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Success factors of global goal-setting for sustainable development: Learning from the Millennium Development Goals

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Abstract

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were an important precursor to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Hence, identifying the conditions that made the MDGs successful enhances our understanding of global goal-setting and informs the global endeavour to achieve the SDGs. Drawing on a comprehensive review of 316 articles published between 2009 and 2018, we identify six factors that have enabled or hindered MDG implementation. Our analysis stresses the importance of path dependencies and shows that the MDGs catalysed changes only for those countries with sufficient resource availability, administrative capacity and economic development, as well as adequate support from external donors. National ownership and NGO pressure bolstered efforts to implement the MDGs. These findings suggest that globally agreed goals do not easily trickle down from the global to the national level. Thus, this article adopts a forward-looking perspective and draws key lessons for the current implementation of the SDGs in developing countries.

KEYWORDS
2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, global goal-setting, global governance, MDGs, Millennium Development Goals, SDGs, Sustainable Development Goals

1 | INTRODUCTION

At the Millennium Summit in September 2000, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Millennium Declaration as a foundation for the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to be achieved by 2015 (United Nations, 2000). The MDGs entailed a global development agenda centered on poverty reduction, along with a set of other priorities that ranged from universal primary education to a global partnership for development. The adoption of the MDGs is a key example of global goal-setting (Fukuda-Parr, 2014; Kanie & Biermann, 2017). In 2015, the MDGs were replaced by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), evolving into a core normative programme of the United Nations (United Nations, 2015). Whether, to what extent, and how the SDGs will be effective is one of the most critical topics in global politics for sustainable development today.

Accordingly, experiences with the MDGs offer vital lessons for the current global endeavour to achieve the SDGs motivating this article to explore what could be learned from their implementation in the period between 2000 and 2015. While the SDGs differ from the MDGs in several respects, the basic logic and general mechanisms underlying these two global goal-setting initiatives are similar (Biermann et al., 2017). Research on the MDGs and especially on the conditions under which they could steer national policymaking provides us, therefore, with crucial indications for the effectiveness of the SDGs. Ultimately, learning from the MDGs can help address major barriers and strengthen important enablers for the success of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the remaining years to attain the goals (Allen et al., 2021).

Hundreds of studies have assessed the overall impact and effects of the MDGs. Some have focused on individual goals, countries, or regions; others have taken a broader perspective and explored several or all of the eight MDGs. As they build on different conceptual frameworks and use different methodological approaches, their conclusions often diverge and place emphasis on a broad range of aspects. A number of scholars have also produced literature reviews pointing to limitations of the MDGs (e.g., Andresen & Iguchi, 2017; Fehling et al., 2013; Larionova, 2020). However, relatively few of the large total number of studies investigate the different factors that affect how the MDGs generate political changes at domestic level. By examining this specific body of literature on the MDGs, this article offers a rigorous assessment of the existing scholarship on national conditions enabling or hindering MDG implementation.

Hence, this study opens the 'black box' of domestic politics and sheds light on the relevance of country-specific factors that determine the success or failure of globally agreed goals. Our review stresses the importance of path dependencies, and underscores that the MDGs had little effect on many developing countries, which simply continued to follow their respective political and economic trajectories. Furthermore, this evaluation of the existing literature shows that the MDGs could foster progress only for those developing countries that had sufficient resource availability, administrative capacity with a certain economic development level, and adequate support from external donors. There is also evidence that in some instances ownership by state leaders and pressure by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) bolstered national efforts to implement the MDGs.

These findings suggest that globally agreed goals do not easily trickle down from the global level of the United Nations to the domestic level and lead to political changes in different national jurisdictions (e.g., Forestier & Kim, 2020; Horn & Grugel, 2018). Scholars and policymakers therefore need to dedicate more attention to the specific national contexts in which global goals are supposed to work and unfold their effects. This bears important policy implications for global goal-setting as a governance instrument which we spell out in detail at the end of this article. In particular, based on the insights from our literature review, we adopt a forward-looking perspective and draw lessons for the current implementation of the SDGs in developing countries.

The article is organised as follows. In the next section, we provide an overview of the MDGs as an example of global goal-setting initiatives. After that, we describe the conceptualisation and methodological approach of our study. We then present our main results regarding different hindering and enabling factors for the implementation of the MDGs in national political-administrative systems, before we contextualise our main results and formulate key insights for the debate on how to accelerate SDG implementation in developing countries. Finally, we conclude with some policy recommendations for the current efforts to implement the SDGs and sketch promising research avenues.

