Uniting for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
Best practices of NGO involvement
Uniting for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development -
Best practices of NGO involvement

2017

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Best practices of NGO involvement in delivering the SDGs

1. Introduction

The complex challenges of the 21st century, including a growing demand for food, multiple environmental crises, a growing population, and increased inequality all call for a more integrated approach to increasing human wellbeing. The concept of sustainable development embraces the so-called “triple bottom line approach to human wellbeing”. This approach aims at achieving economic development while ensuring that the principles of social inclusion and environmental sustainability are not threatened. Sustainable development is built on a shared understanding of economic, environmental, and social goals in a governance context at the international as well as national level (Sachs, 2012). The environmental crises of widespread pollution and degradation, climate change and ocean acidification among others also require a novel way of conceptualizing poverty-reduction objectives. Global poverty and rising inequality cannot be addressed in an isolated manner from global environmental problems.

The Millennium Development Goals, developed in 2000, were made up of eight goals with the overall objective of eradicating extreme poverty primarily in least developed countries of the world. The Sustainable Development Goals, adopted in 2015, however, are comprised of not only far more goals (17 as opposed to 8), but the targets set for these goals were developed in a more complementary manner highlighting the interconnected nature of the goals and calling all countries, including the most developed nations, to action¹.

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are laid out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (henceforth the 2030 Agenda). This was adopted by the 193 member states of the UN in September 2015. The goals are intended to guide national and international level decision making up to the year 2030. They are accompanied by 169 targets which provide more specific actions that countries and other bodies should be

taking in order to achieve the SDGs by 2030. The 2030 Agenda emphasises the need to move the world onto a more sustainable path and the importance of ensuring that no-one is left behind in this transition².

**From MDGs to SDGs**

In the social dimension the SDGs are intended to build on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and achieve what these were unable to. The eight MDGs and 21 accompanying targets developed out of commitments described in the Millennium Declaration, which was adopted by 189 countries in September 2000. A set of health and economic indicators for each target was also laid out. There was considerable criticism of the MDGs and it is hoped that the different approach represented by the SDGs will be more effective at facilitating substantial progress in global sustainable development. Ultimately, the MDGs laid a solid foundation for their successors and without them there would not be as clear of an understanding regarding the complex and comprehensive nature of development as a whole.

As described above, the SDGs differ from the MDGs in that they represent a much more holistic and collaborative approach, also integrating environmental, economic and governance aspects, which build on previous and today’s global commitments like the Rio Declaration and the Paris Agreement on climate change. Critics felt that the interconnectedness of the MDGs was ignored, for example there were separate maternal and child health care goals despite the strong link between these issues³. In contrast, many of the areas covered by the SDGs have targets relating to them that come under goals other than the main goal for that area. This means that institutions and groups working in a given area have to take into account targets that come under a variety of different goals that may not explicitly relate to their work⁴. Hopefully, this will encourage more cross-sectoral and integrated work on sustainable development. Similarly, monitoring groups have to consider multiple goals in order to fully cover their area of interest, again enabling more integration⁵.

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³ [https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3877943/](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3877943/)
Another problem with the MDGs was the lack of civil society and developing country participation in their formulation. Many felt that this led to a lack of ownership of the goals and therefore hampered implementation. In contrast, the 2030 Agenda states that the SDGs are “...the result of over two years of intensive public consultation and engagement with civil society and other stakeholders around the world, which paid particular attention to the voices of the poorest and most vulnerable.” (UN General Assembly 2015, p. 3).

Civil society’s role in the development of the SDGs was key in ensuring their effectiveness and appropriateness. However, there are also important roles it can play in their implementation. This report aims to explore some of these roles using case studies of best practices. While the 2030 Agenda sets global goals to achieve sustainable development, the targets need to be translated to the national level for more effective implementation, where national NGOs have an important role to play as well. Particular focus will thus be on how national level non-governmental organizations can actively contribute to a more committed implementation of the SDGs in their respective countries. One of the questions posed by the 2030 Agenda is how the more holistic and integrated approach towards sustainable development influences the objectives of NGOs and to what extent they should adjust their operations. How can NGOs stay consistent with their mission whilst trying to actively contribute to the holistic transformation called for in the 2030 agenda?

