

Initial assessment and conditions for success of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

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Adopted on September 25, 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development sets 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to address the common challenges of the countries of the world. This agenda was presented as a paradigm shift, a transformative project and a global roadmap to be adopted by all countries and all actors. Four years on, the Progress Report of the Secretary General of the UN and the *Global Sustainable Development Report* present an alarming quantitative assessment of the delay in achieving the SDGs. But what about the qualitative assessment?

This *Study* examines ownership and use of the 2030 Agenda by different actors. Has it changed the practices of national governments, major international organisations, specific communities such as the Ocean community, companies or NGOs? Are their implementation approaches relevant? What have the SDGs brought to policy debates and policy-making at the international and country levels? And what are the potential tools to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda?

KEY MESSAGES

Four years after its adoption, more and more references are being made to the 2030 Agenda by international organisations, governments, the private sector and non-state actors, but they rarely question practices, nor do they initiate a transformative project.

Governments are not doing enough to implement the 2030 Agenda. Implementation must be accelerated by 2030. Some interesting experiments exist, in particular to integrate the SDGs into budgetary processes.

It is essential to restore the backbone of the 2030 Agenda, to develop a clear vision of what does or does not contribute to the SDGs, and to prevent the SDGs from falling victim to an overly vague game of interpretation that everyone can join without questioning the real impact of their actions on the agenda as a whole.

To ensure the 2030 Agenda becomes a true global roadmap, it is time to move away from a form of "weak consensus" and to make this pro-

gramme central to debates, particularly when they are difficult and complex. It should facilitate discussions on sectoral policies, especially trade policies, by questioning their impacts on all of the SDGs. It must assist decision-making and inform the approaches and trade-offs needed to develop sustainable development pathways and to encourage actors to question whether they can do things differently and better. The six transformations proposed by the *Global Sustainable Development Report* provide a useful approach for these discussions.

The High-Level Political Forum should be a place for dialogue and guidance to accompany and develop mechanisms to manage friction and conflicts between the SDGs and to enable real exchanges between actors about the strategic choices to be made. This forum needs to be clearer on what does or does not contribute to the SDG transformative project and must assess the effectiveness of the actions reviewed.

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1. UNDERSTANDING THE EMERGENCE OF THE SDGs

1.1. The context

The Sustainable Development Goals emerged at a time when the sense of urgency was shifting away from the tyranny of short-termism and the desire for cooperation was prevailing over the unilateral expression of the narrowest interests. Although their negotiations were sometimes fierce, the SDGs were nevertheless a statement of confidence that a set of universal ambitions, a sort of draft global social contract, could take shape and be sanctioned by the United Nations. At least three factors explain why the desire to bet on the emergence of ambitious, universal SDGs integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development was widely shared.

The first factor is situational: it is mostly women who were at the origin of the SDGs. In her history of the SDGs, written from inside the negotiations, Paula Caballero (Caballero, 2016) describes how, in October 2010, faced with the imminence of the conference to mark the 20th anniversary of the Rio Earth Summit (or "Rio+20"), to be held in June 2012, a group of Colombian diplomats came up with the idea of the SDGs, which was soon endorsed by other diplomats from Guatemala and Peru.¹ The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) financed the team, which received support from Alicia Barcena (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, ECLAC). Thanks to their efforts of persuasion over more than a year, the SDGs were included in the "Zero Draft" of the Rio+20 final declaration on 10 January 2012.

The SDGs were placed firmly on the Rio+20 agenda largely thanks to diplomats from middle-income countries, the *missing middle* as described by Kharas (2015), which face problems of both poor and rich countries, with neither the access to concessional lending enjoyed by the former, nor the tax base and low-cost borrowing capacities that remain the prerogative of the latter. By devising the SDGs, Colombia and Guatemala pulled off a "diplomatic coup": Paula Caballero notes that the tactical choice made by the diplomats of the initial core of SDG drafters was to convince Brazil, a middle-income country and host of Rio+20, then other middle-income countries (especially Latin American countries), and finally the G77, which was more inclined to support an "MDG+" agenda consisting in completing the work begun with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). "Colombia is a G77+China country that aspires to join the OECD", writes Paula Caballero. She adds "we are bridge builders" and says that "Colombia, it is not a big country. But it has big ideas that can change the history of development". The tactical choice of several middle-income countries was therefore to use the platform provided by the UN, and the concept of sustainable development, to increase the authority and scope of their soft power in international relations.

However, more than a diplomatic coup, Colombia and Guatemala highlighted the previously hidden challenges of economic catch-up and emergence. New challenges implied new requirements and a new expression: that of a "global middle class" with aspirations of comfort and good living (*buen vivir*), which did not identify with the MDG agenda and was no longer satisfied with the negligible effects of the environmental commitments made in Rio. Along the divide between the MDGs (defined for the period 2000-2015) that were still to be achieved and the UN environmental treaties and conventions that urgently needed to be incorporated into the real economy in order to achieve "sustainable" change, the argument was to use a goal-setting approach, on the grounds that the MDGs were a partial success, and to add to them the missing variables, covering the new requirements of a world of ever-increasing and unevenly distributed wealth. As such, the SDGs were a bet as much as a promise: the bet of a comfortable delivery and the promise that

¹ Their names are: Paula Caballero, then at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Colombia, the Deputy Minister Patti Londoño-Jaramillo, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Colombia María Angela Holguín, their counterparts Jimena Leiva and Rita Mishan in Guatemala, and Ye-Min Wu in Singapore. The first team formed around this core, and was joined by Alicia Lozano, Angela Rivera, Claudia Vasquez, Heidi Botero, Isabel Cavelier, Carolina Aguirre, and David Rodríguez, from the Colombian Mission to the UN.

goal-setting could prompt the action that had been inconsistently avoided by the major conferences in Stockholm (1972) and Rio (1992) before them, thereby justifying their existence.

1.2. The promises of the SDGs

The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs have often been presented as innovative and as a “paradigm shift”.² Characterised as a “major advance” or a “turning point”, the agenda was welcomed by numerous academics and NGOs, who highlight its potential and its promise. But other researchers (and often the same ones) have also analysed its possible risks.

A transformative agenda?

Researchers and NGOs first stress that the SDGs could, at least partially, be seen as a “transformative project”, leading ideally to a “systemic change” (Koehler, 2016). However, several authors acknowledge that some goals are more consistent with the transformation agenda than others. Among the goals with high transformative potential, Bhattacharya, Khan & Salma (2014) identify SDGs 5 (gender equality), 10 (reducing inequality), 12 (transforming production and consumption patterns) and 16 (institutions, justice, peace). Koehler (2016) proposes that the SDGs could be used “subversively” to steer discussions and practices if enough actors highlight its transformative content rather than its content that consolidates business-as-usual. Moreover, as pointed out by Korösi (2015), the SDGs were not designed as targets to be met independently, but as a mutually supportive package. This is what makes the 2030 Agenda transformative, since no current development pathway can achieve all of the SDGs together.

Several authors express doubts about the transformative potential of the SDGs. From the adoption of the document “The Future We Want” at Rio+20 (A/RE S/66/288), announcing the SDG negotiations, Bernstein (2013) notes that the terms “integration”, “coherence” and “implementation” suggest consolidation rather than transformation, while remarking that the object of consolidation is not clearly identified. He goes on to argue that Rio+20 confirms the emergence of a weak multilateralism, which avoids contentious subjects and commitments. Several authors argue that the SDGs reinforce an outmoded development model (Weber, 2017; Demaria/Kothari, 2017; Kallis, 2015). The importance given by the 2030 Agenda to economic growth and to the actors symbolising a neoliberal development model, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), is the subject of criticism (Weber, 2017). While some see the SDGs as striking a balance between environmental, social and economic issues or as a long-awaited wake-up call about the relationship between ecosystem well-being and human well-being (Martinez/Mueller, 2015), others see it as a missed opportunity to initiate real structural change (Hickel, 2015). Some even believe that the agenda

strengthens the status quo and that it is not only inadequate to address the pressing challenges of environmental and social sustainability, but also dangerous. This is the dilemma of the SDGs, rejected by some for breaking too radically from previous approaches and by others for not yet disrupting the predominant development model.

A holistic agenda?

The indivisibility of the SDGs is described as the most “visible” innovation of this agenda. Expectations are high, especially regarding the opportunity to create more synergies between social and environmental policies, thereby increasing the weight of these two dimensions of sustainability compared to the economic dimension. The more inclusive nature of the SDGs in relation to the MDGs was seen as long overdue by communities whose issues had so far received less attention. This is also what makes the SDGs richer in conceptual terms, according to Stevenson & Kanie (2016), and more sophisticated than their predecessors. Martinez & Mueller (2015) see this as an opportunity to make human and ecosystem well-being central to international relations. Sustainable development concerns cross-cutting issues (such as inequalities or sustainable consumption), which do not have their own line ministry; the SDG on health, for example, is linked to education (health education), the environment, water (reducing the number of deaths from water pollution), inequalities (universal health coverage) and cities (transport safety). This integration clashes with the reality of national governance systems, which struggle to achieve it. In response to this challenge, the SDGs can provide a reference framework for governments to enable them to monitor and assess public policies in light of the three dimensions of sustainable development, as well as their interrelationships. Thus, in terms of *use*, the cross-cutting nature of the SDGs calls for the creation of “new governance mechanisms”. Potentially, it is also an opportunity to generate more actionable knowledge about the interconnections between issues. Brown & Schaller (2019), on the other hand, see it as a challenge for the Ministries of Foreign Affairs to manage synergies and trade-offs in the pursuit of the SDGs by all countries. In theory, the cross-cutting SDG approach provides numerous opportunities to innovate in terms of governance; in practice, however, there is a risk of failing to meet the challenge of operationalising this kind of systemic approach (Kanie *et al.*, 2017).

Several authors regret that the SDGs do not pursue a truly integrated agenda. In fact, although the integration and indivisibility of challenges is underlined in the unanimously adopted official documents, the 17 SDGs can be easily cherry picked and tackled in silos.

Everyone’s agenda, no one’s agenda?

One of the innovations of the SDGs in relation to the MDGs is that they apply to all countries. According to Deacon (2016), the SDGs could be the “truly first global social (and environmental) policy”. Indeed, this universality is one means of taking greater

² Articles analysed were those published since the emergence of the SDG concept until just after their adoption, for the period 2012-2016.

account of the complexity and the often global dimension of the economic, social and environmental challenges of the 21st century (Kanie *et al.*, 2017). As for the operationalisation of this principle, there are few specific expectations around this idea, although a discussion on spillovers effects—in other words the impact of the development model in one country on the possibility of third countries achieving the SDGs—is beginning to take shape (Sachs *et al.*, 2019a; Kettunen *et al.*, 2018).

Moreover, during the SDG negotiations, the one-size-fits-all approach raised concerns (Kanie *et al.*, 2017), which were ultimately addressed in the final version of the 2030 Agenda, which states that “all of us will work to implement the agenda within our own countries and at the regional and global levels, taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities” (A/RES/70/1, §21). Like the Paris Climate Agreement adopted just a few weeks later in December 2015, the SDGs thus break with a top-down approach (adopted for the MDGs) in favour of a bottom-up approach. However, for this approach to function, it should not be seen as an invitation to interpret the promises of the 2030 Agenda so as to make them consistent with existing practices, without questioning these practices. The SDGs should instead encourage each country to define its own pathway of change, which could subsequently be used in the multilateral framework as a legitimate basis for discussions between countries. Taking the example of Indonesia, where palm oil exports help to reduce inequalities, but are also strictly regulated to ensure conditions for long-term environmental and social sustainability, and Europe, which is ceasing palm oil imports to ensure the European agri-food system is compatible with nutritional, climate and biodiversity challenges: what types of trade relations could enable both Indonesia and Europe to implement their development pathway? As the trade debate currently stands, the SDGs could serve as a common language to inform an international discussion of this kind.

The 2030 Agenda does not concern only the signatory countries, but also encourages all stakeholders to contribute: “All countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan”, as stated in the preamble and in SDG 17 on partnerships. However, the 2030 Agenda does not specify who commits to what, and defines targets and indicators without assigning responsibility. “The universality of the SDGs means they are owned by no-one in particular. As things stand, the SDGs risk becoming rudderless, without anyone ensuring that their bold promises are delivered on”, write Brown & Schaller (2019). Was the adoption of such an ambitious agenda only possible because it does not commit anyone or demand concessions from anyone in particular? Conversely, the notion of partnership may be considered as a gamble on the emergence of new coalitions of action.