2 | THE MDGS AS A GLOBAL GOAL-SETTING INITIATIVE

The MDGs were built upon a variety of earlier experiences of global goal-setting initiatives (Fukuda-Parr, 2014). Already in 1961, the United Nations General Assembly had launched the first 'development decade' that set the goal of a minimum growth rate of 5% in aggregate national incomes in developing countries until 1970 (United Nations, 1961). Another example is the 1990 World Summit for Children and its Plan of Action, which proclaimed several goals on health, education, nutrition, and human rights to improve the wellbeing of children (United Nations, 1990). Over the past two decades, the practice of global goal-setting has gained prominence in ever more areas. The MDGs, agreed upon in 2000, were at that time the most elaborate attempt by the United Nations to guide development policies through globally defined policy goals.

The MDGs comprised an array of developmental goals and targets in eight areas: poverty eradication; education; gender equality; child mortality prevention; maternal health; disease control; environmental protection; and global partnership (United Nations, 2001). In both the academic and policy communities, the MDGs spurred much controversy. Some authors highlighted their clarity and praised them as an historic example of a global mobilisation for universal social priorities (e.g., Sachs, 2012; Solberg, 2015). Others criticised the MDGs by stressing their 'money-metric and donor-centric view' (Vandemoortele, 2011, p. 9) and their unidirectional dimension and narrow focus on developing countries, with industrialised countries being deployed almost as their tutors (e.g. Clemens et al., 2007; Deacon, 2016; Horner & Hulme, 2019; Saith, 2006). Still others asserted a lack of stakeholder engagement in formulating the MDGs and the weak review mechanisms to measure performance (Bäckstrand et al., 2012; Bernstein, 2017; Chasek et al., 2016).

The SDGs are built on a more wide-ranging approach. They set detailed goals and targets for both developing and industrialised countries and call for change in all countries and in practically all domestic and foreign policies (Biermann et al., 2017; Le Blanc, 2015; Spinazzola & Cavalli, 2022). The SDGs also draw on a broader societal basis, with numerous stakeholders having participated in their formulation and in the framing of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Kamau et al., 2018). Unlike their precursor, the SDGs are supported by a periodic review mechanism and performance measures to be carried out under the auspices of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (Abbott & Bernstein, 2015; Beisheim, 2018). In short, the SDGs address several issues for which the MDGs have been criticised.

Notwithstanding these differences, the MDGs and the SDGs build on the same governance logic with a legally non-binding nature. There is hence much that can be learned from evaluating the wealth of scholarly insights on the MDGs for the SDGs and similar future global goal-setting initiatives (Spangenberg, 2017; Stevens & Kanie, 2016).

In general, many observers claim that, in terms of their overall impact, the MDGs had mixed results (e.g., Fukuda-Parr et al., 2013). While some developing countries made considerable progress in achieving the MDGs, strong variations exist across goals, regions, and countries (e.g., Agwu, 2011; Easterly, 2009; Halisçelik & Soytas, 2019; McArthur & Rasmussen, 2018; Peterson, 2010). Due to its enormous economic growth and large population, China has statistically contributed the most to attaining the MDGs in absolute numbers, particularly with regard to MDG 1 (poverty eradication) by lifting almost half a billion people out of extreme poverty (United Nations Development Programme, 2015). In contrast, other countries, especially least developed countries, have made only marginal progress if at all. Most fundamentally, the causal link between the MDGs and their attainment at national level is still heavily debated, particularly for China and other emerging economies (e.g., Andresen & Iguchi, 2017; Kwon & Kim, 2014).

In this article, we adopt a different perspective. We are not primarily interested in the achievement of the MDGs as such but instead focus on domestic factors that shaped their implementation in national jurisdictions. By this means, we seek to enhance our understanding of the specific national contexts in which global goals are supposed to generate political changes, shedding light on the potentials and limits of global goal-setting initiatives. The main contribution of this article is thus a rigorous assessment of the empirical knowledge on the conditions under which the practice of global goal-setting has tangible effects on national politics to draw lessons for the current implementation of the SDGs. We hence discuss the main results from the literature review in light of the current efforts to implement the SDGs in national public-administrative systems of developing countries.

3 | CONCEPTUALISATION AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

To assess the effects of the MDGs on national public-administrative systems, this study synthesises scholarship that deals with factors that supported or constrained the implementation of the MDGs at national level.

3.1 | Our analytical lens

Measuring the effects of a political actor or an institutional mechanism on implementation processes has for a long time been a major strand in the political science literature (e.g., Easton, 1965; March, 1955). Despite many conceptualisations of how to identify driving factors, no standard solution exists due to various analytical and methodological challenges (Levy, 1993; Young, 2008). The main difficulty is to attribute any observed change to a certain cause and to delineate this cause from other potential causes. Tackling the challenge of causation, we adopted an interpretive research lens and gathered insights through an in-depth qualitative content analysis of the existing scholarly knowledge (Snyder, 2019). Our review was guided by a set of commonly agreed principles and guidelines with a clear and transparent procedure for how to analyse the literature and interpret results (Petticrew & Roberts, 2008). This approach allowed us to ascertain the effects of the MDGs on national implementation across a wide and diverse body of literature.

