN SUM

Optimists ... point to the timeline
2021-2030.

Pessimists ... point to the timeline
2015-2021.



THANK YOU

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