Another question omitted from the 2030 Agenda is that of the winners and losers of achieving the SDGs. In reaction to the adoption of the SDGs, Salleh (2016) writes that the concept of sustainable development is now widely recognised as an oxymoron. According to Kallis (2015), sustainable development and its more recent embodiment as green growth depoliticise

and prevent visibility on the political divisions between different views of the future. Indeed, as recommended by Voituriez (2013), it is important not to fall into a “win-win-win” reading of the SDGs, which is unrealistic and of little value. Evidence of the mutual reinforcement of the three dimensions of sustainable development is lacking, and the concept of sustainable development has yet to prove itself in the real economy. Thus, focusing on the political economy of the SDGs would imply identifying not only the winners, but also the losers of a sustainable development agenda, as with any transformation; an aspect that is not developed in the SDG narrative.

Finally, it is the lack of instructions that leaves many actors unsatisfied. The SDGs give a vision of the world in 2030, but say very little about how to achieve it. The list of means of implementation and the framework of indicators for the SDGs only very partially inform the definition of sustainable development pathways. SDG 17 and a number of targets do mention means of implementation, but do not specify who commits to putting them in place.

Compared to the MDGs, this list of means of implementation is already a step forward, but overall, the theory of change for the SDGs is unclear.³ The idea was to protect the sovereignty of countries, to avoid being prescriptive on the means, and to stick to the results while leaving each country to follow its own path. But, in practice, obstacles and lock-ins are emerging, with similarities in all national situations, which the *Global Sustainable Development Report* summarises in six transformations (Independent Group of Scientists, 2019: Human well-being and capabilities; Sustainable and just economies; Food systems and nutrition patterns; Energy decarbonisation and universal access; Urban and peri-urban development; Global environmental commons). This is true both for the achievement of the different goals and for the ways of maximising synergies between them or resolving conflicts. The 2030 Agenda sets goals to address global challenges, but does not tackle either their causes or the dynamics of power (Koehler, 2016).

1.3. What theory of change for the SDGs? A combination of several visions

From the international to the national level

To understand the theory of change for the SDGs, it is important to look at the interactions between international institutions and domestic policies. What impact do international standards, regulations and agreements have on domestic policies? How does the international level influence the national level?

International standards can impact the beliefs and values of different national actors (Nye, 1987; Nadelmann, 1990; Duffield, 1992) and can influence domestic policy processes through the standardisation of bureaucratic procedures (Nye, 1987; Young, 1989). Cortell and Davis (1996) identify two

³ <https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/hello-sdgs-whats-your-theory-of-change/>

additional pathways by which international standards can enter the national policy debate. The first is particularly suited to the soft law dimension of the SDGs. In this scenario, domestic actors, whether public or private, can refer to an international framework such as the SDGs to advance and justify their own cause. This can be reinforced by the mobilisation of several actors around this international agenda to call for domestic actions, consistent with a new "advocacy coalitions" strategy (Sabatier & Weible, 2007). And new international principles can have an empowerment effect on certain groups (scientists, NGOs, public administrations, indigenous peoples, or companies) at the national level (Haas, 1980). The second pathway identified by Cortell and Davis (1996) is the translation of an international framework into national legislation. Yet the 2030 Agenda seems more inclined to adapt to national legislations than the other way around (see §63 of the 2030 Agenda, targets 16.10 and 5.a, for example). But it is not inconceivable, and the agenda explicitly encourages "all Member States to develop as soon as practicable ambitious national responses to the overall implementation of this Agenda. These can support the transition to the Sustainable Development Goals and build on existing planning instruments, such as national development and sustainable development strategies, as appropriate" (A/RES/70/1, §78).

All of these scenarios depend on the interests of state and non-state actors in a given process. If actors see a personal interest in it, they can take ownership of this agenda. An international framework will only find its way in a national policy process if it is relevant to this process and if the institutional structures permit it (Cortell & Davis, 1996). A key question is therefore: do existing institutional structures enable non-state actors to bring an international agenda into the policy debate if state actors have not endorsed it? In this case, the international agenda can at least influence the course of the policy debate, even if it does not necessarily have a direct effect on public policy.

The SDGs can also be seen as a list of common goods, which the countries could have an interest in managing, by cooperating and establishing institutional arrangements that structure and align behaviours and expectations (Stein, 1982). The High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) and other regular meetings linked to monitoring of the 2030 Agenda could be the time and place to structure expectations for 2030. SDG implementation could be an opportunity to generate more knowledge and expertise and to produce a collective learning process, with everyone drawing lessons from the efforts and solutions devised in other countries. It will become clear whether the SDGs have actually generated new knowledge and initiated learning processes if the actors adopt new codes of behaviour (Haas, 1980), and if these behaviours become the norm.

Governing through goals

The SDGs establish 17 goals, 169 targets and a battery of more than 230 indicators. Formulating goals and indicators is part of a distinct governance strategy: "governing through goals", which

aims to steer collective action, in the context of a medium- or long-term vision, through the definition of priorities, the mobilisation of actors capable of addressing these priorities, and the formulation of targets and measures of progress (Young, 2017). The idea is that these priorities and measures will help to focus attention and to influence the allocation of resources by different actors. This calls for a clear definition of these priorities, ideally by setting a limited number of goals to be achieved over a given time horizon. Once these goals have been set, the campaign phase begins, with a view to increasing awareness about them and convincing actors to allocate resources to their fulfilment. During this phase, measuring instruments are used to assess progress, and to convene regular monitoring meetings, which are also aimed at motivating stakeholders and "generating enthusiasm" (Young, 2017). This effect is generally credited to the MDGs in the development assistance agenda.

Greene (2015) questions the theory of change for the SDGs (very weak, or even non-existent in his opinion) as well as the fields that the architects of the SDGs sought to influence. He identifies four: developing country budgets and policies; wider social norms about rights and the duties of governments and others; aid volumes and priorities; and developed country budgets and policies. His conclusion is as follows: the SDGs will probably have an influence on the first two fields, but very little on the last two.

For governing through goals to succeed, especially in a multilateral context necessarily involving a process of negotiation, research and consensus, certain pitfalls must be avoided according to Young (2017). The first is to be sure not to produce an overly long list of priorities, a risk that is increased when a large number of actors are involved and their interests differ. In such a scenario, there is also a risk of producing goals that are incompatible or contradictory. Next, where collectively negotiated goals are concerned, these may be too vague and difficult to operationalise. Devarajan, Miller and Swanson (2002) define the characteristics of useful goals: "*for goals to be useful, they must be well defined and measurable; they must be agreed by those who set the strategies and appropriate the resources to pursue them; and they must be attainable under some plausible scenario*".

The SDGs have avoided none of these pitfalls, and are a governing through goals strategy that is imperfectly designed and fraught with problems: the list of SDGs is too long, they will not necessarily generate useful actions as described by Young (2017), and the governance strategy associated with the SDGs seems insufficiently connected to existing processes dedicated to specific problems that use more prescriptive/regulatory strategies.

At the same time, governing through goals has its limitations, and some characteristics of the SDGs can be seen as an attempted response to these limitations and more specifically to the MDGs, which are nevertheless fewer in number and less complex. Governance by goal-setting tends to favour goals that are easy to communicate, sometimes at the cost of an overly simplistic approach, and may give too much importance to easily measurable variables of progress, while neglecting more

complex but perhaps more important issues (e.g. GDP *versus* well-being) (Young, 2017). Billé, Le Duc and Mermet (2010) note the tendency to favour goal-setting over the development of a specific implementation plan. Young (2017) also speaks of the danger of complacency: goals are sometimes not enough, and are just the first step in opening the way to more regulatory approaches. It is essential to ensure that the setting of non-binding goals is not just a distraction, an easy solution to dealing with difficult issues. Moreover, governance by goal-setting tends to overlook the external context and factors that may impact the achievement of goals, such as geopolitics or macroeconomic policies. In addition, governing through goals is a strategy that originated in the private sector, raising questions about its capacity for adaptation to the public sector and especially to an audience as diffuse and a context as complex as the international community (Billé, Le Duc, & Mermet, 2010); in particular, the issue of responsibility for implementing the goals is far less clear here than in the context of a private company.

The SDGs are a response to a certain number of concerns, some of which were raised by the specific MDG approach: a first concern is the need to avoid an overly simplistic approach and measures that do not take sufficient account of the diversity of contexts and starting points. Country ownership, the disaggregation of data and the call to define targets and measurement frameworks that are nationally and locally adapted are some of the elements of response found in the 2030 Agenda.

Each country can choose the means of implementing and monitoring the SDGs in its own national context. This flexibility has undoubtedly contributed to the adoption of a framework as ambitious as the SDGs by all of the member countries of the United Nations, but, especially because of the superposition of different frameworks of indicators (local, national, global), it makes it more difficult to assess progress. Similarly, the high number of goals and indicators and the often vague definition of targets have attracted criticism. The SDGs are a hybrid instrument, in line with the governing through goals approach of the MDGs, while striving to go beyond this approach. However, if considered in the same way as the MDGs, the exhaustive nature of the SDGs could plunge states into onerous, almost impossible bureaucratic exercises (Easterly, 2015). If the same expectations are applied to the SDGs as to the MDGs, in other words a focus on specific priorities that raise awareness among political leaders and philanthropists about the challenges of socio-economic development and mobilise and channel resources towards these priorities (Solberg, 2015), then they can only be disappointed. In this context, there is a risk of a lack of public ownership⁴ and political support.

However, the governing through goals strategy can be effective, especially if the long-term mobilisation of actors is guaranteed. This implies campaigning for the achievement of these goals, and creating coalitions of actors who are motivated and motivating and can successfully rally others.

Several other factors can contribute to this mobilisation (Young, 2017):

- making the goals public, in a meaningful way;
- establishing well-defined comparisons as well as clear deadlines;
- encouraging ownership within civil society and the media, in order to put pressure on actor accountability and on the need for results;
- integrating the pioneering role of progressive companies (Greene, 2015);
- leveraging peer review and peer pressure.

Peer pressure

The SDGs can support new public strategies first through pressure exerted by peers, namely other governments, and by civil society. Although the resolution adopted in September 2015 is not a legally binding act for governments, in that no sanctions or compulsory measures are provided for, the assumption is that monitoring of the SDGs by the United Nations, other governments and also civil society will encourage a state to make changes, since its performance can be assessed and compared to other states. This pressure can in theory prove effective when it is accompanied by a common performance assessment framework, based on measurable targets and indicators, and by a "place" for assessment: in the context of the 2030 Agenda, the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) is the place for this assessment. Within this forum, yearly discussions are held on governments' progress or lack thereof, under the watchful eye of civil society. Alongside the HLPF, each country is invited to establish an SDG implementation process at the national level, in which local civil society can also pressure states to ensure actions are undertaken, to monitor progress made and to compare it to that of other countries. The universality of this commitment makes the SDGs a tool for collective learning. In the context of the HLPF, as in any international body dealing with the SDGs, the countries are invited to exchange between themselves and with civil society on their strategies and actions in order to identify good practices, common problems, and possibilities for cooperation on global policies such as finance, taxation and international trade. Breakspear (2012) shows that exchanges between policymakers and experts on the strategies of leading countries in a given field and international comparisons can incite other countries to change, especially if those countries have similar socio-economic characteristics. The positive effect is even greater if the indicators used are recognised as legitimate by actors, if monitoring and reporting mechanisms exist—provided for in the 2030 Agenda—and if the results of evaluation exercises are publicised (McGee, 2010). The independence of the evaluation of progress is also an important factor in the success of this exercise, but this independence is not currently guaranteed in the official framework of the HLPF, since the countries themselves present the state of progress on the 2030 Agenda for their own country. However, initiatives by think tanks and civil society focusing on one subject or on all of the SDGs do exist. The Bertelsmann Foundation and the

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/jan/19/sustainable-development-goals-united-nations>

Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) publish a yearly SDG index establishing a ranking of countries based on a statistical comparison.⁵ An independent evaluation can also be organised on a voluntary basis at the national level, as is the case in Germany and Finland (Niestroy *et al.*, 2019), with the main objective of revealing obstacles to implementation and possible levers for action. According to Bernstein (2012), the HLPF could prove useful if it becomes a platform for high-level leadership and support for transformative partnerships and activities that involve civil society and the private sector.