The report outlines the distinct types of practices organizations can undertake that will be beneficial to overall efforts on SDG implementation. The report concludes with discussing current obstacles that hinder progress in NGO ownership of and mobilization around SDGs, and proposes ways forward to strengthen joint advocacy for the Sustainable Development Goals set out in the 2030 Agenda.
2. Roles of NGOs in SDG implementation

The term ‘NGO’ covers a wide range of organizations, from grassroots activism groups to large-scale aid providers. NGOs also differ considerably in sophistication and access to resources. Therefore, it is unsurprising that there are a vast array of possible roles they can play in the implementation of the SDGs. Actions through which NGOs can mobilize themselves around the SDGs can vary from advocacy/lobbying activities, general awareness raising campaigns, monitoring of implementation plans in the public as well as private sector, and implementing projects themselves.

Discussion papers on the subject of NGO involvement in the SDG implementation process have touched upon the question of which roles NGOs can and wish to take upon themselves. Research on self-reported roles by Spitz, Kamphof and van Ewijk (2015) suggests that advocacy activities towards the government and implementing projects in developing countries are regarded as most relevant. The importance attached to carrying out activities in developing countries is also reflected in the fact that it is still development NGOs and organizations working on international issues that demonstrate greater mobilization efforts around SDGs. International NGOs for cooperation, the environment and human rights – which are highly experienced in international negotiations – have been very active in the negotiation as well as implementation process and have thus taken ownership of the SDGs. NGOs operating on a national and local level, however, can and should take on different roles relevant to their field of work. These roles - which can be even conflicting and are likely to change in the coming years when NGOs have better explored their resources and strategies - are outlined below.

2.1 Watchdog

National NGOs can play an important role in holding governments to account. They can help to ensure the proper functioning of the necessary accountability framework through advocacy work, lobbying and acting as watchdogs (through joint position papers, shadow reports or events). Monitoring progress, with special focus on voluntary national reviews, is said to be among the key roles of national NGOs (Spitz et al., 2015). Together with advocacy activities, acting as a watchdog is not a foreign role to most NGOs, however, many of them are not aware of their countries’ implementation plans (Hege & Demailly, 2017). Chapter 4 on the barriers to NGO ownership of SDGs reflects on the lack of awareness of SDGs encountered among national NGOs.
As states are the signatories, NGOs focus their efforts on holding the governments accountable. Monitoring the governments’ progress in incorporating SDGs into strategic planning processes and documents and implementing them can be done in different forms. Cooperation among NGOs in the form of coalitions or alliances is likely to be the strongest action NGOs can undertake as it strengthens their position. This could help them in conveying their messages to the public as well, which will be of high importance to exert pressure on public administration bodies. Collaboration with the objective of holding the government accountable for their pledges and actions can be realized in the form of joint position papers, shadow reports or even conferences where other stakeholders can also be represented.

Taking up the specific, often quantitative targets, as well as the indicators creates more legitimacy (see 2030 Watch in Germany, described in Chapter 3.1). Making more use of indicators would likely have a beneficial impact on several roles, for example advocacy and monitoring to increase accuracy and legitimacy and strengthen their stance with numbers. It could also enhance the impact of communication and awareness raising campaigns to go beyond referring to the overall objectives and “overarching principles” and making the targets and the required actions more tangible to the target audience. Lastly, quantitative support in the form of indicators would also provide a clearer view of what type of projects are needed to most effectively further the implementation process.