In particular, studies rarely recognise unambiguous or even unidirectional causality and hardly ever attribute performance in terms of political changes to the MDGs only. To sharpen our analytical view, we developed a common perception of national MDG implementation, which we defined broadly as changes in national budgets, organisational structures, and actual policies within public administrative systems of developing countries to meet the MDGs (Capano, 2009). Hence, we understand MDG implementation as a political process that includes planning, capacity building, and political actions. We deliberately refrained from prescribing involved researchers a rigid review tool to prevent a simple tick-box exercise. This left considerable flexibility for the researchers who reviewed the existing scholarly studies. Interpretations by analysts hence became an active instrument in the review (Stake, 2010). Based on this inductive approach, we identified different factors in the literature which shaped the implementation of the MDGs in national jurisdictions.

3.2 | Compiling our database

To systematically evaluate success conditions for MDG implementation, we compiled a raw database of in total 1324 scholarly articles published between 2009 and 2018. We chose this 10-year period because earlier studies are unlikely to offer meaningful insights about the effects of the MDGs on national planning, capacity building, and political actions. Using *Scopus* as search engine, we included all articles in academic journals that had 'Millennium Development Goal(s)' or the acronym 'MDG(s)' in their titles, abstracts or keywords. Next, we excluded all non-empirical work, such as editorials or commentaries, limiting the database to original research. We then further refined the database stepwise (Card, 2015): to studies in the field of social sciences, which we assumed to contain most pertinent insights regarding our focus; to articles in English excluding a small amount of articles in other languages; and to articles that touched upon the MDGs non-superficially (e.g., as a proxy for health or development) and that explicitly dealt with their political effects. This led to an ultimate database with 316 articles.

By means of an in-depth reading of the abstracts of these 316 studies, we selected 92 articles as most relevant for our research purpose. Around 56% of these articles deal with the MDGs as a whole; the remaining 44% focus on one or a few MDGs. Of these, MDG 1 (poverty eradication) is most intensively studied, followed by MDG 2 (education), MDG 7 (environmental protection), MDG

5 (maternal health), MDG 3 (gender equality), MDG 4 (child mortality prevention), MDG 6 (disease control) and MDG 8 (global partnership). The majority of the articles that we included in our final set of studies have a global scope and no country-specific perspective. Of the other studies, about 28% focus on Africa, especially Sub-Saharan Africa; 10% on East Asia and the Pacific; 7% on Central Asia and Eastern Europe; 3% on Latin America and the Caribbean; and 2% on South Asia. From the country-specific articles, Kenya, Nigeria, India, and South Africa are most strongly represented in the set of articles.

3.3 | Qualitative content analysis

After compiling and refining our database, we conducted an in-depth qualitative content analysis of the remaining 92 articles to identify hindering and enabling factors in the implementation of the MDGs at domestic level. We hereby adopted a two-step approach. First, two researchers of our team reviewed all articles from the database that were identified as relevant for our research. In this primary coding process, we designed a general coding guide to enhance intercoder reliability (MacPhail et al., 2016). In a second step, other researchers from our group carried out an independent secondary coding of the same material. In this way, every article that was selected for our collaborative qualitative content analysis was evaluated by at least two researchers to minimise a potential investigator bias (Mayring, 2004). This guide used for the secondary step of the qualitative content analysis is available as supplementary material.

Following this in-depth evaluation of the body of literature, we discussed the results from the qualitative content analysis in a structured workshop to ensure that no relevant information had been overlooked and to discuss ambiguities in the coding protocols. While the range of topics dealt with in the pool of reviewed studies is quite broad, the development of a common understanding of national MDG implementation and the design of a general coding guide enabled us to distil the most important findings (Neuendorf, 2017; Schreier, 2012). The individual observations from the collaborative qualitative content analysis can be seen as mosaic pieces. Taken together, they yield a revealing picture of the domestic supporting or constraining conditions under which the MDGs have generated political changes in developing countries.

3.4 | Methodological limitations

As with all studies, our methodological approach has some limitations. First, our focus on publications in English led to an overrepresentation of English-speaking developing countries in the set of evaluated articles. Yet, the factors we identified in these countries arguably do not differ systematically from factors that can be seen in other developing countries. Second, our study was concentrated on domestic factors that support or constrain MDG implementation at national level and we did not investigate any global factors that might have impeded MDG implementation at national level, such as inherent

inconsistencies of the MDGs, their overall design, or their quantitative focus (e.g., Liverman, 2018; Wisor, 2015). Lastly, we have not systematically analysed the interactions across factors. Such an analysis would have been promising but goes beyond the scope of our study (Guang-Wen et al., 2022; Pham-Truffert et al., 2020). Despite these methodological limitations, our review provides the groundwork for further investigations that delve deeper into national contexts and assess the complex linkages between domestic factors for the implementation of global goal-setting initiatives.