Two scenarios are emerging concerning the use of the statistical framework and monitoring mechanisms for the SDGs: the first gives the SDGs a statistical existence by requiring each country to report on them to a UN body, with little impact in terms of domestic policy. The second gives the 2030 Agenda a real political existence by making it an opportunity to transform development pathways. To realise this potential, Voituriez (2013) identifies a number of ways of using the SDGs, which should:

- 1. serve as a basis for the construction of compromises and policy trade-offs within countries, rejecting the overly simplistic idea of “win-win” solutions;
- 2. facilitate the emergence of a multi-actor experimentation regime encouraging, stimulating and evaluating the reorientation of public and private investment policies.

What can be expected of the SDGs?

Despite limitations in the development of its founding principles (its promises) and a partial theory of change, comprised of a hybridisation of several theories of action, like any outcome of a political negotiation, is the 2030 Agenda useful? And if so, how? What does it achieve? What types of action does it encourage and by whom? Under which conditions? What positions/behaviours are no longer tolerated because of the SDGs?

After four years of implementation, the progress report by the UN Secretary General in 2019 (SG, 2019) and the 2019 edition of the *Global Sustainable Development Report* (GSDR, 2019) agree on the following: the world is not on track to achieve the SDGs. Although it is too soon to tell whether the unsustainable trend of numerous indicators can be reversed (specific implementation efforts can take several years to produce results), an attempt can be made to assess what the SDGs have achieved since their adoption. This analysis is the subject of the next two sections, first for international organisations, then for countries and other actors such as companies and NGOs.

2. HAVE THE SDGs BECOME AN INTERNATIONAL ROADMAP?

The preamble to the 2030 Agenda is clear: “This Agenda is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity” and “all countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan”. It is thus supposed to apply to everyone. How have the different actors and international institutions taken ownership of this new global agenda? Do their orientations, practices and modes of action really need to change?

2.1. The 2030 Agenda, a new international reference?

The G20 and the G7

Ownership of the 2030 Agenda by the G7 (or G8) and G20, the “*oligarchic clubs*” described by Bertrand Badie (2011), is particularly instructive in terms of the credibility and legitimacy of this universal agenda designed to be a new international and universal framework.

Riding the dynamic of the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit in New York, several weeks after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the G20 Summit adopted a Leaders Communiqué in Antalya (Turkey), in which the members of the G20 explicitly recognise the transformative, universal and ambitious nature of the 2030 Agenda (and of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development). The G20 also committed in 2015 to developing an action plan to further align its work with the 2030 Agenda. In 2016 in Hangzhou (China), the G20 adopted an Action Plan on the 2030 Agenda emphasising the added value of the G20, presented as a global forum for economic cooperation, which intends to put sustainable development at the heart of its action. However, this action plan is not truly transformative: although it includes all of the promises of the 2030 Agenda, it focuses instead on supporting the sectoral actions already implemented by the G20 by linking them to the corresponding SDGs. In 2017, the G20 under the German presidency updated this action plan. Since 2015, all G20 declarations clearly refer to the 2030 Agenda, highlighting the important role of the G20 in delivering this agenda.

The G7 in Ise-Shima (Japan) in 2016 devoted a whole section of its final declaration to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in the part on development and international cooperation. The G7 takes up the main language elements used in the 2030 Agenda and highlights its commitment to support developing countries’ efforts to implement the agenda, with a particular emphasis on the dignity of vulnerable populations and the promotion of human security. As a body that has regularly addressed financing for development, and in particular official development assistance, the G7 explicitly stresses the importance of implementing the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, which for the G7 constitutes “an integral part” of the 2030 Agenda. This declaration also makes the challenges facing Africa central to the delivery of the SDGs, while recognising

⁵ <https://sdgindex.org/>

that security, development, climate change and gender equality are interdependent and instrumental to ensuring a prosperous and peaceful Africa. In 2017 and 2018, respectively in Taormina (Italy) and Charlevoix (Canada), the G7 continued to refer to the 2030 Agenda, but far more succinctly and without this giving a truly new or different impetus to the discussions and initiatives launched in its framework.

International financial and economic institutions

Further to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, even the international organisations that do not formally belong to the United Nations system had to position themselves in relation to this new development programme.

The World Bank, the main international organisation financing development throughout the world, was involved in discussions from the beginning of the SDG process. The institution wanted to avoid repeating the mistakes made in the framework of the MDGs, for which it had taken almost five years to catch up and support implementation. Jim Yong Kim, the then President of the World Bank, thus received in the spring meetings of 2014 a mandate from his Development Committee to "*maintain strong collaboration with the UN system in the definition of the Post-2015 Millennium Development Goals*".⁶ A special envoy responsible for discussions on the SDGs (Mahmoud Mohieldin, now Senior Vice-President for the 2030 Development Agenda and United Nations Relations) was appointed, with a mandate to play an active role in the development of the agenda and especially in discussions on its financing. The World Bank then aligned the SDG targets and indicators with its own results frameworks, including the performance ratings and the Results Measurement System of its International Development Association (IDA). Since July 2017, the Bank has integrated the SDGs into the planning and monitoring of the group's activities and into the annual reports from all regions, as well as into key institutional and strategic processes that inform country commitment through the different institutions of the World Bank group. And since 2017, the World Bank presents its efforts to deliver the SDGs in more than 170 countries through its annual SDG Atlas. Moreover, a new World Bank Group Partnership Fund for the SDGs has been launched, supported by Sweden and South Korea, in order to meet "the growing need for strong partnerships and means of implementation for global goals by funding catalytic initiatives that strengthen implementation to help us reach the SDGs".

Although the International Monetary Fund (IMF) took part in the SDG negotiations, their adoption does not appear to have made any real difference to its practices or its modes of intervention, with the institution simply explaining in a publication how it helps its members to implement the 2030 Agenda in the fields covered by its mandate, in other words financial stability and sustainable and inclusive economic growth. In 2015, the

IMF Executive Board recognised that the primary contribution the IMF could make to achieving the 2030 Agenda was to deliver on its core mandate of helping maintain macroeconomic and financial stability at both the global and national levels. It also specified that there were "*several areas where targeted expansion of Fund policy engagement and technical assistance could help countries accelerate sustainable development*". The IMF thus committed to increase its support, primarily for developing countries, in several areas, including: (i) strengthening national tax systems; (ii) tackling large infrastructure gaps; (iii) promoting economic inclusion; (iv) developing domestic financial markets; (v) intensified engagement in fragile and conflict-affected states; (vi) improving economic statistics; (vii) expanding the financial safety net for developing countries; and (viii) addressing macroeconomic aspects of climate change. Since 2015, further initiatives have been implemented, especially the definition of methods to quantify the budget costs of delivering the SDGs and increased IMF contribution to reducing vulnerability to corruption. In view of these documents, it appears difficult to argue that the 2030 Agenda has had an impact on IMF activities, even if this agenda clearly emerges as a framework in relation to which the Fund must position its action.

The World Trade Organization (WTO), for its part, has not truly integrated the 2030 Agenda as a new international framework with which its action should be aligned, but attempts to demonstrate that its action contributes directly to this agenda: "*By delivering and implementing trade reforms which are pro-growth and pro-development, and by continuing to foster stable, predictable and equitable trading relations across the world, the WTO is playing an important role in delivering the SDGs, just as it did with the Millennium Development Goals before them.*"⁷

Paradoxically, the international organisation that appears to have been the most effective in integrating the 2030 Agenda is the OECD, in other words an organisation that has "only" 36 member countries, none of which are on the African continent. However, the OECD seems to have taken up this new international framework in order to rethink its activities using the wide range of data, policy tools and dialogue platforms available to it in order to benefit "countries as they develop national strategies for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda". The OECD intends to adapt its expertise by applying an "SDG lens" to its multidisciplinary and sectoral work and has adopted a strategic response to the SDGs in the form of an OECD Action Plan on the SDGs.⁸ Through this document, the OECD hopes to contribute to the "GPS" the international community needs to deliver the 2030 Agenda. The organisation attempts to "support countries as they identify where they currently stand in relation to the SDGs, where they need to be, and propose sustainable

⁶ https://www.devcommittee.org/sites/www.devcommittee.org/files/download/Communiques/Communique%28E%29V2_Final.pdf

⁷ https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/coher_e/sdgs_e/sdgs_e.htm

⁸ Better Policies for 2030 An OECD Action Plan on the Sustainable Development Goals, 2019 <http://www.oecd.org/dac/Better%20Policies%20for%202030.pdf>

pathways based on evidence". The OECD reaffirms "its role as a leading source of expertise, good practices and standards in economic, social and environmental areas of public policy that are relevant to the SDGs" and encourages "a 'race to the top' for better and more coherent policies that can help deliver the SDGs, through the use of hallmark OECD approaches (e.g. peer reviews and learning; monitoring and statistical reporting; policy dialogue; soft law)". Accordingly, the OECD has produced numerous studies, sometimes in an uncoordinated fashion, that place the 2030 Agenda at the heart of its analyses, especially on the situation of the OECD countries in relation to the goals to be met.⁹ These orientations are particularly interesting coming from an organisation that is known for putting the emphasis on policy alignment with liberal economic objectives. But are they actually a paradigm shift for the organisation? Can its different assessment tools and mechanisms, especially peer review, truly serve as an example or as a model for other bodies? In this respect, it is worth noting the launch by the OECD and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), on September 25, 2019, of the Global Hub on the Governance for the SDGs, which aims to facilitate targeted support to countries for SDG implementation.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) should also be mentioned, as it places the 2030 Agenda at the heart of China's "globalisation 2.0" project. Questions nevertheless remain about the use of the principles and goals of this agenda in this framework.¹⁰

The United Nations

The 2030 Agenda is first and foremost the fruit of the United Nations system, which nevertheless only really restructured to support its implementation in the countries, at the initiative of the Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, from January 1, 2019. At the heart of this transformation, the new resident coordinator system puts the countries at the forefront, to "*allow for the emergence of a new generation of country teams, centred on a strategic United Nations Development Assistance Framework and led by an impartial, independent and empowered resident coordinator*".¹¹ The resident coordinators, who hitherto represented the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), now concentrate full-time on leading the United Nations country teams with the mandate to step up coordination on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In this context, the objective of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework is to serve as a pact between the UN and the countries based on collective results. It is clearly too soon to determine the impact of this reform, but the results at country level will be a litmus test.

The United Nations development entities at the global and regional levels are also changing to meet the demands of the

2030 Agenda. In order to strengthen the strategic orientation and monitoring of field operations, the Secretary-General has made changes to the United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG), the body that brings together the heads of the 40 United Nations entities that support sustainable development in the field. At the regional level, the United Nations Regional Economic and Social Commissions are being consolidated to meet specific regional requirements as the countries make progress in SDG implementation. The recent SDG forums organised by ECLAC and ECA in Latin America and Africa confirm the increasingly important role played by these commissions in regional dynamics to support the 2030 Agenda.

2.2. The example of SDG 14 on oceans

SDG 14 ("Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development") calls upon the countries to sustainably manage and protect marine and coastal ecosystems, to minimise and address the impacts of ocean acidification, to end overfishing, in particular by prohibiting subsidies that contribute to it, and to conserve at least 10% of marine and coastal areas. Contrary to other goals under the 2030 Agenda, SDG 14 does not include any new obligations for states, but takes the form of a reminder of commitments already made by the international community under different treaties and declarations. The aim of the Oceans SDG is thus to establish a specific roadmap and a pathway from which states must not depart. When it was adopted in 2015, the Oceans SDG brought new political momentum and many actors thus made its implementation a key objective.

First, many countries took this opportunity to establish new institutional arrangements: some created a multi-stakeholder task force to coordinate the application of SDG 14 (Madagascar), others assigned this mandate to an existing body (Jamaica), while yet others designated a national focal point (France). From a strategic point of view, many states also launched national consultations to identify the priority targets on which to concentrate efforts.

Some regional organisations have also included SDG 14 in their agenda, in order to encourage their member countries to work towards its implementation and to facilitate experience sharing to this end. The Nairobi Convention, the regional organisation responsible for marine environment protection in the Western Indian Ocean, has thus organised several events on SDG 14 and integrated its implementation challenges into its 2018-2022 strategy. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) has also launched initiatives for the coordinated application of the 2030 Agenda, including SDG 14.