NGOs can also hold the private sector to account, either indirectly through pushing for government action, or through advocacy aimed directly at businesses. While partnership between NGOs and private companies is still not everyday practice, there is a strong case to make for NGOs to establish such collaboration. As the private sector is becoming increasingly involved in SDG implementation through voluntary commitments, NGOs could take on the role of monitoring transparency and ensuring that companies deliver on their commitments. However, many NGOs are wary of entering into cooperation with private entities for a number of reasons. As the role and responsibility of the private sector in implementing SDGs is unclear, NGOs fear that a lack of transparency might undermine voluntary commitments. NGOs also need to decide whether they intend to hold the private sector to account by naming and shaming (Spitz et al., 2015) or rather by acting as a collaborative partner giving guidance and advice on transforming their business models and staying on track to meet their commitments.
2.2 Raising awareness

Also important is the role they can play in publicising the SDGs. Clearly, the more awareness people have of the SDGs, the more they can align their lifestyles to this transformative agenda, and use also their democratic powers to influence the government to align their policy with the SDGs. Furthermore, it is positive for civil society to be involved in spreading the message of the 2030 Agenda as this demonstrates to citizens that everyone is involved in their implementation, not just the national government.

If citizens become more engaged in the topic of sustainable development and demand more action from the government, NGOs can capitalize on that social demand and put more pressure on the government. Funding for awareness raising about the SDGs is not easily obtained, but Europe-wide communication and mobilization projects could assist NGOs in securing funding (Hege & Demailly, 2017).

Mobilizing citizens around the SDGs is also a challenging task from the perspective of today’s political climate and the perceived lack of willingness to engage in the topic. Amidst global threats of terrorism and growing political and social turmoil in many parts of the world, this global agenda might have become less of an immediate concern for many citizens. This also raises the question of how much NGOs should prioritize communication activities and in what way. Placing SDGs on the government’s agenda and explaining to the public how they relate to the global challenges that people also notice and hold important, and how SDGs are embedded in sectoral strategies should be a priority to create the social demand that is needed to advance the implementation of SDGs.

2.3 Partnerships

Closely linked to efforts for advocacy and accountability is the establishment of coalitions or alliances among NGOs or across sectors resulting in partnerships between NGOs, the government and the private sector. This could be seen as less of a role NGOs take on and more of a tool these organizations have at their disposal to strengthen their voice and position.

For collaborations among NGOs to be successful, the silo mentality needs to be overcome to facilitate knowledge and information exchange and strengthen shared positions. It is essential in conveying the importance of SDGs to the public as well as in monitoring and
holding the government and private actors to account. This is also why coalitions or alliances such as SDG Watch Europe or Alliance Sud (see Chapter 3.3) are considered good practices in terms of collaboration as they provide a platform for NGOs that might have a different focus but have a shared understanding of the goals.

Some NGOs are still wary of collaborating with private enterprises out of fear that this “new partnership” might lead to blurred responsibilities. Research on Dutch NGOs show that they are concerned that if they strengthen coordination and cooperation with the private sector, the government might weaken its commitments arguing that there is no more need for it to take up a leading role, only that of a facilitator (Spitz et al., 2015). While these are valid arguments that need to be taken into account, monitoring the activities of the private sector could also be facilitated through stronger cooperation.

2.4 Practical implementation

SDG implementation efforts by national NGOs can also be more direct. This can come in the form of carrying out projects themselves or supporting other organizations, communities or companies in doing so. Many NGOs who had been implementing projects before the 2030 Agenda was adopted in 2015 believe that they are already actively supporting the advancement of SDGs. Therefore, projects do not need to be “SDG projects” per se, NGOs rather strive to use the goals and targets in pre and post-evaluation of projects to ensure that they are well-aligned with the SDGs, positively contributing to some and not affecting others in a negative way. The sector where SDGs have had the most tangible impact in terms of project planning and implementation is civic education where the content of many programs has been adapted to the new agenda. The e-learning course for teachers developed by ASVIS in Italy presents an outstanding example and will be discussed in more detail among other initiatives in Chapter 3 on good practices.

