



Citation for published version:

Biermann, F, Sun, Y, Banik, D, Beisheim, M, Bloomfield, MJ, Charles, A, Chasek, P, Hickmann, T, Pradhan, P & Sénit, C-A 2023, 'Four governance reforms to strengthen the SDGs: A demanding policy vision can accelerate global sustainable development efforts', *Science*, vol. 381, no. 6663, pp. 1159-1160.
<https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adj5434>

DOI:

[10.1126/science.adj5434](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adj5434)

Publication date:

2023

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

This is the author's version of the work. It is posted here by permission of the AAAS for personal use, not for redistribution. The definitive version was published in *Science* on Volume 381pp. 1159-1160 14 Sep 2023
<https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.adj5434>

University of Bath

Alternative formats

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact:
openaccess@bath.ac.uk

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

OVERLINE

Four Reforms to Strengthen the Governance of the Sustainable Development Goals

By Frank Biermann,¹ Yixian Sun,² Dan Banik,³ Marianne Beisheim,⁴ Michael J. Bloomfield,² Aurelie Charles,² Pamela Chasek,⁵ Thomas Hickmann,⁶ Prajal Pradhan,^{7,8} and Carole-Anne S nit¹

In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly agreed on 17 “Sustainable Development Goals” (SDGs) as part of a broader “2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. While the SDGs, which are to be achieved by 2030, are not the first attempt to guide policy actors through global goals, they go beyond earlier agreements in their detail, comprehensiveness, and ambition. In September 2023, the “SDG Summit” will be held to review the half-way point in SDG implementation, and in 2024 a major “Summit of the Future” will build on the results and debate possible governance reforms.

The 2022 SDG Impact Assessment, conducted by a global consortium of 61 researchers, has shown that the first phase of SDG implementation did not manage to reorient political systems and societies in a transformative way (1,2). The SDGs were found to have discursive impacts through influencing how actors in government, civil society, and business frame sustainable development policies in their external and internal communication. The political impact of the SDGs, however, has been limited. In most cases the goals have not yet succeeded in transforming government policies, institutional arrangements, public and private funding allocations, or international cooperation. The SDG Summit in September 2023 is thus an opportune moment to adjust the course of SDG implementation on the road to 2030 and to breathe new life into current efforts to achieve the global goals.

As a long-term global network of SDG researchers and experts, we present here a demanding yet realistic policy vision for the SDGs. It entails four core elements, namely *differentiation*, *dynamization*, *legalization*, and stronger *institutionalization*.

Short-Term Measures to Increase the Impact of the SDGs

Differentiation. First, governments must agree to strengthen the current SDG framework by differentiating implementation of targets in such a way that commits high-income countries to stronger and more concrete action. In principle, the SDGs lay down normative aspirations for all countries, not only low-income countries, and here they differ from earlier goal-setting policies such as the Millennium Development Goals. The SDGs are presented as universal, indivisible, and interlinked, even though the 2030 Agenda also allows governments to set their own targets, which should be guided by the global level of ambition while taking into account their national circumstances.

This approach was progressive in bringing high-income countries under the United Nations normative framework. Yet, in practice it resulted in widespread cherry-picking, allowing leaders in affluent countries to focus on goals and targets they could easily reach or that lacked demanding targets and indicators. Consequently, important policy targets for high-income countries were insufficiently addressed, such as reducing unsustainable consumption (SDG 12), phasing out fossil fuels (SDG 7 and 13), protecting terrestrial and marine biodiversity (SDG 14 and 15), and increasing financial support for poorer countries and strengthening global partnerships for sustainable development (SDG 17). The universal framing of the SDGs may have also supported a persistent Western perspective in global media, academia, and civil society, suggesting a unified “humankind” while blinding unequal consumption and emissions patterns among and within countries, including their spillover effects (3,4). In short, the global sustainability transition requires that high-income countries define, and deliver on, more ambitious national commitments.

Dynamization. Second, the original 17 goals and their 169 targets were based on numerous political compromises during their negotiation (5), and most targets have been inadequate given the escalating crises of ecological breakdown, global pandemics, persistent extreme poverty, and rising inequalities. Similar to the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement and its

ratcheting-up process, the SDGs should thus undergo regular rounds of revisions during which countries raise their ambition. In this process, widely recognized synergies and trade-offs between goals and targets must also be addressed more effectively.

For this purpose, the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development must evolve from a review mechanism to a mechanism that focuses on adjusting existing targets to the exigencies of multiple global crises. Governments should view this reporting and review process as an opportunity for more effective peer-learning, leveraging synergies and increasing ambition (6). Equally important is a more comprehensive and transparent inclusion of domestic SDG implementation efforts and greater involvement of civil society in the reporting process.