Finally, it is worth noting that SDG 14 is the only goal that has a specific regular assessment mechanism. Indeed, at the proposal of Fiji and Sweden, the UN member states decided to organise a triennial conference on the oceans and seas, to assess progress made in the implementation of the Oceans SDG. A first conference was organised in New York in June 2017 and the next will be held in Lisbon in 2020. In addition to the plenary

⁹ *Mesurer la distance à parcourir pour atteindre les cibles des ODD - 2019* <http://www.oecd.org/sdd/measuring-distance-to-the-sdg-targets-2019-a8caf-3fa-en.htm>

¹⁰ <https://www.iddri.org/fr/publications-et-evenements/billet-de-blog/verdir-les-nouvelles-routes-de-la-soie-recents-progres>

¹¹ <https://undocs.org/fr/A/72/684>

sessions, during which country representatives are invited to present their initiatives for the implementation of SDG 14, these conferences are also an opportunity for the “extended” Oceans community (experts, NGOs, think tanks, private sector, etc.) to mobilise, especially through the “voluntary commitments” that these actors can present.

2.3. Collective learning: what added value for the High-Level Political Forum?

The decision to create the HLPF was taken in 2012 at Rio+20. Although the SDG negotiations were decided at the same time, the HLPF emerged before their final adoption. According to the conclusions of Rio+20, the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development was created to: (1) provide political leadership, guidance and recommendations for sustainable development; (2) follow up and review progress in the implementation of sustainable development commitments; (3) enhance integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development in a holistic and cross-sectoral manner at all levels; and (4) have a focused, dynamic and action-oriented agenda, ensuring the appropriate consideration of new and emerging sustainable development challenges (A/RES/66/288, *The Future We Want*).

When the 2030 Agenda entered into force, the HLPF became its platform for monitoring and reviewing progress. This forum meets once a year in July under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). In addition, every four years and for the first time in 2019, the HLPF will meet in the form of a summit of heads of state under the auspices of the United Nations General Assembly. The 2019 meeting marked the end of a four-year cycle during which progress made in the delivery of all of the SDGs was reviewed.

The technical segment of the HLPF

Four years after the adoption of the SDGs, what added value does this forum bring to their implementation? Based on our previous analyses (Vaillé, 2016; Demailly & Hege, 2017; Hege, 2018), the results of the HLPF as a mechanism for monitoring country progress are mixed. The first part of this forum, the technical segment, involves a thematic review of a limited number of goals. This is organised in four-year cycles; each of the 17 SDGs will therefore have been reviewed three or four times by 2030. In July 2018, for example, discussions focused on water and sanitation, access to clean energy, sustainable cities, sustainable consumption and production patterns, biodiversity, and means of implementation, in other words SDGs 6, 7, 11, 12, 15 and 17; a wide range of subjects, which were inevitably addressed only briefly and superficially. The water community, which was relatively active in this forum, expressed concern about the superficiality and insufficiency of discussions.

Concerning the other SDGs, the general level of discussions, summarising what is already being discussed elsewhere (energy issues are discussed in the framework of the Paris Agreement,

biodiversity issues in that of the Convention on Biological Diversity, etc.), attracts very few specialists, and those who do attend say they are somewhat disappointed that nothing new is said. Issues are discussed before delegates who are typically generalists in development, sustainable development or the SDGs. Yet, as one speaker remarked, a fruitful discussion on the effectiveness of public policies requires expertise, and in particular independent expertise. This raises the question of the added value that the HLPF brings in relation to thematic international institutions such as the WHO, UN Women, the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) or the United Nations Environment Assembly. Some of these have independent expertise mechanisms (such as the CFS High-Level Panel of Experts [HLPE]), in addition to the specific expertise of the UN agencies; but their mandate does not easily enable them to identify the limitations of the individual action of a country after evaluation of its public policies; added value which is nevertheless necessary.

As for the potential of the SDGs to generate discussions and knowledge about the interrelationships between the different challenges, the HLPF only contributes to a limited extent. In the discourse, growing awareness of the existence of interrelationships between the SDGs has been observed, but it does not automatically lead to practice changes or to more coherent policies. To work on the conflicts and synergies between the SDGs in a practical manner, the HLPF has not yet succeeded in initiating joint work programmes between sectors, for example on the dams advocated by some as a source of renewable energy and condemned by others as a cause of biodiversity loss. The *Global Sustainable Development Report* highlights the need for further research on interactions between the targets of the 2030 Agenda; only 10% of these interactions are currently addressed in the academic literature (Independent Group of Scientists, 2019). It is in this context that the International Science Council published a guide aimed at exploring the nature of interlinkages between the targets of the 2030 Agenda (Griggs *et al.*, 2017).

The political segment of the HLPF

The second part of the Forum, the political segment, is marked by the presence of higher level representatives, Ministers and Secretaries of State; with just a few exceptions, these are all Ministers of the Environment, Planning or Cooperation. Some 47 countries submitted to the voluntary national review exercise, presented their state of progress on the SDGs and answered questions put by other countries and civil society. As it stands, this exercise, a key element of accountability for SDG implementation, is unconvincing. The quality of national reports varies considerably, and the questions asked by other countries are often ones of convenience, prepared in advance with the country presenting its report. There has nevertheless been some improvement: the countries no longer speak only of their successes, but also of the remaining challenges. However, all too often the countries still simply describe their process to “align” their existing policies, and sometimes their budget, with the SDGs, without any way of determining what the SDGs have actually changed, questioned or moved forward.

The HLPF is not the only place for collective learning and accountability on the SDGs, and even less on the different subjects covered by the SDGs. Other places exist at the national level, and the SDGs themselves open new spaces for discussion within countries, between ministries and with civil society. But the HLPF is the figurehead of the SDGs: it should echo the learning processes in other places, and the criticisms levelled at country actions, their level of ambition, their effectiveness and their impact; it should also identify the subjects for which further collective learning and accountability are required, and stimulate research on these subjects going beyond the traditional institutional silos. The multilateral review exercises for policies implemented by the countries are highly sensitive from the viewpoint of diplomacy and state sovereignty, as shown by the difficulty of negotiations on the transparency of commitments under the Paris Climate Agreement.

The emergence of this type of discussion within the HLPF is therefore to be commended, being essential to collective learning and enhanced ambition for everyone concerned, while recognising that there is still considerable scope for progress. But this is a long way from peer review exercises, such as those implemented by the OECD.

It should nevertheless be noted that the HLPF can be an opportunity to listen to inspiring discussions about the state of the world and future solutions, or sharp reminders about the climate, for example. It is a place for teambuilding and exchanges for the community working on the SDGs, particularly articulated around events organised for different types of actors (companies, for example) and different levels of action (local issues are also addressed there, alongside the national dimension). It was further to research conducted in the context of the HLPF in 2017 that Finland began the construction of a national sustainability-oriented budget consistent with the goals of the 2030 Agenda.¹²

Reforming the HLPF

The HLPF, whose action receives very little media coverage, has so far generated only limited collective action. To avoid losing credibility (RNE, 2018), it needs to be reformed. In the Political Declaration of the SDG Summit in September 2019, the member states explicitly pledge to carry out a review of the HLPF to "*further strengthen the effective and participatory character of this intergovernmental forum and encourage the peer-learning character of the voluntary national reviews*".¹³ There are a number of avenues for strengthening the legitimacy and effectiveness of the HLPF, which could:

- focus on the effectiveness of policies: assessing past and ongoing actions, assessing the gap between trends and

goals, identifying the main obstacles to action and tools available;

- focus on one of the added values of the SDGs, in other words the synergies—and sometimes conflicts—between the different sustainability challenges. The HLPF must continue to explore the specificity of its role in terms of this complementarity between specialist expertise and an integrated vision;
- in order to fulfil its role (and its mandate) of "political leadership", focus on emerging topics, those with a critical need for greater political visibility: income inequalities within countries, gender inequalities and good governance rather than climate policies, for example, which are widely covered elsewhere. The HLPF could also focus on negative spillovers between countries, such as trade in products from deforestation or tax havens. This is an indicative list, whose objective is to invite everyone to question what the added value of the HLPF could be;
- give more time to exchanges between countries and with civil society, and give them a peer review mission/role;
- entrust monitoring to one or two "observer" countries for the whole national process to draft voluntary country reports, with these observers then becoming the official discussants during the review phase;
- launch a coalition of the fastest (RNE, 2018).

The SDG Summit of 2019

In September 2019, the HLPF was placed for the first time under the aegis of the United Nations General Assembly. This special edition, also known as the "SDG Summit", will be held every four years. In 2019, a Political Declaration was unanimously adopted, reaffirming the commitments made in 2015 and calling for voluntary actions. A register of voluntary actions undertaken by countries and other actors was created in the form of a web platform (SDG Acceleration Actions); these actions may be new or may build on existing initiatives. During the summit, the Secretary-General announced the creation of an annual platform to take stock of action on the SDGs,¹⁴ and also called for actors to accelerate efforts and to move forward not through the prism of the economy of the past decade, but through that of the next decade, fostering solutions that have the greatest impact on gender equality, sustainable cities and the fight against climate change. The group of scientists at the origin of the *Global Sustainable Development Report* (GSDR) warned about the dangers of a silo approach to implementation for several SDGs, and called for actors to address the difficult trade-offs between goals by designing food security policies according to their impact on biodiversity and climate, for example.

Many heads of state attended (e.g. Japan, Iceland, Finland, Malaysia) and several of them answered the Secretary-General's call to accelerate action. As with a classical HLPF, the focus

¹² On this subject, see the blog post published by IDDRI (interview with Annika Lindblom, Adviser for International Affairs at the Ministry of the Environment of Finland and Secretary-General of the National Commission on Sustainable Development of Finland: <https://www.iddri.org/fr/publications-et-evenements/billet-de-blog/construire-un-budget-pour-les-generations-futures>

¹³ <https://undocs.org/fr/A/HLPF/2019/L.1>

¹⁴ <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2019-09-24/remarks-high-level-political-sustainable-development-forum>

of country presentations varied from one country to another (digitalization policy for some, water management for others), thereby confirming the absence of a coherent, mobilising narrative around this complex agenda. The countries dealt very little with the six subjects proposed: megatrends impacting the achievement of the SDGs; accelerating the achievement of the SDGs: critical entry points; measures to leverage progress across the SDGs; localising the SDGs; partnerships for sustainable development; and the 2020-2030 vision. However, the presentations enabled the countries to highlight their efforts and challenges in the implementation of the agenda. Malaysia, for example, drew attention to the difficult trade-offs between goals on forest preservation, housing and agricultural production, and also criticised the developed countries, which send their waste to Malaysia, even though the country already has difficulty processing its own; and Iceland shared its experience of integrating social and environmental well-being indicators into the national budget.

Several major states were not represented at the highest level (e.g. France, Russia) or did not make a presentation (e.g. Germany, Mexico, Canada). Moreover, compared to the Climate Action Summit, which also took place within the framework of the United Nations General Assembly, the SDG Summit received little media coverage.

3. ASSESSING SDGs IMPLEMENTATION AT THE DOMESTIC LEVEL

3.1. Interesting regional dynamics: a zoom on three regions

Africa: new impetus for planning and participation

The African sustainable development landscape is complicated by the coexistence of two sets of goals: Agenda 2063 adopted under the aegis of the African Union,¹⁵ and the 2030 Agenda including the SDGs implemented by the United Nations (Economic Commission for Africa - ECA). Both processes are endeavouring to coordinate their activities and to develop harmonised approaches, especially on reporting. This nevertheless results in complexities, overlapping and costly duplication of efforts.

At the national level, the SDG process plays a positive role in the construction of a new approach to the governance of development, especially for development planning processes. After the statist, centralised planning phase of the post-colonial years, then the decline of planning during the years of structural adjustment

and liberalisation (Samuel, 2017), the SDGs are the opportunity to renew this approach in a less technocratic, more systemic and inclusive manner, which is open to civil society participation (Economic Commission for Africa). Planning is of interest in that it associates all ministries, ensures dialogue with the funding agencies, and is situated upstream of budget processes; it thus appears as a suitable approach to mainstreaming the SDGs at the strategic level and on a multi-year basis.

An interesting example is that of Morocco, where the High Commission for Planning (HCP) supports the national sustainable development strategy, as well as the participatory processes that accompany it. In South Africa, the national SDG coordination process is placed under the responsibility of the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, which reports to the National Planning Commission; this commission works in association with stakeholders, including the private sector. The current development plan was adopted in 2013; it is gradually being updated with a view to alignment with the SDGs in the framework of the five-year implementation plans.

In Namibia, the 5th National Development Plan (2017-2022) integrates the SDGs and Agenda 2063 under the aegis of the Planning Commission, which endeavours to mobilise economic operators and civil society

During the African Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, held in April 2019 in Marrakech, it was stressed that SDG integration into planning is very progressive and that the adjustment of development plans needs to be accelerated.