2.5 Getting active around SDGs

The role and activities taken up by NGOs strongly depends on their profile and prior involvement with Agenda 21 and the MDGs, implying a path dependency resulting in a stronger link to the post-2015 Development Agenda. National NGOs who have not participated in negotiation processes or are not familiar with UN agendas have less or even no knowledge about the SDGs and their potential role in enhancing their implementation on a national level. It is also due to this fact that joint NGO platforms can
deliver better results than organizations working alone as the coalition serves as a place for knowledge and experience exchange.6

The roles NGOs play can be influenced by the partnerships in the context: a (partly) government financed project implementer or an NGO taking part in a governmental-non-governmental-private collaboration will not be able to make decisions independently of other actors. As stated by Spitz et al. (2015, p. 10): “The different roles – being a partner of the government or really following in a critical way – are often difficult to combine. Many NGOs struggle with this issue.”. At the same time, the level of NGO activity and engagement will also influence how much they can get involved into national level implementation: governments are less likely to make the SDGs a priority if there is no such demand from civil society. In addition, to what extent the government will prioritize the SDGs will have a significant effect on the outcome of NGO mobilization efforts. Therefore, neither NGOs nor governments should hesitate and wait for the other party to make the first move or initiate negotiations before taking action.

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6 http://www.iisd.org/business/ngo/roles.aspx
3. Case studies: good practices of NGO involvement in the SDG implementation

The Sustainable Development Goals have been endorsed and adopted by the European Union as the pathway for sustainable development until 2030. The EU’s published policy proposals, however, have been met by outcries from civil society in Europe. The lack of high political commitment, policy mainstreaming and roadmap for implementation was highlighted by organisations such as SDG Watch Europe or Alliance Sud, and spurred the establishment of further platforms and coalitions with a common vision, such as the 6th Scenario proposal, which united over 250 NGO organisations in a joint effort to propose an alternative, truly transformative path towards sustainable development for the European Union.7

The following organizations, events and information platforms are all engaged in acting as watchdogs for either the European Union as a whole, or city councils and national governments. They work together to suggest improvements and campaign for better policies, critically review the public sector’s policies, factual precision implementation in the form of shadow reports, and work towards the involvement of people in active efforts to break out of poverty and become involved in joint efforts. The following compilation of good practices is by no means exhaustive but rather intends to showcase the different tools and methods NGOs can employ to fulfil one or more of the roles described in Chapter 2. While the classification of these practices is not definitive as they tend to fall within more than one category at the same time, this report seeks to structure the collected practices so as to provide a clear examination.

3.1 Good practices in the role of a watchdog

As described in Chapter 2.1, acting as a watchdog can come in the form of advocacy and lobbying activities or monitoring the performance of the government and to some extent the private sector by peer reviews, reports, or publications. Below we present a few good practices, where civil society takes up the watchdog role in the form of non-governmental coalitions (e.g. SDG Watch Europe), within public-private partnerships (e.g. UKSSD), or through focused projects on monitoring (e.g. 2030 Watch).

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2030 Watch

The successful monitoring of the implementation of SDGs necessitates adequate indicators. On global level, the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators developed 232 global SDG indicators\(^8\), which was adopted in March 2017. The EUROSTAT also published a first set of European SDG indicators\(^9\) in May 2017. However, a national level monitoring framework is still missing in most countries. The 2030 Watch project by the Open Knowledge Foundation in Germany aims to fill this gap and monitor the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in high income countries, including European and OECD countries.

The data provided on their website [www.2030-watch.de/en/](http://www.2030-watch.de/en/) is based on indicator proposals made by experts in academia, research institutes and civil society organizations, and allows for comparison among countries\(^10\). 2030 Watch aims to compile these indicators to equip citizens, journalists and parliamentarians with tools to gain an easier understanding of the overview of progress towards achieving the SDGs in their own countries and in other countries. The pilot phase of the project offers a visual comparison of countries’ performance for one year only, but in the final version of SDG Watch long term trends will also be shown.

Generally, 2030 Watch is supposed to raise awareness, inform the public and increase pressure on politicians to take the 2030 Agenda into account in their decisions, and is not intended for academic analysis\(^11\).