Legalization. Third, the SDGs have been crafted as non-legally binding and often qualitative commitments that cover broad areas of human activity. While this non-binding approach has historically allowed for universal support by governments, it has also been found to reduce incentives for governments to enact the institutional and normative transformations that are needed. Stronger commitments are now crucial. Although the entire set of 17 SDGs is unlikely to become binding under international law, like-minded countries should work towards a series of legally binding, plurilateral agreements and governance arrangements in support of specific goals and targets. Examples are the international treaty to end plastic pollution (7), which is linked to SDG 12; the agreement on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction (8), linked to SDG 14; the existing United Nations convention against corruption, linked to SDG 16; or the civil society initiative for a fossil fuel non-proliferation treaty (9), linked, among others, to SDG 13.

Smaller, focused plurilateral agreements and “coalitions of the willing” could better ensure progress in times of geopolitical tensions that often block new universal agreements. The progressive legalization of some SDGs will also improve governance in sectors that lack effective global governance mechanisms, such as the international regulation of mining activities by multinational corporations in low-income

¹ Utrecht University, The Netherlands.

² University of Bath, United Kingdom.

³ University of Oslo, Norway.

⁴ German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin, Germany.

⁵ Manhattan College, United States.

⁶ Lund University, Sweden.

⁷ University of Groningen, The Netherlands.

⁸ Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, Germany

1 countries or pollution of outer space (10). It is
2 also important to better align the SDGs with
3 other legal frameworks, including global trade
4 and investment agreements and the United
5 Nations human rights system.

6 **Institutionalization.** Fourth, global policy
7 progress is impeded by a lack of focused insti-
8 tutional support and by governance fragmen-
9 tation in some areas. While some SDGs, such as
10 health (SDG 3), can build on strong interna-
11 tional organizations and national agencies,
12 other areas are barely institutionalized, notably
13 regarding goals on reducing inequality (SDG
14 10), responsible consumption and production
15 (SDG 12), and strengthening of institutions and
16 governance (SDG 16). Moreover, various
17 United Nations agencies act as custodians for
18 individual SDGs, with responsibilities being
19 widely spread among ministries and local insti-
20 tutions (11,12).

21 United Nations bodies and governments
22 should thus support further institutionalization
23 around the SDGs and enhance steering capaci-
24 ties in global governance and national policy-
25 making. For example, it has been proposed to
26 strengthen implementation of SDG 12 by set-
27 ting up a new “UN forum on sustainable life-
28 styles” that would “enable international peer
29 learning and elevate action on SDG12” (13).
30 Similar new institutions are conceivable to en-
31 able and build capacities for the integrated
32 transformative shifts that are envisaged in the
33 Global Sustainable Development Reports (14).

35 **Post 2030: The Road Ahead**

36 The future of the SDGs after 2030 is uncertain.
37 Despite all shortcomings and criticisms, it
38 would be ill-advised to terminate or to funda-
39 mentally redesign the 17 SDGs. The necessary
40 negotiations within the United Nations system
41 would cost valuable time and divert political at-
42 tention, and the eventual outcome would most
43 likely not be very different given current global
44 power constellations. Instead, we propose four
45 reforms to strengthen governance for achiev-
46 ing the SDGs. Our strategy of differentiation,
47 dynamization, legalization, and institutionaliza-
48 tion holds the potential to drive policy pro-
49 cesses that continue beyond 2030 and gener-
50 ate a global policy framework that would not
51 only be more ambitious but also more effec-
52 tive.

53 Three complementary reforms would fur-
54 ther support the reforms that we propose.
55 First, governments should agree on stronger
56 governance arrangements to initiate, oversee,
57 and refine these processes of differentiation,
58 dynamization, legalization, and institutionaliza-
59 tion. In 1992, governments created the United
60 Nations Commission on Sustainable

Development, which was widely judged as un-
successful. After 2012, the High-level Political
Forum on Sustainable Development was set up
to replace this commission; yet most observers
agree that this forum has also not lived up to
expectations (15). Governments should thus
establish a stronger mechanism at the heart of
the United Nations to support and oversee the
proposed differentiation, dynamization, legaliza-
tion, and institutionalization of the SDGs.
One option would be a new United Nations
Sustainable Development Council that could
serve among others as a compulsory and more
structured, integrated, and impactful review
mechanism for the SDGs (16). The 2024 United
Nations Summit of the Future will be an im-
portant venue to discuss such governance in-
novations.