The participatory approach is integral to the concept of the SDGs. A number of African countries have advocated the participation of civil society and economic operators in their national SDG implementation process. In Kenya, for example, the SDG Kenya Forum (www.sdgkenyaforum.org) is a voluntary group of 60 civil society organisations representing the different regions alongside the government bodies. This forum addresses the political and legislative changes required for SDG implementation, organises specific dialogues to this end and builds operational partnerships.

In Morocco, the government (Secretariat of State for Sustainable Development and HCP) organised two major national consultations in 2016 and 2019 on SDG implementation with a view to drafting the national report submitted to the United Nations (HLPF). In this regard, it should be noted that the preparation of the national report is generally a key moment for civil society participation, enabling non-state actors to give their analysis of the state of progress on the SDGs.

In South Africa, the Global Compact Network South Africa has mobilised companies to contribute to SDG implementation in connection with the National Development Plan.

The SDG process also has positive effects on regional and sub-regional cooperation through the initiatives of the African Union as well as the United Nations and their agencies. ECA publishes an annual report on progress towards the SDGs in connection with the HLPF agenda, a valuable document that identifies advances as well as the considerable gaps that remain, especially in terms of statistics. It coordinates regional cooperation and experience sharing on the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs).

¹⁵ <https://au.int/fr/agenda2063/vue-ensemble>

In total, for the period 2016-2019, 34 of the 54 countries of the African continent presented their national report to the HLPF. Emphasis was placed on private sector and civil society participation in the drafting of this report. An illustrative case is that of Sierra Leone, where non-state actors are closely involved in the national report process.

This progress must not however obscure the fact that Africa is lagging far behind in delivering the SDGs. According to the SDSN report (June 2019), of the 20 countries that are furthest behind on the SDGs, 17 are African, and the regional report presented by ECA at the forum in Marrakech is pessimistic about the possibility of achieving the SDGs by 2030 (Sachs *et al.*, 2019a).

Latin America and the Caribbean: strong support for the SDGs in the discourse and experimentation in budgets

In 2019, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) organised its third regional forum on the SDGs, which mobilised high-level country representatives, academics and civil society. During this forum, a quadrennial progress report was launched (ECLAC, 2019), sparking heated debate about SDG implementation as well as the obstacles encountered by the countries. Given that the SDGs were driven by two countries in the region, Colombia and Guatemala, it is perhaps only natural that these goals are doing well in this region, at least in the discourse. Another indication of the importance these countries give to the 2030 Agenda is the decision to place responsibility for its implementation at the highest level, with the office of the President or the Prime Minister, for example; moreover, in 29 of the 33 countries of the region, formal institutional mechanisms have been created by decree or resolution to coordinate SDG implementation in those countries.

As is the case in Africa, planning mechanisms, which are important in the history of the region, have been revived by the SDGs: in 16 Latin American countries, the Ministries of Planning act as a technical secretariat for SDG implementation, and development plans are often the entry point for discussing this process.

The actions conducted by the coordination mechanisms cover numerous fields: training and information, the production of analyses at the national and/or regional level, the promotion of cooperation agreements with international organisations and other aspects linked to implementation and evaluation, and the definition of priorities. Moreover, ECLAC has developed a methodology, adopted in particular by Guatemala (HLPF Side Event, 2018) and Costa Rica, to identify "accelerators",¹⁶ in other words priorities that take account of multiplying effects on other objectives.

In this region, the SDGs have also served to revive discussions on coherence between long-term development plans and

budget processes. According to the regional progress report, the adoption of the 2030 Agenda has given national and sub-national governments the opportunity to connect the objectives of their planning instruments (aligned with the SDGs) to national budgets and investment plans.

This is an interesting development, but one that is not without challenges, relating to limited fiscal space and time lags between plans and budgets. National development plans focus on medium- and long-term objectives, whereas public budgets are designed from a short-term perspective, except in the case of multi-year budgets. Political leadership supported at the highest level can help to overcome this challenge.

Mexico, for example, is working to link its development plan to the budget and to the 2030 Agenda. Over the fiscal year 2018, more than 80% of its budget programmes concerned matters relating to SDG delivery. Moreover, 156 of the 169 SDG targets were linked to at least one budget programme, the goal being to determine what proportion of the budget is allocated to SDG delivery. Since the linkage is not direct, this process involved two stages: (i) establishing a link between the SDGs and the national budget and planning programmes; and (ii) determining the contribution of each budget programme to the SDGs.

In its latest national voluntary review, Colombia presents a new tool developed by the National Planning Department in order to facilitate resource allocation with a view to delivering the 2030 Agenda. This report details the limitations of the tool and difficulties in identifying the resources allocated to each SDG, primarily because of their interdependence. The tool is used to monitor and systematise budget information and to identify for each source of public spending the proportion used for SDG implementation. The idea is to establish a baseline from which it will be possible to monitor the evolution of resources allocated to SDG delivery and the proportion of total investment financed by the general budget allocated to each SDG. Investments have concentrated on SDGs 1, 3, 4, 9 and 16, and have been primarily dedicated to infrastructure development, especially in the transport sector, in order to improve connections between the different parts of the country. Special attention has also been given to resources aimed at strengthening peace institutions and negotiations (ECLAC, 2019). Argentina and Uruguay have also begun efforts to better connect the 2030 Agenda to budget processes.

Europe: new momentum for sustainable development strategies and the search for a regional approach

IDDDRI contributed to the report entitled *Europe's approach to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals: Good practices and the way forward*,¹⁷ the first study that compares SDG implementation processes and governance mechanisms in all EU Member States.

¹⁶ <https://www.cepal.org/es/node/45900>.

¹⁷ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/160360/DEVE%20study%20on%20EU%20SDG%20implementation%20formatted.pdf>

Most countries have already or are about to update their national development or sustainable development plans in accordance with the SDGs. And half of the countries have clear coordination mechanisms between ministries, often headed by the Prime Minister. Most of the member states provide regular progress reports and indicators on the SDGs, but there is still room for improvement in the definition of quantified objectives and in the independence of progress reviews. As in other regions, considerable efforts are being made to improve stakeholder participation and SDG implementation, and many countries are taking an inclusive approach; however, in some countries, stakeholder participation is still absent. Assessments of the impact on sustainable development and the use of the SDGs in budget processes are still rare, but many countries are planning efforts to that effect.

Niestroy *et al.* (2019) also review the initiatives launched by EU member state parliaments. More and more parliaments have special commissions or initiatives linked to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. But there are still challenges to overcome in terms of the compartmentalisation of committees, and other tools could be developed to examine and closely monitor SDG progress in all policies.

Germany and Finland are endeavouring to take on a leadership role through highly structured implementation processes, but not without flaws in the effectiveness of their implementation.

Germany especially stands out for its robust monitoring framework, which includes regular progress reports and an independent review by international experts. This panel of experts is mandated to formulate recommendations to which the government is obliged to respond. The German Court of Auditors has also taken up the SDGs to examine progress still to be made. And impact studies for bills structured around the 17 SDGs are an interesting innovation.

Finland is one of the most complete examples of SDG integration in budget processes. It has a long tradition of discussing sustainable development within the government and more broadly within Finnish society. The Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development has existed for 25 years, and the 2030 Agenda has provided the opportunity to scale up its work. The universal nature of the SDGs and the critical changes they impose have revealed the need to create new mechanisms, including in the budget process.¹⁸ In February 2017, the Finnish government adopted an implementation plan defining two priority areas: (1) a carbon-neutral and resource-wise Finland; and (2) a non-discriminating, equal and competent Finland. This plan is integrated into the national budget in three ways. First, the ministries, in their reporting, must justify their main lines of expenditure against sustainable development criteria. Each ministry is required to report on the resources allocated to the two above-mentioned priorities. The 2018 budget was a trial run. The 2019 budget includes a new section on the general outlook. The ministries can provide further analysis

and assessment of one of the sustainability priorities. For practical reasons, the decision was made to concentrate on one or other of the two priority areas, being easier to identify and integrate into the budget process. The model, which will be improved over time, is supplemented by a budget review publication, which has an English version online. Finally, a new specific chapter on sustainable development summarises the first and second sections. The Ministry of Finance did not want to focus solely on lines of expenditure, but also on taxes and environmentally harmful subsidies, which may or may not support the SDGs. Taxes on motor vehicles, beverages and waste are considered to support sustainable development; but other taxes are more difficult to assess. The budget directors were strategically included as closely as possible in the development of the initiative, launched by a Secretary of State at the Ministry of Finance. Civil society was involved in discussions and therefore knew of the existence of this initiative, enabling it to pressure the ministry to assess its progress. Now that sustainability criteria are included in the budget, they will produce results if they are increasingly taken into account in future budget decisions.

In Europe, there is also the question of a regional approach to SDG implementation. The Commission has not developed an SDG implementation strategy for more than three years, which has been criticised by the Council and the Parliament, but perhaps not with enough force.¹⁹ Monitoring is carried out by Eurostat, which publishes annual statistical reports at the EU level. In the absence of specific indicators for many SDG targets, the report mainly analyses trends. The Commission has nevertheless created a multi-stakeholder platform with the goal of producing a contribution to the Reflection Paper published by the Commission in January 2019: different civil society groups, including private sector representatives, agreed in this framework to recommend a cross-cutting, ambitious strategy on SDG implementation in Europe. As for horizontal coordination, the Council created a Working Party on the 2030 Agenda, with the explicit aim of better connecting internal and external activities on SDG implementation. The Commission has not so far fulfilled its intention to mainstream the SDGs in all policies, in particular through "better regulation" tools and other instruments such as structural funds. There is scope to revise the Commission's impact assessment in the light of the 2030 Agenda, as the economic dimension currently dominates the environmental and social dimensions.

In early 2019, the European Commission published its Reflection Paper on the SDGs, entitled *Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030*.²⁰ This paper explores three scenarios for the future that effectively sum up the ideas advanced by different actors (Hege, 2019). Scenario 3 proposes focusing efforts on EU external action, thereby reflecting the classical narrative of the SDGs

¹⁸ <https://www.iddri.org/fr/publications-et-evenements/billet-de-blog/construire-un-budget-pour-les-generations-futures>

¹⁹ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/36775/18-euco-finalconclusions-en.pdf>.

²⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/publications/reflection-paper-towards-sustainable-europe-2030_en

in favour of development, and works on the assumption that little additional action is needed at the domestic level, given the EU's good position in SDG rankings. Scenario 2 is that of an improved status quo, based on a mainstreaming approach: the member states and the different Directorates-General of the Commission are responsible for mainstreaming the SDGs in their activities, without any binding directives. This scenario resembles the current approach, but proposes several avenues for improvement while remaining somewhat vague. Its main advantage is that it is intended to be operational and effective by adopting sectoral approaches; its main disadvantage is that it does not provide solutions for better coordination between the states and the EU, or for better policy coherence. Scenario 1 is the most ambitious scenario, and also the one that requires the greatest additional efforts. It proposes an overarching SDG implementation strategy with specific targets and deadlines and substantial monitoring at the EU and country levels. This is the option for which the authors identify the most advantages: an ambitious strategy could give a positive vision for Europe and send a strong signal at the international level. Its disadvantage is that it is the most complex scenario, since agreeing on specific targets between countries takes time.

The decision will be down to the Commission and the new Parliament. The Reflection Paper was prepared by Frans Timmermans and his team during his mandate as Vice-President of the previous Commission; in his new mandate as Vice-President, he is primarily responsible for developing a European Green Deal. The new President of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, included an explicit reference to the SDGs in the mission letter to the Commissioners-designate: "*Each Commissioner will ensure the delivery of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals within their policy area. The College as a whole will be responsible for the overall implementation of the Goals*". The sectoral approach implicitly advocated by the President is consistent with scenario 2 described above, and is therefore likely to change very little in relation to the previous mode of operating.

3.2. What have the SDGs achieved at the country level?

Planning sustainable development

As observed in the previous sections and also noted in the progress report by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the SDGs have enabled the "revival" of development planning and sustainable development strategies,²¹ in line with the long-term transformation of the development path required to deliver all of the 17 SDGs.

For some countries, the 2030 Agenda has served as inspiration for new or revised strategies or plans. In some cases, this

has been facilitated by the fact that the sustainable development planning, vision or strategy documents needed updating in any case (e.g. Germany). Other countries, especially those whose plans and policies predate the adoption of the SDGs, have primarily compared the SDGs to their existing documents and analysed the way in which these documents can move the 2030 Agenda forward through "mapping" exercises.