SDG Watch Europe

SDG Watch Europe is a cross-sectoral civil society coalition, bringing together more than 78 European platforms working in social, environmental human rights, development and other fields. The main aim of the coalition is to monitor the European level implementation of the 2030 Agenda and provide recommendations to the European institutions and EU Member States. It also aims to inform and engage European civil society through sharing good practices, carrying out joint communication actions and

\(^8\) [https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/indicators-list/](https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/indicators-list/)


\(^11\) [https://2030-watch.de/en/](https://2030-watch.de/en/)
sharing information. Its work is organised in four strands: policy and advocacy, monitoring and indicators, civil society mobilisation, as well as reflection and innovation. In addition, there are specific campaigns under the auspices of the coalition, such as the **People’s Budget** campaign on the mainstreaming of sustainability and the SDGs into the post 2020 EU budget.

The joint work of these European and national NGOs aim to advance the implementation of the SDGs on many levels and taking up many different roles. As a watchdog, SDG Watch Europe is primarily concerned with monitoring and analysing current policy developments, and providing recommendations and expert guidance to EU bodies and national governments through the more localized initiatives of the member organizations. Their commitment to advocacy and policy advice involves gap analysis, analysis of current policy and whether it is adequately integrated for the successful achievement of the SDGs. Monitoring policy and implementation ensures that all governmental and EU bodies are accountable under the pledges they made, particularly with regard to lack of data or the creative use of available data. Similarly to a think tank, they also reflect on current practices and suggest innovative solutions to current problems by supporting other organisations, sharing best practice methods and suggesting implementation techniques. The focus on research and public scrutiny means also providing input to official studies and reports put forward by EU institutions, such as the Reflection Paper on EU Finances\(^\text{12}\)\(^\text{13}\); conveying their message to decision makers and the public by drafting position papers on EU legislation, reports and other written declarations or resolutions; and engaging with public and private stakeholders by surveying them on issues such as the EU budget\(^\text{14}\). Since its launch in 2016, SDG Watch Europe formulated several positions on European SDG implementation. It responded to the EU Communication: Next steps for a sustainable European future, criticising it for a lack of ambition and plan of action. In its position it also formulated several concrete recommendations, such as the development of a European Sustainable Development Strategy, a gap analysis and plan of implementation, and called for EU Member States to adopt strong European Council conclusions on the topic in June 2017.

The coalition does not only look at the focused policy process of implementing the 2030 Agenda, but also at how SDGs are mainstreamed into the various policies. Jean-Claude

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13 https://www.sdgwatcheurope.org/single-post/2017/06/20/SDG-Watch-Europe-input-to-the-Reflection-paper-on-EU-finances
14 https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/09175c_af3016e78e50406080748fdf455215723.pdf
Juncker, President of the European Commission, outlined five possible scenarios for how the European Union could look going forward in a white paper in March 2017. SDG Watch Europe heavily criticised it for not putting sustainability and the 2030 Agenda, the only cross-sectoral agenda adopted by Europe with a longer term horizon, at the center of the five scenarios. European civil society felt, that none of these scenarios were truly for the people of Europe based on the universal sustainability agenda. Thus SDG Watch Europe and Friends of the Earth Europe worked with around 100 other organisations to develop an alternative 6th scenario. The outline states that in this scenario, ‘sustainability sits firmly at the heart of the European project, the EU27 will prioritise the interests of citizens, in the EU and beyond’. The importance of democracy, justice and sustainability are emphasised.

More than 250 NGOs have given their support to the 6th scenario. Between them they cover a wide range of public interest issues including women’s rights, labour rights, health and the environment. Both national and international organisations are represented from Social Justice Ireland to Save the Children. The 6th scenario proposition is intended to influence the ongoing discussion about the future of Europe. Hopefully the high level of support it has received will encourage EU decision makers to consider it seriously in upcoming debates.

The civil society cooperation within SDG Watch Europe greatly builds on the strength to bring together NGOs from various sectors. By combining social, economic, environmental and governance aspects in their work, they are not only able to follow up the SDG implementation in an integrated manner to strengthen synergies and mitigate trade-offs in policies, but they are also more capable to enhance pressure on the various sectoral institutions. Their cross-sectoral cooperation and holistic approach can also serve as a positive example for governmental actors.

**UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development (UKSSD)**

In 2016, UKSSD, a multi-stakeholder network, representing organisations from the UK that span the business, civil society, academic and public spheres, coordinated written evidence submissions for the Environmental Audit Committee inquiry into the

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16 [http://maximpactblog.com/a-sixth-scenario-for-europe-the-ngo-vision/](http://maximpactblog.com/a-sixth-scenario-for-europe-the-ngo-vision/)

17 [https://www.socialjustice.ie/content/policy-issues/over-250-non-goverment-organisations-launch-alternative-vision-europe](https://www.socialjustice.ie/content/policy-issues/over-250-non-goverment-organisations-launch-alternative-vision-europe)
Sustainable Development Goals in the UK and the Women and Equalities Committee inquiry on the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 5 in the UK.

In early 2016, UKSSD worked with the Office of National Statistics (ONS) to help them meet the data challenges associated with the SDGs. Between 7 March and 27 May, UKSSD and the ONS collaborated on a research exercise to seek the views of non-governmental organisations, both private and voluntary, on how the ONS should report progress towards the SDGs. These findings are now being considered along with further analysis to develop a UK reporting framework for SDGs, which ONS will put to the public for consultation in autumn 2016.

When the ONS publish their draft national reporting framework for consultation UKSSD will be encouraging their stakeholders across the UK to contribute their views. The national indicator framework will be key to holding the government to account so it is critical that as many stakeholders as possible have their say18.

Global Goals Municipality Campaign

After the successful ‘Millennium Municipality’ campaign which was set up to raise public awareness for the Millennium Development Goals, the International Cooperation Agency of The Association of Dutch Municipalities (Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenteen), VNG International launched a renewed campaign revolving around the newly adopted SDGs. The Agency primarily supports developing countries in strengthening local governments, associations and facilitating decentralisation processes. The Gemeenten4GlobalGoals campaign was created based on this central conviction that local governments are key agents in the new development agenda. A number of goals, such as Goal 11 (sustainable cities) and 16 (effective, accountable and inclusive institutions) to name just two, are of particular relevance to municipalities as they occupy a central position within the everyday practices of municipalities. However, all of the goals are – to a certain extent- local goals, which means that local governments can contribute to each and every one of them.

The Global Goals Municipality Campaign is dedicated to raise awareness for the Global Goals and aims to inspire and mobilize Dutch municipalities in the achievement of the goals. VNG International will offer assistance and will facilitate the exchange of

18 https://www.ukssd.co.uk
knowledge and best practices between municipalities. The campaign will support municipalities to create an enabling and vibrant environment in which active citizens, businesses, volunteers, etc. will be able to find and inspire each other and start local partnerships for sustainable development and international cooperation\textsuperscript{19}. Support is provided in the form of publications specifically aimed at municipalities such as factsheets with more general information about the SDGs but also various other communication tools ranging from a map of inspiring practices to a questionnaire on how respective municipalities manage the global goals\textsuperscript{20}.

\textit{Federal Council for Sustainable Development Belgium}

The Federal Council for Sustainable Development (FRDO-CFDD) advises the Belgian federal government on sustainable development policy, particularly in relation to international commitments, including the SDGs.

Part of the role of the FRDO-CFDD is to act as a forum to allow ideas about sustainable development to be exchanged. It organises dialogues with stakeholders whose opinions are then conveyed to national decision makers. Gathering of opinions may take place at the request of ministers, secretaries of state, the parliament or on the FRDO-CFDD's own initiative. The ministers or secretaries of state feedback on what action the government has taken based on the opinions collected and, if necessary, the reasons for taking different courses of action to those suggested.

The members of the FRDO-CFDD are representatives of various social groups: environmental organisations, organisation for development cooperation, users’, employees’ and employers’ bodies, youth organisations and the scientific world\textsuperscript{21}. The FRDO-CFDD has produced opinion reports on Belgium’s 2017 Voluntary National Review\textsuperscript{22} and also a report in 2015 on its progress on SDG implementation\textsuperscript{23}.