Second, assessments of the influence of the
SDGs have shown that they had sizeable impact
beyond national governments, notably in cities
and with regional authorities (17). Such subna-
tional success stories are not, however, suffi-
ciently supported by transnational institutions
and networks, and the United Nations is cur-
rently unable to provide such coordination. A
new post-2030 governance system must there-
fore recognize the valuable role of local and
provincial governments and provide stronger
institutions to support subnational action, pos-
sibly following the recommendations of the
United Nations Secretary-General in 2021 (18).

Third, assessments of the role of the SDGs
in supporting sustainability transformations in
low-income countries have shown that lack of
finance is a severe limitation for SDG action.
The 2023 SDG Summit should thus include
stronger commitments by high-income coun-
tries to support sustainability transformations
in the Global South. In addition, the 2024 Sum-
mit of the Future is expected to discuss reforms
of the international financial architecture, and
bold steps are also needed here. Important to
consider are novel financial mechanisms that
increase the costs of harmful consumption and
production and channel new funding into sus-
tainability projects in low-income nations. A
global Energy Transition Fund, novel mecha-
nisms to fund global public goods, or regional
levies on air transportation and other high-
emitting sectors are examples of financial
mechanisms that must be explored.

In sum, our research, as well as those of
others, has shown that the 17 SDGs have not
led to the global sustainability transformation
that is urgently needed. The claim by the
United Nations General Assembly that the
SDGs would enable governments to take “bold
and transformative steps which are urgently
needed to shift the world on to a sustainable
and resilient path” (19) has not materialized.

The SDG Summit in September 2023 must
agree on a roadmap towards a major reform of
the SDG process that further differentiates the
goals to enable greater ambitions for high-in-
come countries; dynamizes goals and targets
by regular pledge-and-review rounds; legalizes
certain goals and targets in a network of pluri-
lateral agreements among like-minded coun-
tries; and institutionalizes global and national
governance in areas where the SDGs lack polit-
ical and institutional anchoring and support.
These four governance measures are central
for the acceleration of SDG implementation
leading up to 2030, but they would also be im-
portant cornerstones for a revised SDG frame-
work beyond 2030. In short, the design of the
governance for the SDGs must be significantly
strengthened to allow these goals to “trans-
form our world,” as the original 2015 United
Nations declaration promised.

REFERENCES

1. F. Biermann *et al.*, *Nature Sustainability* **5**, 795-800 (2022).
2. F. Biermann, T. Hickmann, C.-A. Sénit, Eds., *The Political Impact of the Sustainable Development Goals. Transforming Governance through Global Goals?* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2022).
3. S. Fukuda-Parr, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the promise of a transformative agenda. In: *International Organization and Global Governance* (Routledge, 2023). Pp. 708-723.
4. D. Banik, *Anthropocene Science* **1**, 233-245 (2022).
5. M. Kamau, P. Chasek, D. O'Connor, *Transforming multilateral diplomacy: The inside story of the Sustainable Development Goals* (Routledge, 2018).
6. M. Beisheim, F. Fritzsche, *Global Policy* **13.5** 683-693 (2022).
7. N. Simon *et al.*, *Science* **373**, 43-47 (2021).
8. E. M. De Santo *et al.*, *Earth System Governance* **2**: article 100029 (2019).
9. <https://fossilfuel treaty.org/>
10. I. E. Napper *et al.*, *Science* **379**, 990-991 (2023).
11. M. Van Driel *et al.*, *Global Policy* **13.5** 669-682 (2022).
12. M. Bexell, K. Jönsson, *The Politics of the Sustainable Development Goals: Legitimacy, Responsibility, and Accountability* (Taylor & Francis, 2021).
13. Stockholm Environment Institute, Council on Energy, Environment and Water, Stockholm+50: Unlocking a Better Future (SEI and CEEW, 2022).
14. E.g., Independent Group of Scientists, *Global Sustainable Development Report, Advance Unedited Version* (New York: United Nations, 2023).
15. M. Beisheim, S. Bernstein, *The High-Level Political Forum Review 2020: An opportunity to fulfill the HLPF's mandate, in Friends of Governance for Sustainable Development, Eds., Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Addressing Key Climate and Environmental Issues* (New World Frontiers, n.p., 2022).
16. F. Biermann *et al.*, *Science* **335**, 1306-1307 (2012).
17. F. Ortiz-Moya, M. Reggiani, *npj Urban Sustain* **3**, 22 (2023).
18. United Nations, *Our Common Agenda – Report of the Secretary-General* (2021), esp. para. 119.
19. United Nations General Assembly, *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, UN Doc. A/RES/70/1 (2015).

10.1126/science.adj5434