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SDGs need NGOs, NGOs need SDGs

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The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was the result of a long process of negotiation between countries, with the unprecedented involvement of civil society. International NGOs for cooperation, the environment and human rights – which are highly experienced in international negotiations – have been very active in this process by proposing targets and have thus taken ownership of the SDGs. This is much less the case for national NGOs, which were consulted very little, and do not yet use SDGs to strengthen their actions. It is essential to move from an inclusive international negotiation process to participatory national implementation. SDGs need NGOs, and NGOs need SDGs: SDGs offer NGOs new opportunities to advance their ideas and projects.

SDGs help to hold governments to account regarding their progress

SDGs create a common accountability framework for all countries. This framework contains objectives of varying degrees of precision, quantification and originality, on which States, and to a lesser extent businesses, have committed themselves (see the next blog post on businesses). Each year, States must report to the United Nations on more than 200 monitoring indicators, and present at least two progress reports [to the High-Level Political Forum \(HLPF\) by 2030](#). At the national level, governments must – in consultation with all stakeholders, including NGOs – use SDGs to assess the sustainability of their country and the need for action, and to develop new policy strategies and regularly review the progress achieved. National NGOs have a decisive role to play in ensuring the proper functioning of this accountability framework through advocacy, while the above-mentioned obligations provide opportunities for these NGOs to hold governments accountable and to raise awareness on issues that have been insufficiently considered. National NGOs are already producing shadow reports, which provide a critical analysis of the state of progress of SDGs in their own countries, as did the Swiss NGO coalition *Alliance Sud*. They can even, as a coalition of German NGOs has done, present these shadow reports at the HLPF in New York to attract the attention of the international community to the problems of sustainable development implementation in their own countries. Others use the key indicators of the SDGs to establish rankings or compare the performance of their country with that of neighbouring countries, such as in the 2030 Watch project carried out by the Open Knowledge Foundation in Germany. Moreover, with its general principle of “leaving no one behind”, SDGs are a valuable advocacy tool for a large number of charitable and human rights NGOs. An advocacy tool in favour of public policies that are designed first and foremost to reach the most marginalized or vulnerable populations, to shine a light onto “forgotten” or marginalized issues, and to remind governments not to rest on their laurels in terms of what has been achieved for the majority of their citizens. SDGs can also bring new “advocacy ammunition” to specific subjects. SDG 10 on inequalities, for example, commits countries to ensure that the incomes of the poorest 40% of the population grow at a faster pace than the national average income. This objective constitutes a new commitment for all countries, notably France, and thus provides a new opportunity for NGOs to put the inequality issue on the agenda.

SDGs allow NGOs to form new alliances The notions of “indivisibility” and “universality” are at the heart of the SDGs. All objectives must be met by countries, taking into account the interactions between these objectives and the impact of one country’s actions on the others. NGOs are often well aware of the need to work across several sectors, and outside of traditional thematic silos, to develop a systemic approach to the challenges in order to move more effectively towards sustainable development. However, similarly to public institutions, NGOs continue to struggle to develop joint advocacy. The SDGs can be the foundation for collaboration between development NGOs, environmental NGOs and social NGOs, and this collaboration outside the silos has already begun at the international level. This collaboration must now happen within all countries. In Europe, these types of alliances are already emerging, such as SDG Watch Europe at the continental level, or the above-mentioned coalitions in Germany and Switzerland. In other countries, such alliances are struggling to emerge or are at their initial stage, as is the case in France.

Since SDGs are universal, they can also provide a basis for NGOs in different countries to collaborate beyond borders. This could enable NGOs to enrich themselves from their respective experiences, from their proposals, and thus to be stronger on the national and international scene. Such alliances could be developed to crosscut several subjects or focus on specific themes. For example, when will there be an alliance between NGOs in Europe and those in Latin America on the inequality SDG? At the moment, this is not on the agenda.

SDGs can inspire new actions in the field

NGOs are actors in State accountability, as well as in the accountability of local governments or businesses, and SDGs can help them in this role. But they are also – directly – actors of change through their actions in the field to improve health, education and the environment in their own countries or abroad. In a sense, they are themselves accountable and must justify their contributions to the SDGs. Either singlehandedly or in partnership with public authorities, donors or businesses, NGOs are expected to reinforce their actions in the field and give consideration to the indivisibility of SDGs: protecting the environment, for example, cannot be done to the detriment of local populations and vice versa. This is obvious in theory, but not always the case in practice.

Some governments are trying to mobilize NGOs, particularly through civil society engagement platforms, to highlight the most innovative projects. It will take time to see if and how SDGs actually change projects on the ground. The magnitude of this change will undoubtedly be heavily influenced by the financial resources available to NGOs. And thus the way that public and private donors with which NGOs collaborate (States, local authorities, development agencies, private foundations, businesses) seize the SDGs.

The need to strengthen NGO ownership of SDGs

Are NGOs taking hold of the opportunities presented by SDGs? While certain “good practices” are emerging, a real dynamic has not yet been seen everywhere, particularly in France. Several explanations can be put forward: lack of knowledge of SDGs; lack of resources; lack of credibility of State implementation processes; lack of NGO involvement in these processes; lack of political support for SDGs at the highest State level. The ownership of SDGs by national NGOs therefore depends on several factors. Beyond the work of raising awareness about national NGOs that must be carried out by the UN, States and international NGOs, the national NGOs need human and financial resources to take ownership of the SDGs. More than ever, these NGOs also need to be able to influence the political agenda, which is not evident in some countries where governments do not tolerate criticism. Even in countries where NGOs have real freedom of speech and action, they will only take ownership of the SDGs if they are convinced that governments are taking the 2015 global goals seriously.

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