4 | RESULTS: SUCCESS FACTORS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MDGS

We identified six factors that have affected the implementation of the MDGs in the national contexts of developing countries.

4.1 | Factor 1: Path dependencies

A first factor we identified is whether the MDGs are in line with the historical political orientation and tradition of a country which we perceive as path dependencies. Governments that share key principles and norms of the Millennium Declaration have it naturally easier to adopt political priorities that are in accordance with the MDGs.

The degree of congruence between the MDGs and national programs is frequently emphasised in the literature as a strong enabler for national implementation (Abbott et al., 2017; Meth, 2013; Rao & Seth, 2009; Reddy & Kauzya, 2015; Yamin & Boulanger, 2014). A case in point is MDG 3 on gender equality. While this MDG was controversially discussed among different countries, governments that were already in favour of this goal could introduce policies at almost zero costs and used this MDG as 'tailwind' for their own political strategies (Mashau et al., 2014). Another example is the growth paradigm of emerging economies, such as Brazil, China, India, and Indonesia. For these countries, the MDGs were largely consistent with their political objectives and resonated well with their development philosophy (Hezri, 2013; Tandon, 2013). Likewise in Bhutan, Nigeria, and Zambia, the MDGs were in accordance with national development strategies, which brought them in a better position to implement the goals and targets (Kelly, 2013; Nhema, 2010; Ojo et al., 2014).

At the same time, several studies point to the gap between national priorities and the MDGs as a major factor that constrained national implementation (Elkins et al., 2018; Haug & Hella, 2013; Hoxhaj et al., 2014; Hulme, 2010; Ware, 2011). Countries with discriminatory laws against women or other societal groups were less willing to implement measures promoting gender equality and to enact laws or adopt policies for equal opportunities (Christie, 2015; Sika, 2011). For instance, both India and Nigeria have been identified as countries whose governments had low preferences for MDG 4 on child mortality and MDG 5 on maternal health, which led to ineffective implementation of these goals (Das, 2018; Díaz-Martínez & Gibbons, 2014; see also Gore, 2010). As another example, MDG 7 on environmental protection was implemented

in Albania only rudimentarily because of the lack of pre-existing political preferences in this field (Pici et al., 2014). Moreover, several African governments that preferred protectionist trade measures opposed the MDGs due to the belief that they opened the door for a liberal trade system (Durokifa & Ijeoma, 2018; Stocchetti, 2016).

In short, governments which had already adopted political strategies that were coherent with the Millennium Declaration readily initiated projects and programmes to implement the MDGs. In contrast, governments whose political priorities did not match with the MDGs remained stuck in their previous trajectories; they did not invest much to comply with the MDGs pointing to limited effects in such cases.

4.2 | Factor 2: Government ownership

The second factor we recognised is government ownership of the MDGs, here understood as the degree to which the MDGs generated engagement by national policymakers and benefitted from it. Indeed, we found that if state leaders felt ownership of the MDGs and internalised their principles and goals, they put much efforts into translating them into national strategies and political programmes.

In our analysis, government ownership has been identified as a factor that can considerably support national implementation of the MDGs (Fukuda-Parr, 2010; McCormick, 2014; Rao & Seth, 2009; Sumner & Tiwari, 2009). Some countries, such as Malaysia, Nigeria, and Rwanda, have developed national policy programmes on the basis of the MDGs (Abbott et al., 2017; Akwara et al., 2014; Hezri, 2013). State leaders such as the Rwandan president have sought to integrate the MDGs into local cultures (Rwiyereka, 2014). Public officials in China, India, Mexico, Indonesia, and Zambia have been keen to present their performance of MDG implementation on the international stage (Evans, 2018; Fukuda-Parr, 2014). Such ownership and internalisation of the MDGs point to a high political commitment and strong political sway, even though the eventual political effectiveness is not always ensured.

On the other hand, any lack of ownership of the MDGs by national governments is widely cited as a major constraining factor for MDG implementation (Haug & Hella, 2013; Hulme & Scott, 2010; Ukachukwu & Iheriohanma, 2013). Scholars have shown that many governments of developing countries had little interest in the MDGs and were hence reluctant to translate global goals into national contexts (Fukuda-Parr, 2014; Hezri, 2013). This applies especially to MDG 7 on environmental protection, which some governments regarded as hampering their chances for economic growth (Meth, 2013). Many scholars pointed out that the top-down character of the MDGs and the misfit with national strategies, weak technical prerequisites, and varying donor priorities severely undermined national ownership (Manning et al., 2013). In particular, the conditionality imposed by external funding schemes led in some instances to a negative perception of the MDGs by government elites in the global South (Chung et al., 2018; Evans, 2018).