According to the Secretary-General's report, the budgeting of SDGs and their mainstreaming in national financial frameworks are uncommon for the time being, in both the developed and the developing countries, although some countries have adopted this approach at the initiative of the ministries, members of parliament or other political actors. Only a small number of countries seem to have specific financing plans for SDG implementation. Benin, for example, has evaluated the costs of SDG implementation at the national level, enabling it to prioritise the key investments that have spillover effects on other objectives.

A key finding by Niestroy *et al.* (2019) is that most of the EU countries have revised their sustainable development strategies and development plans or have launched new strategies with the SDGs. But it is very difficult to determine whether these strategies are operational. Only half of the countries list new measures, and very few of these strategies are linked to the national budget or to an investment plan. In terms of monitoring, many countries have revised their indicators in accordance with the SDGs, but very few, like Finland and Germany, go as far as organising an independent progress review.

Reform or transformation? Some historical benchmarks

Volkery *et al.* (2006) studied 19 developing and developed countries in order to identify the main challenges in terms of action for sustainable development at the national level. Their research shows that a large number of innovative approaches and tools have been developed and applied over the last 10 years. But despite some real progress, they note that the countries are still in the early stages of their process, and the lack of coordination with the national budget and with other strategic processes at the national level already appears as one of the main challenges. Hopwood *et al.* (2005) propose a distinction between an approach based on reform and a transformative approach to sustainable development. Their global assessment shows that the reformist approach has failed to bring about change in line with the expectations of the Brundtland Report (1987).²² Almost 15 years after this assessment, and although the SDGs are not yet halfway through their implementation, most of the country practices observed today are typically closer to a reformist approach. For the least ambitious, the goal is not even to reform what already exists, but to simply "repaint" it in the colours of the SDGs. It seems there is still a long way to go to realise the transformative promise of the SDGs,

²¹ The idea of national sustainable development strategies as implementation tools dates back to the Johannesburg Summit in 2002. Most of them serve partly to rationalise all of the policy initiatives that have already been created from other existing political and institutional processes (Volkery *et al.*, 2006).

²² https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/sites/odyssee-developpement-durable/files/5/rapport_brundtland.pdf

which is perhaps also explained by the fact that this promise was challenged from the outset. Going back further in the history of sustainable development, already five years after the Earth Summit in 1992, a United Nations Special Session produced a disappointing review of progress made: individual successes were overshadowed by the general inability of countries to give the proper political weight required for significant implementation (Brown, 1997). Here again, four years after the adoption of the SDGs, the Secretary-General's report is only slightly more encouraging.

Based on their examination of some 20 strategic processes in the developed and developing countries, Swanson *et al.* (2004, pp. 37-38) identify four key challenges in the sustainable development implementation process: the lack of a feedback mechanism (monitoring, learning); no coordination of objectives and strategic initiatives with the national budget process; coordination of action with the local and sub-national levels; and failure to deploy a full range of policy initiatives. A relatively similar set of challenges was identified during a review of member states' strategies conducted by the European Commission (EC, 2004). Cited by Zaccai (2012), one of the main findings of this review is that numerous strategies are not clearly prioritised, posing a risk of diluting them and obstructing the implementation of the global strategy (EC, 2004). The danger is that the concept of sustainable development could become an "empty box" into which all existing economic, social and environmental policies can be placed and simply relabelled (EC, 2004). The different promises associated with the 2030 Agenda, with the 17 SDGs and with the large number of indicators are aimed at overcoming this empty box syndrome, but it seems that in practice, as observed so far, this risk has not been eliminated. Meadowcroft (2007) calls these empty boxes "cosmetic strategies" (as opposed to "ideal strategies"), being almost entirely devoid of political and administrative relevance, and "naturally" deriving from the incompatibility between the actual functioning of governments and political systems on the one hand, and the ambitious nature of sustainable development on the other.

This brief historical overview of the critical analysis of the implementation of sustainable development is echoed in the mixed picture four years after the adoption of the SDGs.

A case study: France

The French example illustrates certain stumbling blocks in the implementation process for an agenda as complex as the SDGs. The first is that of the SDGs becoming a parallel process that adds an additional layer to existing mechanisms. France does not lack mechanisms aimed—at the basis of economic, social and environmental indicators—at improving public policy evaluation and coherence: the National Sustainable Development Strategy (SNTEDD), which expires in 2020, and the 2015 law on the New Indicators Of Wealth. Other more specific multisectoral processes exist, such as the National Low-Carbon Strategy (SNBC), as well as numerous sectoral strategies and action plans. The SDGs could be the opportunity to align these different objectives, and to ensure better monitoring and evaluation of commitments

that are often neglected. It is not clear whether the new SDG roadmap presented in September 2019 will play this role. The first reason illustrates another obstacle often observed in SDG implementation processes: in France, as in many other countries, SDG implementation processes are primarily handled at the administrative level (within a ministry, without any powers of coordination), whereas an agenda as complex as the SDGs requires high-level political momentum in order to be meaningful. The SDGs have not entered the policy debate in France, which raises questions about their relevance in relation to other more tangible concepts such as the just transition, for example.

However, the French process is not without positive initiatives. The French Development Agency (AFD) has launched discussions, which are ongoing, about what the 2030 Agenda means for the world of investment. Civil society has been closely involved in efforts to select monitoring indicators and to develop the national roadmap, as have members of parliament, companies, regional authorities and different ministries.

But the roadmap lacks a strategic analysis in the form of a review of the practices to be questioned and the changes needed to address the challenges of the SDGs and their transversality, and often simply highlights existing plans and measures. However, an analysis of 29 targets of the 2030 Agenda, conducted by IDDRI, shows that France is at risk of failing to achieve three quarters of them by 2030, based on past trends (Hege *et al.*, 2017). Simply "repainting" existing activities in the colours of the SDGs is another pitfall to be avoided. Although the SDGs must not add another layer or create parallel structures, they do need to ask some serious questions about existing practices that are more equal to the challenges.

The level of political support for SDG implementation is an important factor of success (Brimont, L. *et al.*, 2016). Breaking away from the framework in which sustainable development is traditionally addressed, namely the Ministry of the Environment, the UN Secretary-General's report highlights the examples of Bangladesh, Belarus, Costa Rica and Nigeria, which have placed responsibility for SDG implementation with the office of the President or the Prime Minister. As early as 2006, Volker *et al.* insisted on this point, and noted moreover that the institutional landscape of sustainable development was becoming more diverse: broad stakeholder participation and consultation have become standard government procedure for sustainable development policy. Have the SDGs helped to make these practices more widespread and more effective?

Meadowcroft (2007) proposes a distinction between, on the one hand, national sustainable development strategies, the official SDG implementation process observed, which is sometimes removed from the heart of policy-making, and, on the other, the more global practice of strategic decision-making on sustainable development. The transformative potential of the SDGs is found in the context of this second category. Thus, for example, ongoing discussions about the adoption of the Mercosur free trade agreement, which involves two regions claiming to be among the most ambitious in terms of sustainability (Europe and Latin America), specifically question the role of the 2030 Agenda in sectoral policies, especially trade policies.

The SDGs, a tool to question budget policies?

As the primary political and economic expression of government policy, the budget seems a natural starting point for the integration of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Several countries announced their intention to integrate the SDGs into their budgetary processes during the HLPF, which could signal a step forward in relation to the findings of the literature on sustainable development strategies in the 2000s. However, these countries rarely specify the way in which this should be done. Based on nine case studies, the analysis by Hege & Brimont (2018) identifies four ways in which countries integrate the SDGs into their budget processes. Most of the countries studied choose to either map their budgets against the SDGs or to include qualitative reporting in their main budget document, giving an insight into the way in which the budget is linked to the different SDGs. Less often, the countries use the SDGs to improve their budget performance evaluation system or as a management tool for resource allocation and negotiations. These approaches are not mutually exclusive and there is scope for developing interactions between the four methods of integration.

For the time being, the tools developed to integrate the SDGs into budget processes serve primarily to increase the visibility of existing government commitments on the SDGs. This improves transparency and indicates current budget priorities in relation to the SDGs. But it does not automatically lead to more coherent management or to discussions on the reallocation of resources in order to better target the most challenging sustainable development problems. Nor does it automatically lead actors to use this information to ask governments to account for their commitments. This implies that members of parliament, civil society, political parties and ministries use this information on the SDGs in the budget debate. Another important advance would consist in linking it to public policy evaluation in order to measure the conflicting or synergetic effects of the different programmes with a view to improving policy coherence. The Courts of Auditors could play a key role in these evaluations: according to the UN Secretary-General's Report (2019), these increasingly focus on reviewing SDG implementation (in more than 20 countries). If this trend continues, the Courts of Auditors and other accountability actors could contribute to increasing SDG integration in the policy agenda.

The Secretary-General's report also notes that some countries (such as Finland and the Netherlands) have involved their national parliament in the implementation, monitoring and review of the SDGs. Some parliaments have also taken the initiative to engage in the SDG implementation process, for example by creating specific parliamentary commissions or organising special hearings. To what extent the SDGs have actually entered the debate on the adoption of projects and laws is another question.

City dynamics

At the local and regional levels, many initiatives are in line with the 'Localising SDGs' dynamic, which consists in implementing the 2030 Agenda to obtain specific results

at the local level through various innovative mechanisms. More and more experiments are emerging. The city of Los Angeles (United States), for example, published its first local voluntary report on SDG implementation in July 2019. The city of Hamburg (Germany) has developed a series of indicators for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. On September 25, 2019, more than 20 cities in more than 15 countries committed to implementing the 2030 Agenda: Accra (Ghana), Amman (Jordan), Barcarena (Brazil), Barcelona (Spain), Bristol (United Kingdom), Buenos Aires (Argentina), Cape Town (South Africa), Freetown (Sierra Leone), Georgetown (Guyana), Helsinki (Finland), Kazan (Russia), Los Angeles (United States), Malmö (Sweden), Mannheim (Germany), Montevideo (Uruguay), New York (United States), Orlando (United States), Santa Ana (Costa Rica), Santa Fe (Argentina), Santana de Parnaíba (Brazil), Stockholm (Sweden), and Yokohama (Japan). This city mobilisation is encouraging, with local and regional support having the potential to "reconcile" the 2030 Agenda with its promises of specific action on sustainable development; indeed, local governments can help to turn a global vision into a local reality.

3.3. What is the private sector doing?

A role recognised as decisive

An SDG Business Forum is held every year alongside the HLPF, and more specifically in 2019 alongside the UNGA. It deals with issues of sustainable financing and ways of scaling up action, which has so far been insufficient, despite numerous initiatives and the driving role of the Global Compact, an international initiative for voluntary sustainable development commitments.²³ Big businesses are some of the most vocal actors on the SDGs, and the private sector seems to have understood the interest of this agenda, even if the number of companies involved is still limited.

According to UN estimations, in the context of the developing countries alone, SDG delivery requires an additional 2.5 trillion dollars annually;²⁴ worldwide, this figure increases to 5 or 6 trillion dollars,²⁵ a sum often considered as relatively low in view of total global investments, but sufficient to raise high expectations of the private sector. Over the last 20 years, businesses, which are key actors in the implementation of sustainable development, have thus been progressively associated with discussions on international cooperation, and have in particular participated in negotiations on the 2030 Agenda, with their contribution being explicitly called for.²⁶ According to a survey conducted in

²³ <http://www.globalcompact-france.org/p-29-pourquoi-s-engager>.

²⁴ <https://unctad.org/en/pages/newsdetails.aspx?OriginalVersionID=2061>

²⁵ <https://www.unglobalcompact.org/take-action/action/globalallianceforsdgfinance>

²⁶ https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030_Agenda_for_Sustainable_Development_web.pdf (articles 41, 52 et 67)

2016 of more than 2,000 professionals,²⁷ 50% of multinationals plan to engage with the SDGs. In France, 25% of companies in the CAC40 refer to the SDGs in their latest sustainable development report.²⁸

A series of commitments towards transformation

Companies say they appreciate the constructive role assigned to them; a role as partners rather than troublemakers in SDG delivery. On September 23, 2019, the United Nations Secretary-General announced the launch of the CEO alliance, Global Investors for Sustainable Development,²⁹ set up by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). This alliance will develop a plan of action and present its first results in 2021. Banking sector representatives have also launched the "Principles for responsible banking", some of which are explicitly aimed at aligning the financial sector with the SDGs and the Paris Climate Agreement.³⁰ Moreover, in the context of the G7, 30 large companies have pledged to invest 1 billion dollars in projects to reduce inequalities and have signed a declaration that describes growing inequality as the "defining challenge of our time". At the EU level, 200 company CEOs have called on the President of the new Commission to create a New Deal for Europe guided by the SDGs.³¹ In this request, the SDGs are presented as a compass (partnerships and joint visions) that could help navigate the turbulent waters of multilateralism.