In a nutshell, government ownership has in some cases been crucial for the effective national implementation of the MDGs. Some state leaders had internalised the principles and norms of the Millennium Declaration and tried to take leadership by presenting their MDG records at the international level. Conversely, other governments had only little ownership, which is even further undermined by top-down governance and conditionality imposed by international and bilateral donors.

4.3 | Factor 3: Pressure from non-governmental organisations

The third factor that we found in the reviewed studies is pressure from NGOs. In countries with an active civil society, NGOs appear to use several strategies to hold governments accountable for the MDGs. Moreover, due to intensified communication and collaboration across borders, the advocacy of NGOs is increasingly transnational.

NGO pressure is shown in the literature as a factor that has to some extent supported the implementation of the MDGs in national contexts (Kelly, 2013; Majid et al., 2016; Sen & Mukherjee, 2014). Some studies point to NGO protests and campaigns; others mention cooperative strategies of NGOs and their collaboration with private sector firms as well as international organisations to support the implementation of the MDGs (Ilcan & Phillips, 2010; Pici et al., 2014). While several scholars highlight the large potential of NGOs to push their governments towards implementing the principles and norms of the Millennium Declaration, few empirical cases of such an effect are mentioned. A notable exception is India, where researchers stress the advocacy work of NGOs concerned with claiming rights for vulnerable societal groups in national MDG implementation (Siriginidi, 2009). Similarly, NGO pressure is often seen as central in the implementation of MDG 3 on gender equality and women's human rights (Sen & Mukherjee, 2014).

At the same time, scholars recognise the lack of NGO pressure as a major constraining factor for MDG implementation by national governments (Fukuda-Parr, 2014; Manning et al., 2013). They point out that the formulation of the MDGs was not transparent to civil society and that the implementation has not been accompanied by larger public debates, all of which has limited possible entry points for NGO influence. As a consequence, civil society pressure was allegedly lacking in many African countries to push for the realisation of the health-related MDGs (Evans, 2018). Likewise, only little NGO pressure was exerted on governments for improving education, and societal groups were not empowered to push for political reforms (McCormick, 2014).

Hence, NGO pressure has in a few instances been conducive to MDG implementation at national level, particularly with regard to the goal of gender equality and related matters. Some NGOs used the MDGs for their advocacy for vulnerable societal groups. Nonetheless, NGO pressure for the MDGs was limited. This can be seen as one reason for the slow implementation of the principles and norms of the millennium declaration in some countries.

4.4 | Factor 4: Availability of financial resources

The fourth factor we identified is whether governments have a sufficient availability of resources. Most obviously, governments of

countries with strong resource constraints and severe budgetary limitations cannot carry out comprehensive political programmes to achieve the MDGs.

In the articles that we reviewed, resource availability is generally stressed as a key factor that is crucial for the implementation of the MDGs, especially regarding targets that require broad investments such as improving and maintaining national health systems (Akume, 2014; Richards & Vining, 2016). Governments of countries that planned to implement the MDGs relied on their ability to raise revenues and to allocate and spend their own income to deliver critical public services (Go & Quijada, 2012). Due to a higher resource availability, emerging economies and countries with rising markets such as Kenya or South Africa are generally better situated to adopt and realise development strategies and programmes in accordance with the MDGs (Unterhalter & North, 2011). Malaysia is referred to as a typical example of a country with a growing national economy that enabled its government to address basic problems of human development relevant for several MDGs (Hezri, 2013).

Many studies also identify the lack of adequate resources as a factor that hinders the implementation of the MDGs (Abbott et al., 2017; Mashau et al., 2014; Rao & Seth, 2009; Unterhalter & North, 2011). Scarce financial means are a key constraint for all efforts to promote the MDGs, especially in least developed countries, such as Namibia, Tanzania, and Zambia (Chung et al., 2018; Evans, 2018; Haug & Hella, 2013; Ilcan & Lacey, 2015). In this context, several studies point to the adverse effects of the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2007 and the later global economic recession (Akume, 2014; Caprani, 2016; Pici et al., 2014). These developments reduced the availability of resources in all developing countries and constrained their efforts to adopt policies for MDG implementation.

All things considered, a lack of resources heavily impeded effective implementation of the MDGs, especially in least developed countries. Emerging economies were better equipped to pursue policies in line with the MDGs but, also here, global emergencies could suddenly limit their resources and hamper their development strategies and programmes.

4.5 | Factor 5: Administrative capacity and level of economic development

The fifth factor we acknowledged in our analysis is administrative capacity and level of economic development. Countries with strong administrative capacities and a high economic development level are more likely to take efforts for implementing the MDGs than countries with weak administrative capacities and a low economic development level.

The literature has highlighted stable administrative capacity and a certain economic development level as factors that strongly enables national MDG implementation (Abbott et al., 2017; Pouliot & Thérien, 2018). According to quantitative studies, a higher per-capita gross domestic product in 1990 is generally associated with capable bureaucracies and effective implementation of the MDGs (Go & Quijada, 2012). This suggests that the administrative capacity and economic

development level of a country largely determine its MDG performance. A prominent example is China, which had strong administrative capacities and economic development and could hence adopt effective national strategies aligned with the MDGs (Li, 2013). A professional and well-equipped public sector with a strong bureaucracy is perceived as key for carrying out effective development programmes (Akume, 2014; Reddy & Kauzya, 2015). Such organisational features are highlighted as prerequisites for good governance and service provision consistent with the principles and norms of the Millennium Declaration (Gore, 2010; Lay, 2012; Richards & Vining, 2015).

Conversely, the absence of administrative capacity and a low economic development level severely constrain national efforts to implement the MDGs (Alabaster, 2014; Bernardi & De Chiara, 2011; Elkins et al., 2018; Onditi & Odera, 2017; Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2014). Weak institutional frameworks and a high degree of poverty are major obstacles for effective policies for the promotion of the different MDGs (Omona, 2010). In particular, countries that suffer from socio-economic inequality and lacking administrative capacity with deficient coordination are not able to take adequate measures that improve pro-poor development (Asadullah & Savoia, 2018; Mashau et al., 2014), basic health services for the poor (Das, 2018), environmental protection (Castelló et al., 2010; Opršal et al., 2018) or other MDG targets (Comim, 2015; Haug & Hella, 2013; Hoxhaj et al., 2014; Sío-López, 2015). Such capacity deficits open the door for policymakers to distort the programmes for their own gains leading to poor MDG implementation (Hezri, 2013; Omona, 2010; Ukachukwu & Iheriohanma, 2013). This is most evident in conflict zones and areas without statehood where the MDGs had essentially no effects (Caprani, 2016).

Overall, professional public administrations and related institutional frameworks as well as economic development and stability were decisive for national implementation of the MDGs. Without this, governments faced huge barriers for adopting strategies and programmes that could foster progress towards implementing the MDGs.

4.6 | Factor 6: Support from international or bilateral donors

The sixth factor that we found is whether governments obtain enough support from international or bilateral donors. Governments of countries that receive substantial external financial assistance are generally in a better place to adopt measures in accordance with the principles and norms of the Millennium Declaration.

In the set of scientific studies that we evaluated, donor support was described as a strong factor for national implementation of the MDGs (Rao & Seth, 2009; Reddy & Kauzya, 2015; Shoaf Kozak et al., 2012). The work of the United Nations, for instance, encompassed capacity building for public entities, workshops and training sessions to enhance skills of local stakeholders, or concerted actions with specialised agencies for disaster risk reduction (Hollis, 2014; Ilcan & Phillips, 2010; Manning et al., 2013; Meth, 2013). The World Bank moreover offered loans and sponsored development projects based

on the MDGs to some developing countries (Elkins et al., 2018; Fukuda-Parr, 2010; Pici et al., 2014). In addition, many bilateral donors have assisted governments of developing countries to pursue certain policies, such as improving maternal health, and to implement other MDG-related norms (Aurégan, 2017; Evans, 2018; Sío-López, 2015).

However, support from international and national donors is not always seen as positive. Studies show that strong external agendas of donors often lead to dysfunctional outcomes of national MDG implementation (Abbott et al., 2017; Chung et al., 2018; Comim, 2015; Sambu & Tarhule, 2013; Shoaf Kozak et al., 2012). Scholars criticise the sectoral approach of development assistance and stress that donors often do not take national or local circumstances into account, but mainly seek to further their self-interests under the flag of the MDGs (Haug & Hella, 2013; Ware, 2011; Wickstead, 2010). Moreover, authors state that too many technical details for monitoring and evaluation overwhelmed those countries with low resources and administrative capacities (Gore, 2010). Beyond that, studies point to insufficient support from donors and a lack of adequate international funding especially in least developed countries because donors often worry that their support will not have significant effects in such countries (Caprani, 2016; Hulme & Scott, 2010; Onditi & Odera, 2017).

All in all, donor support helped developing countries to launch political strategies and programmes to follow and pursue the MDGs. For some countries, political changes would not have been possible without such assistance. Least developed countries, however, did not receive adequate support. At the same time, strong external agendas of donors also undermined national commitments to the MDGs and hampered some initiatives of developing countries.