For companies as well as for other actors, the 2030 Agenda gives a clear definition of the future everyone wants, describes a more inclusive and sustainable world for 2030, and delivers a transformative project for development models. This vision, supported at the highest UN level (Antonio Guterres considers the SDGs as a "*blueprint for a fair globalisation*")³², which challenges business as usual, can enable companies to project themselves in terms of collaboration around issues that have a future. It remains to be determined to what extent, for example, the signatories to the call of the 200 European CEOs, with different profiles and interests, actually uphold an ambitious, transformative interpretation of the SDGs. Do the numerous private sector initiatives signal the emergence of an encouraging and stimulating multi-stakeholder experimentation regime that can redirect public and private investment policies (Voituriez, 2013)? This is a possibility.

²⁷ <http://sdg.iisd.org/news/csos-private-sector-analyze-companies-sdg-engagement/>

²⁸ <http://www.bl-evolution.com/blog/etude-bl-evolution-odd-et-entreprises/3668>

²⁹ <http://sdg.iisd.org/news/un-secretary-general-announces-ceo-alliance-for-sdg-investment/>

³⁰ <https://www.unepfi.org/principles-launch/>

³¹ <https://www.csreurope.org/200-ceos-ready-work-new-eu-leaders-2030-sustainable-europe#.XVbBAegzblU>

³² <https://twitter.com/antonioguterres/status/1176644823945797632>

A useful agenda for companies?

The SDGs are sometimes presented as opening up market opportunities;³³ as a sort of agenda of economic opportunities for the future, beyond the sectors typically concerned by the energy transition. These opportunities are difficult to quantify, but they indicate a growing understanding of what companies can gain from contributing to a more sustainable and equitable society, and of the changes to be made to their activities in order to move in this direction. It should nevertheless be noted that, in an entrepreneurial context accustomed to short-term profitability, the time lag between investments made and benefits gained may be an obstacle.

Moreover, the legitimacy conferred to the SDGs by the UN framework and by their adoption by all world leaders (Brimont, 2017) can be used within companies, by those aware of or responsible for sustainable development issues, to convince their managers but also all collaborators to engage in a process to assess their impacts or to strengthen existing mechanisms. Through interviews conducted as part of research by IDDRI on the SDGs, this legitimacy emerges as their main advantage today. Finally, the SDGs could be a common language between companies and their stakeholders: public authorities, suppliers, unions, NGOs, consumers, etc. If this common language is translated into a common evaluation framework, a supplier would then be confronted with the same criteria no matter who its customers are. Can the SDGs establish themselves as a common evaluation standard? Can they contribute to aligning expectations and behaviours?

The initiatives emerging in the private sector can also be seen as marginal "anecdotes", or a game taking advantage of the lack of clarity of the 2030 Agenda and used by companies to promulgate their role, with an exclusively reputational objective. Some NGOs express concerns about the delivery of these commitments and the reality of these contributions, insofar as they are not necessarily accompanied by transparent monitoring and reporting mechanisms enabling their evaluation (Hege & Demailly, 2018). Moreover, they fear that companies will adopt less ambitious goals in order to maximise their chances of achieving them. The SDGs require from companies substantial efforts to initiate far-reaching transformations. The NGOs, aware of these challenges, are concerned that companies may focus solely on the goals/targets for which they have the best results, to the detriment of others, and without truly changing their economic models: this is the risk of cherry picking.

It would seem this risk is very real: a survey conducted by PwC in 2015 of more than 900 companies³⁴ shows that only 1% of them plan to assess their impacts against the 17 SDGs. SDG 10 is one of the goals considered as a priority for companies by the UN Secretary-General. Faced with the temptation of cherry picking,

³³ http://report.businesscommission.org/uploads/BetterBiz-BetterWorld_170215_012417.pdf

³⁴ <http://sdghub.com/project/make-it-your-business-engaging-with-the-sdgs/>

the NGOs can instead encourage and assist companies in “challenge picking”, focusing on the critical challenges specific to each of them. Many NGOs also fear that recognising companies as stakeholders in the 2030 Agenda could be a means for governments to partially withdraw from its implementation, by “outsourcing” it to the private sector, and positioning themselves as more of a platform coordinator than a regulatory actor. Some NGOs are thus concerned that the 2030 Agenda could encourage the privatisation of common goods such as education or water (Civil Society Reflection Group on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 2017).

One of the future challenges for the HLPF will be to follow through with these commitments and to assess how they truly meet needs, and whether they prioritise the SDGs that are furthest behind, such as climate action, biodiversity, inequalities, and sustainable consumption and production patterns, especially in the food system.

3.4. What are the NGOs doing?

Greater participation?

The 2030 Agenda and the HLPF are often considered as being particularly inclusive and open to contributions from non-state actors. It is true that the arrangements for participation are relatively progressive in relation to other processes, even if their critical and active role could still be strengthened. The major groups (women, youth, indigenous people, NGOs, etc.)³⁵ and other stakeholders have, for example, been able to provide their contribution to the political declaration of the 2019 SDG Summit.

Spaces for civil society participation in the intergovernmental negotiations on sustainable development have multiplied since the Earth Summit in 1992. Often accepted as beneficial in offsetting an alleged democratic deficit in policy-making, S nit (2017) nevertheless argues that the capacity to democratise global politics is restricted by the limited influence of these spaces.

As observed in the country examples mentioned (see section 3.2), the SDGs can improve civil society participation in public decision-making. Given their complexity, they are to some extent an invitation to use collective intelligence. Numerous consultation and participation mechanisms have been launched around the development of SDG implementation strategies. In some cases, such as France, strategies have even been co-written with civil society representatives. But not all NGOs decide to take part in these processes and among those who do participate, some have doubts as to the impact of official SDG policy processes and strategies. It is not always possible to see the added value of their participation in these processes. This is why some NGOs prefer to engage in more sectoral projects (energy, agriculture or environment), where their role and their influence seem to be truly taken into account (Hege & Demailly, 2018).

Between commitment and caution

According to the study conducted by IDDRI in 2018 based on their actions in Europe, the NGOs are involved in numerous initiatives for the SDGs. This can be seen at least as a partial response to the promise of the mobilising effect of the SDGs. For example, they develop specific measures to communicate the SDGs to a broader public. In Germany and France, some NGOs integrate the SDGs into their outreach activities. NGOs working in the field of education for sustainable development are also active. The civil society coalition ASviS in Italy has developed educational material and organises a yearly festival to mobilise citizens and decision-makers across Italy. Another role of the NGOs can be to contribute directly through projects, either alone or in the context of “multi-stakeholder partnerships” also involving private companies, local authorities, national governments and research centres. As regards their potential contribution through their own projects, most NGOs say that their activities already contribute to the SDGs and that they did not wait for the adoption of the SDGs to take action, thereby deflecting potential criticism about the simple benefit of an SDG “label” on their image in the field.

The question facing the NGOs is: should they do more, or differently? Although “there is no SDG project”, as stressed by one NGO, the SDGs could encourage the NGOs to conduct their projects differently. And the NGOs could be a vector for evaluating new and existing projects in order to ensure that they are coherent from an SDG perspective and that they avoid negative impacts. Some NGOs are considering using the SDGs as a tool for evaluating their own projects, such as WWF Europe, which has implemented an internal “SDG checklist” programme.

“Champions 12.3”, a coalition of 30 leaders from private companies, national governments, international institutions, think tanks and NGOs, is an example of a multi-stakeholder partnership at the international level, whose objective is to accelerate progress towards achieving SDG 12.3, which aims to halve food waste and losses. The NGOs are called upon by governments to contribute to the SDGs through similar projects, especially in France and Germany, two countries that insist on “the mobilisation of all for the SDGs”. Where multi-stakeholder partnerships are concerned, some of the NGOs questioned by IDDRI seem to adopt a policy of caution, especially when the accountability framework is poorly defined. Other NGOs have not shown the same reluctance and have even expressed the desire to collaborate more with other actors, including the private sector. In this sense, the SDGs raise interesting questions about the role of the NGOs and of coalitions of actors, one of the promises of the SDGs.

The most significant added value of the SDGs for the NGOs seems to be the opportunity to create new coalitions, especially for advocacy and campaigning, which enables them to have a stronger voice and greater impact on decision-makers. Coalitions also enable the NGOs in different sectors to dialogue more and to develop joint campaigns. At

³⁵ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/majorgroups/about>

the EU level, this is the case of SDG Watch Europe,³⁶ which brings together NGOs from different sectors and different EU countries and has, in particular, launched a campaign on inequalities.

At the UN level, the limited inclusion of the environmental NGOs in the HLPF until now, and the fact that the forum is hosted by a United Nations agency whose mandate focuses on social and economic affairs, are reasons given by some NGOs to justify a loss of interest.

Although more and more NGOs know about and have mobilised around the SDGs, this mobilisation has been and still is oriented towards the development organisations and, more generally, organisations working on international questions. Yet traditionally, the discourse on sustainable development was dominated by the environmental community. Has part of this community made the choice to not get involved in the mobilisation around SDG implementation because it doubts the capacity of this agenda to position itself as the transformative project promised and required? At the same time, movements for the protection of the environment and the climate have recently obtained significant results in terms of resonance in society and in the media. Their independent stance, separate from the international organisations, seems a far cry from the notion of partnership promoted by the 2030 Agenda. Is this "external" search for influence more effective? Can the two strategies complement one another?

4. 2020-2030: HOW TO KICKSTART A DECADE OF ACTION?

4.1. What is the situation?

In his progress report, the UN Secretary-General's message is clear: the world is not on track to achieve the SDGs (SG, 2019). Even if extreme poverty continues to decline, this positive trend is decelerating. If the current pace continues, 6% of the global population will still be living in extreme poverty in 2030, and the goal of eradicating poverty will not be achieved. Between 2015 and 2017, global material consumption rose from 87 to 92.1 billion tonnes. Official development assistance (ODA) fell by 2.7% between 2017 and 2018, and aid to Africa fell by 4%. Far greater efforts are required in order to achieve the goals on biodiversity and climate. SDG 10 on inequalities, a new goal that had not been debated as such by the international community prior to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, is still not given enough attention. And some SDGs that were showing positive long-term developments are currently regressing. For the third consecutive year, hunger in the world is on the rise. New solutions are needed to address these alarming trends consistently, for example achieving SDG 2 on ending hunger and promoting

sustainable food systems while halting the massive loss of biodiversity. The *Global Sustainable Development Report* (GSDR), written by 15 scientists appointed in 2016, also sounds the alarm about the "limited success" in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (Independent Group of Scientists, 2019). It lists a certain number of targets that are, to varying degrees, far from being achieved, and identifies four particularly alarming trends: rising inequalities, climate change, biodiversity loss and the increasing amounts of waste from human activities.

Not only do these challenges represent trends that are difficult to reverse, but they also make it more difficult to achieve other goals and targets, sometimes in a way that impacts the whole of the 2030 Agenda. For example, limiting global warming to 1.5°C instead of 2°C above pre-industrial levels would make it easier to end poverty and to reduce inequalities (Roy *et al.*, 2018). The GSDR places the emphasis on the co-benefits, but also the difficult trade-offs between goals. These interactions are still not sufficiently integrated into SDG implementation strategies. Based on the existing literature, which is still very limited, there are more co-benefits than difficult trade-offs between goals. To move towards implementation, it is strategically important to focus more on these difficult trade-offs.

The GSDR proposes that the countries invest in six transformations, each of which has the potential to limit negative impacts and to increase positive impacts on all of the SDGs. By proposing this approach, the report also insists on the importance of defining sustainable development pathways at the country level and avoiding a "checkbox" approach to the 169 targets, which would be too onerous in administrative terms. This approach to advancing in SDG implementation by targeting several major transformations is also proposed by Sachs *et al.* (2019b).

To achieve the promises and the goals of the 2030 Agenda, in just over 10 year' time, certain conditions now appear necessary.