5 | DISCUSSION AND FORWARD-LOOKING PERSPECTIVE

After presenting the results of our literature review, we now summarise our main results before drawing lessons for the global endeavour to implement the SDGs and point to the boundaries of our study.

5.1 | Summary of key findings

Despite the large general attention that was devoted to the MDGs in the scholarly literature, only a small portion of articles investigated the concrete conditions under which the MDGs have generated political changes in different national jurisdictions. Many authors still treat domestic politics as a 'black box' and disregard the specific national contexts that determine whether and how global goals gain traction and affect politics on the ground, or touch upon these aspects only marginally. From our comprehensive synthesis of the literature on the MDGs, we identified six factors that have shaped national implementation of the MDGs in the 2000–2015 period.

Our analysis underscores that countries are deeply entangled in specific political trajectories and path dependencies. They allowed some governments to align their strategies with the principles and norms of the Millennium Declaration and kept others, which had different historical political orientations and traditions, from engaging in planning, capacity building and political actions for realising the MDGs. This shows that the MDGs, as a global policy instrument, did not function as a driver but at most as a catalyst for action. The MDGs were supportive when their core ideas were already shared by governments, while they remained toothless when governments lacked any interest or disagreed with the core MDG norms. This reminds us that historical pathways must be taken seriously, as they can severely limit the effects of global goal-setting initiatives on public administrative systems and their policy apparatus.

Furthermore, we found that the effective implementation of the MDGs in national contexts relied first and foremost on three domestic factors. Only countries with a sufficient resource availability, administrative capacity with a certain level of economic development, and adequate support from external donors had a real chance to adopt strategies and programmes in line with the MDGs. In some instances, national efforts to implement the MDGs were bolstered by state leaders who had developed ownership of the MDGs, while in individual cases NGOs pushed governments to adopt political changes to meet certain MDGs. What do these findings tell us about who benefitted from the MDGs as a governance instrument? The answer critically depends on the type of countries, and we recognise three categories.

First, countries with a relatively strong resource base, administrative capacity and economic development level and some donor support - notably Brazil, China, Indonesia, and India - performed comparatively well in terms of national implementation and advancing towards the MDGs. However, it remains largely unclear to what extent the MDGs have contributed to these developments. While the MDGs might have been conducive of some transitions towards good governance, the governments of these countries would have likely adopted the bulk of their political strategies and programmes also without the MDGs.

A second category comprises developing countries, such as Kenya, Malaysia, Nigeria, and South Africa, all of which have, relatively speaking, a sizeable resource availability, moderate administrative capacity and level of economic development, along with considerable international and bilateral donor support. In these countries, the MDGs had considerable effects on domestic politics and contributed to political changes. These changes were partly driven by the agendas of external actors, such as international funding bodies or different national development agencies, and partly by state leaders and public officials once they had assumed ownership of the principles and norms of the MDGs.

A third category entails those countries with a poor resource basis, limited or constrained administrative capacity and low economic development level, all of which hindered them from profiting from external assistance. For the populations of these countries—which are located primarily in Sub-Saharan Africa and conflict zones like Afghanistan and Somalia—the MDGs did not bring any substantial changes. Although these countries were most in need for financial support from bilateral and international donors, they were not able to access funding streams and did not receive substantial development assistance.

Thus, the MDGs have unfolded tangible effects on national politics only under specific domestic conditions and only in specific domestic contexts. More precisely, they fostered progress only for a few developing countries with particular characteristics, namely a solid resource availability, administrative capacity and development level, and sufficient external financial assistance. In light of these main results from the literature review, we now draw lessons for the current efforts to implement the SDGs in different national jurisdictions.

5.2 | Lessons learned for the SDGs

A first lesson is that path dependencies, such as prevailing historical political orientations and traditions, cannot easily be altered through global policy goals. Many experts placed high hopes and expectations in the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs but they have underestimated the strong domestic obstacles for generating deep transformational changes towards sustainable development in national public-administrative systems. Many governments remain stuck in conventional patterns and practices and the idea of sustainable development is only slowly gaining more fruitful ground (Forestier & Kim, 2020; Horn & Grugel, 2018; Spangenberg, 2017).

A second lesson is that governments of countries with low resource availability, administrative capacity and level of economic development must be better supported through a more targeted and structural approach taken by wealthier countries. Least developed countries will otherwise not be in a position to adopt adequate measures to implement the SDGs in their jurisdictions (Fukuda-Parr & Hegstad, 2018). A strengthened global funding initiative for these countries could leverage new public and private resources for sustainable development and overcome or mitigate their highest vulnerability (Bertheau & Lindner, 2022; Doumbia & Lauridsen, 2019; Hurley & Voituriez, 2016).