4.2. Seeking real leadership

Although the 2030 Agenda has become a reference framework that cannot easily be ignored, it suffers from a lack of champions capable of supporting it and stimulating momentum to accelerate its effective implementation. The MDGs demonstrated that a set of goals agreed by the global community could have a real mobilising effect. They benefited from several champions, starting with the United Nations Secretary-General at the time, Kofi Annan, but also a number of celebrities, such as U2's lead singer Bono, who ensured the MDGs took centre stage and remained high on the international agenda. This mobilisation led the Gleneagles G8, on July 8, 2005, 10 years from the deadline for the MDGs, to make financial commitments to achieving the MDGs in Africa: "*The commitments of the G8 and other donors will lead to an increase in official development assistance to Africa of \$25 billion a year by 2010, more than doubling aid to Africa compared to 2004.*"³⁷ These commitments helped

³⁶ <https://www.sdwatcheurope.org/>

³⁷ <http://www.g8.utoronto.ca/summit/2005gleneagles/africa.pdf>

to build momentum on the MDGs in Africa. Further to this G8, the United Kingdom took on a leadership role for official development assistance, enabling it to achieve the ODA target of 0.7% of gross national income by 2013.

The 2030 Agenda currently lacks a figure to embody and encourage the mobilisation of all actors. The current Secretary-General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, is somewhat alone on this stage at present. He has attempted to mobilise the CEOs of very large corporations, without great success so far. From the countries mentioned in the context of this study (Finland, Germany, France, Colombia, Indonesia and Bangladesh), one or two "champions" of the 2030 Agenda should emerge and serve as an example. The European Union could be this champion if the new Commission takes up scenario 1 from its Reflection Paper on the SDGs, in order to support sustainability challenges at the highest political level, to make them EU strategy and to strengthen EU external action and its alignment with the SDGs.³⁸

Leadership also means identifying illustrations and examples of good practice in which different actors have taken ownership of the 2030 Agenda to build their own sustainable development strategy. But the international community is lacking such models.

4.3. Restoring the backbone of the 2030 Agenda

Paradoxically, the 2030 Agenda suffers from the ambition of its promises. These may sometimes seem unrealistic or unachievable to many actors, and are thus often overlooked or given little consideration. The risk is then that actors will focus only on this list of goals and adopt a selective approach, claiming they contribute to the 2030 Agenda if they have had any kind of impact on just one of the 169 targets. This is a risk faced by many actors, sometimes in spite of themselves, especially in the private sector. In this spirit, in 2018 the Global Compact asked companies to stop cherry picking the SDGs in their sustainable development reports, and to try instead to prioritise their actions according to the SDGs, taking account of both positive and negative impacts. It is essential to clearly identify and assume the difficulties and problems in order to provide solutions to them.

To ensure the 2030 Agenda does not lose credibility, the SDGs must be prevented from falling victim to an overly vague game of interpretation that everyone can join without questioning the real impact of their actions on the agenda as a whole. Contributing to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda cannot consist in simply contributing to one or two of the 169 targets, but must imply minimising impacts on the agenda as a whole. This means actors must question their modes of intervention and ask whether they can do better or differently in order to maximise the impact of their action on the 2030 Agenda, even when the action in question is aimed at just one of the targets.

This approach is indispensable, but not without methodological difficulties for the different actors, who struggle with the lack of "instructions" for the 2030 Agenda, and tend to position themselves in terms of an SDG "narrative" rather than in terms of real action towards their implementation. This problem is integral to the SDGs as they were negotiated, being open enough for all stakeholders to subscribe to them without difficulty.

However, the challenge of the SDGs is not to conform to business as usual, but to develop innovative approaches that help to develop a clear vision of what does or does not contribute to the goals set by the countries and to actually achieve them by 2030. This implies striking a balance between the promise of flexibility of the SDGs and that of a truly transformative project.

Already, during the negotiations, discussions around several of the most transformative SDGs illustrated the resistance to change shown by different groups. For example, many developed countries were wary of the lifestyle changes they would need to make in the framework of the SDGs, especially with the adoption of a goal on sustainable consumption and production. The developing countries, for their part, feared that European support for a climate change goal would translate into an obstacle to the growth of their economies, which they considered as a necessary condition for eradicating poverty; Europe's support for the concept of "limits on growth" therefore had little political clout in the developing countries (Kamau, Chasek, & O'Connor, 2018). As explained by Macharia Kamau, the Kenyan Ambassador during the negotiations, the Arab states (especially those that depend on fossil fuels) expressed concerns that the SDGs were part of a programme that would disrupt their economies and their livelihoods. The co-Chairs of the Open Working Group therefore attempted to assure them that the SDGs were not geared towards ending the use of fossil fuels and depriving the oil-producing states of their main source of income, but that they should be seen as an opportunity to invest in and develop renewable energy technologies, such as solar energy. The 2030 Agenda as an opportunity, but one that does not disrupt existing practices or models: herein lies the ambiguity of this agenda, which meant it was adopted by all of the countries of the world. It now needs to move away from this "weak consensus", which is counter-productive in terms of implementation, and avoid any "SDG washing".

To ensure the 2030 Agenda truly becomes a global roadmap, it is important to clarify the paths that can be taken and the obstacles that must be avoided. The six transformations proposed by the GSDR and the "planetary boundaries" (Steffen *et al.*, 2015) are approaches that can help to identify these potential risks. This will also require the development of standards and the monitoring of voluntary commitments made by states and companies. These standards must ensure compliance with a certain level of ambition and, at the least, prevent negative impacts on the particularly high-risk targets identified by the GSDR: rising inequalities, climate change, biodiversity loss and the increasing amounts of waste from human activities. Ignoring these objectives in any commitment on the SDGs will make it difficult to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

The United Nations has a fundamental role to play in structuring the backbone the 2030 Agenda needs. It must position

³⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/publications/reflection-paper-towards-sustainable-europe-2030_fr

itself more clearly in order to help the countries and actors to determine the actions that contribute to, and especially those that undermine the delivery of the 2030 Agenda. The Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, must continue to engage and to make the implementation and delivery of the SDGs a priority of his action. This also requires clear decisions and guidelines, in line with his recent position on the climate:³⁹ *"We must set radical change in motion. This means ending subsidies for fossil fuels and high-emitting, unsustainable agriculture and shifting towards renewable energy, electric vehicles and climate-smart practices"*; or his explicit call to accelerate the closure of coal-fired power plants.

It is in this spirit that the HLPF must provide a space for dialogue and guidance to accompany and develop mechanisms aimed at facilitating the management of tension and conflicts between SDGs; a dialogue enabling real exchanges between actors about the strategic choices to be made. The different regional forums on sustainable development organised every year by the United Nations economic commissions could also be useful places for discussions in order to stimulate "peer dynamics", provided they create a dialogue that is open to debating policies and initiatives and helps to foster good practice. Based on the model of the OECD Development Assistance Committee, why not establish a sort of peer review of systems and policies for the delivery of the 2030 Agenda, which would provide specific practical recommendations for the countries?

4.4. Moving beyond the UN framework

Finally, in order to be truly transformative and effective, the 2030 Agenda should not be considered as yet another UN declaration, to be referred to just once a year during the United Nations General Assembly or within other international bodies. The 2030 Agenda must not be confined to the UN system alone, but fully integrated by the actors, in the countries. In order to become the global roadmap promised, it must be specifically immersed in the decision-making processes that have an impact on the SDGs. This implies a necessary, or even essential paradigm shift, as reflected in the explicit reference to the SDGs in the mission letter from the new President of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, to the Commissioners-designate: *"Each Commissioner will ensure the delivery of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals within their policy area. The College as a whole will be responsible for the overall implementation of the Goals"*. Although the wording chosen does not rule out the risk of working in silos, this reference is a positive development and, above all, places the issue of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the heart of sectoral policy debates (food, trade, energy, transport, for example) with all actors.

The value of the 2030 Agenda must be in providing a sort of collective intelligence to inform decisions and clarify the orientations and trade-offs needed for the formulation of sustainable

development strategies. It should be a structural reference framework. The trade agreements recently negotiated or still under negotiation can provide a useful illustration of this: based for several decades on the goal of increasing trade, they have now come up against the need to align with the Sustainable Development Goals (2030 Agenda, Paris Climate Agreement) and are revealing diplomatic tensions that reflect the countries' conflicting visions of development. The question now should be: how can trade become a tool for the SDGs, for all countries? Recent tension around the EU-Mercosur free trade agreement demonstrates the difficulties inherent in this change of perspective, but this is an area for further analysis.

4.5. The challenge of financing the 2030 Agenda

Accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda also requires improving and more effectively mobilising funding channels for sustainable development. Although there is a consensus about the need to move from billions of dollars of official development assistance (ODA) to trillions of dollars of investment, the 2030 Agenda is still seeking the actors who can make the promise of a better world a reality.

There are many challenges on the path to meeting this goal, which can be grouped around a core need for the financial institutions to progress from the strategic intention to implement the 2030 Agenda to real integration. However, what this "real integration" entails is not yet clear for actors involved in financing for development. The development banks need to analyse sustainable development practices in the field, how the SDGs have been implemented so far and how to align their financing with country trajectories, while taking into account the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental).

No development finance actor can claim to have a full answer to these questions, but they have all changed their practices since 2015: some have made new commitments or implemented internal reforms, while others have developed new instruments, strategies or partnerships. In this respect, it is worth noting the commitment made, on the margins of the UNGA climate and SDG summits in September 2019, by IDFC (International Development Finance Club), which includes 24 national or regional development banks, to further align its financial flows with the Paris Agreement and the SDGs.

It is by sharing developments made by all concerned, by comparing them and combining them, that development finance actors will be able to obtain a panoramic view of what they can do with the SDGs. All actors need to move in this direction, but the development banks have specific advantages enabling them to position themselves at the forefront of this movement. With their detailed knowledge of the specific situation of each country and substantial flexibility in the design of concessional loan programmes for partner countries taking account of the national situation, these institutions are a crucial voice to complement the multilateral development banks and commercial investors. They can also take advantage of national

³⁹ https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2019/03/19/antonio-guterres-nous-devons-arreter-de-subventionner-les-combustibles-fossiles_5438028_3232.html

scientific expertise and that of stakeholders to identify pathways towards the SDGs and to translate these into real integration in their day-to-day practices.

5. CONCLUSION

The SDGs are a tool for sustainable development. They are complex and imperfect, in the sense that their “instruction manual” is often missing, but useful if they are used as a transformative project equal to the challenges posed by environmental issues, inequalities, the contentious evolution of globalisation, and so on. This transformative—and unifying—ambition of the SDGs was disputed during their negotiation, and persists in international debates. The 2030 Agenda is a global project, and has never been fundamentally or directly challenged as such (adopted unanimously in 2015, it would be diplomatically risky for a country to reject it), but its ownership and interpretation have differed depending on the actors concerned; not just one, but several SDG narratives exist. Moreover, the current multilateral context, with all its turbulence, leads some to adopt a cautious stance, or even to withdraw and maintain

the status quo, all of which are positions that are incompatible with the spirit of change inherent in the SDGs. In terms of implementation and results, four years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, this flexibility in policy-making reveals a very mixed picture; a concern with the deadline just 10 years away.

As a sustainable societal project for the world of tomorrow, the SDGs are accepted by all, but cannot be limited to this superficial consensus when what they actually imply is a massive transformation of development models at the global level; a transformation which in turn requires the construction and adoption of resolutely innovative and sustainable practices, in terms of both governance and implementation in the field. The time for superficial words is over, and the transformations required must now be operationalised. The six priorities for action identified by the *Global Sustainable Development Report* confirm this urgency and point the way forward.

The 2030 Agenda must become a global roadmap, used by all actors, in all fields of development. As a tool for decision support to question the co-benefits and negative impacts of sectoral policies, especially trade policies, it must contribute in all areas to the definition and implementation of pathways towards sustainable development.

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Initial assessment and conditions for success of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

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The Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations (IDDRI) is an independent think tank that facilitates the transition towards sustainable development. It was founded in 2001. To achieve this, IDDRI identifies the conditions and proposes the tools for integrating sustainable development into policies. It takes action at different levels, from international cooperation to that of national and sub-national governments and private companies, with each level informing the other. As a research institute and a dialogue platform, IDDRI creates the conditions for a shared analysis and expertise between stakeholders. It connects them in a transparent, collaborative manner, based on leading interdisciplinary research. IDDRI then makes its analyses and proposals available to all. Four issues are central to the institute's activities: climate, biodiversity and ecosystems, oceans, and sustainable development governance.

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Citation: Hege, E., Barchiche, D., Rochette, J., Chabason, L., Barthélemy, P. (2019). Initial assessment and conditions for success of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. IDDRI, *Study* N°07/19.

ISSN: 2258-7535

This article has received financial support from Ademe (Agence de l'environnement et de la maîtrise de l'énergie) and from the French government in the framework of the programme "Investissements d'avenir", managed by ANR (the French National Research Agency) under the reference ANR-10-LABX-01.

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