A third lesson is that support from international and national donors for developing countries should not be selective and biased by strong external agendas. Instead, such assistance needs to be in line with the overall principle and norm of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to leave no one behind to enhance ownership and internalisation of the SDGs within governments and populations of recipient countries. National ownership is crucial for deeper political changes towards sustainable development and should be emphasised in strategic development plans, capacity building, and political actions to mobilise political support at provincial and local levels (Biermann et al., 2017; Nhamo, 2017).

A fourth lesson is that professional public administrations with effective coordination are crucial for countries to make progress on the SDGs. Weak institutional frameworks in public-administrative systems hamper the adoption and design of coherent policies for promoting sustainable development (Nilsson et al., 2022). Efforts for coordination and integration of the SDGs into national systems differ from country to country and there is no one-size-fits-all solution to achieve the SDGs. Yet, all governments need to build up their administrative capacities and educate public officials at all levels to be able to implement the SDGs in their jurisdictions (Breuer et al., 2019; Fourie, 2018; Mbanda & Fourie, 2020).

Finally, NGO pressure on national governments to take more ambitious actions towards sustainable development hinges on possibilities for engagement and involvement in global goal-setting initiatives. While numerous NGOs participated in the formulation of the SDGs, their role in the periodic review of goal implementation remains limited (Beisheim, 2018). This diminishes the potential of NGOs to act as watchdogs holding governments accountable for national performances on sustainable development. Moreover, NGOs from the global South are underrepresented at global level and many countries restrict and suppress activities of NGOs (Arhin, 2016; Gereke & Brühl, 2019; Hassan et al., 2019).

5.3 | Boundaries of our study

As our literature review has been focusing on the MDGs, we need to acknowledge the scope conditions and a limited generalisability of our findings. In particular, the above-mentioned lessons might not apply to all countries but primarily to developing countries. Moreover, this study has examined domestic enabling and hindering factors and did not discuss other factors which contribute to the success and failure of global goal-setting initiatives, such as internal ambiguities, their overall structure, and specific goals. Nevertheless, by focusing on national conditions and domestic politics, we claim that our insights improve our understanding of the potentials and pitfalls of global goal-setting initiatives. Finally, the SDGs differ in several respects from the MDGs as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development entails a periodic review mechanism, fosters learning among governments and societal stakeholders, and provides for new financial instruments. These differences between the MDGs and the SDGs impede a direct translation of our results and allow some cautious optimism on the SDGs. Yet, they underline our point that developing countries will only be able to implement the SDGs if they receive adequate support from other actors through bilateral and international programmes.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

Our study demonstrates that the question of whether and to what extent global goal-setting initiatives generate political changes in national public-administrative systems critically depends on certain domestic prerequisites. Globally agreed goals therefore cannot be expected to easily trickle down from intergovernmental negotiations within the United Nations to the national level and then further to regions and provinces as well as cities and municipalities. Thus, scholars and policymakers concerned with the effectiveness of globally agreed policy goals should dedicate more attention to the domestic contexts in which such global principles and norms are supposed to take effect.

This brings us to some policy recommendations how to enhance the effectiveness of the SDGs and foster sustainable development worldwide. First, the periodic review mechanism taking place at the

High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development needs to be strengthened and further developed (Beisheim & Fritzsche, 2022). Second, learning among public and private actors for SDG implementation should be fostered at all levels and scales (Andonova et al., 2022; Türkeli et al., 2020) with large potential for cities and local governments to function as transmission belts between the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and actions on the ground (Hickmann, 2021). Third, governments must substantially reallocate funding for sustainable development and establish stronger incentive structures to guide public and private funding to promote sustainability transformations in different sectors (Biermann et al., 2022).

Finally, our study points to important research avenues on global goal-setting initiatives as a governance mechanism. Further research is warranted for more fine-tuned empirical investigations of how and under what conditions globally agreed goals work in national contexts. As a recent assessments on the political impact of the SDGs shows, several questions are still heavily under-researched despite the evolving research field (Biermann, Hickmann, & Sénit, 2022). This applies in particular to research on whether the SDGs lead to more institutional and policy coherence at domestic level (Nilsson et al., 2022). We hence need studies that explore the links between global and domestic politics from a critical perspective to improve our understanding of the concrete pathways under which global governance initiatives may effectively unfold tangible effects on national politics. For such future research lines, our work here provides a solid foundation and several promising starting points.

[Correction added on 2 December 2022, after first online publication: Changes have been made to the article content to improve clarity in this version.]

DECLARATION

We confirm that this work is original, has never been published nor is under review elsewhere, and that the authors do not have any conflict of interest to disclose.

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