\textsuperscript{19} http://www.vng-international.nl/our-projects/global-goals-municipality-campaign/
\textsuperscript{20} https://vng.nl/global-goals-gemeenten
\textsuperscript{21} http://www.frdo-cfdd.be/en/the-council
\textsuperscript{23} http://www.frdo-cfdd.be/sites/default/files/content/download/files/2015a05e.pdf
Global – Civil Society review of 2016 High Level Political Forum (HLPF)

More than 230 NGOs representing a mixture of national and international bodies signed a letter to Oh Joon, then president of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, giving feedback on the 2016 HLPF. They aimed to make substantial recommendations for improvements to the forum going forward. Suggestions included introducing the national voluntary reviews at the beginning of the annual HLPF programme, creating more interactive modalities conducive to constructive exchange and problem-solving, and making national reviews more inclusive, transparent and participatory. It was also added that inclusivity and accessibility could be improved “by providing closed captioning, international sign interpretation, and accessible format website and documentation for visually impaired participants”24.

Norway Shadow report on VNR

Countries prepare voluntary national reviews (VNRs) on SDG implementation to the High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development that is held under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council annually and under the UN General Assembly every four years. Norway prepared its VNR in 2016, and as a response, the Norwegian civil society also produced a report on SDG implementation entitled How the UN Sustainable Development Goals can be reached in and with Norway by 2030, which the contributing 50 NGOs shared with the Norwegian government prior to the UN HLPF in New York in July 2017. The aim of this shadow report was to highlight issues not raised by the government and supplement the VNR with additional information on the state of SDG implementation in Norway. In the preface, the report states that ‘there is a vast gap between what they (politicians) say and what they do, even in Norway.’

The report gives seven overall recommendations for implementing the SDGs: make a step-by-step plan, establish partnerships including with civil society, produce annual, public reports, improve policy coherence, prioritise inequality reduction, increase public awareness and strengthen funding for implementation. The report also gives specific recommendations for actions to facilitate implementation of each goal, as well as a few examples of how civil society is contributing. Most importantly, detail is given about what

24 https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/10771Letter%20to%20President%20of%20ECOSOC_Final.pdf
should be done to achieve individual targets, in contrast to the government’s voluntary national review (VNR).

Shadow reporting is an effective means of ensuring a fair assessment of SDG implementation progress at the annual High Level Political Forum. It allows civil society to hold governments to account on their commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development\(^{25}\). Increasing its effectiveness as an advocacy tool, however, requires NGOs to incorporate it into their long-term strategy and public dialogue.

*Shadow report on Switzerland’s progress by Alliance Sud*

Alliance Sud gives a review of Switzerland’s implementation plan of the SDGs by scrutinizing the resources allocated for the implementation, the Sustainable Development Strategy with proposed measures to meet the goals, the role of civil society and the progress it has made\(^{26}\). As the implementation process of SDGs has only started and countries are in the stage of reevaluating policies and creating a legislative environment conducive to implementation efforts, the report only monitors progress in terms of plans and not achievements. It was produced by the six leading Swiss development NGOs,\(^{27}\) who reviewed recent and planned budgetary measures, the legislative and institutional landscape including concrete strategies such as the Sustainable Development Strategy 2016-2019 and the Swiss Development Cooperation Strategy 2017-2020 to conclude that the actions of the government run partly counter to its commitments.

*Overseas Development Institute report on coal subsidies in European countries*

NGOs often direct their efforts towards the implementation and monitoring of specific goals or targets in 2030 Agenda. One example is the Overseas Development Institute’s work on coal subsidies, which focuses on target 12.C, calling for phasing out harmful subsidies for fossil fuels. Their report reviews subsidies to coal in 10 countries that produce 84% of Europe’s energy-related greenhouse gas emissions: France, the Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and UK. It is accompanied by individual briefs for each of the ten countries setting out where subsidies to coal remain. The report also provides general recommendations for governments going

forward. The study constitutes a good practice in drawing attention to how governments continue to subsidize Europe’s reliance on oil, gas and coal and thus contribute to increasing the transparency of such support, strengthening efforts to assess the implementation progress.

The strategic debate about energy security and electricity access on the one hand, and the need for sustainable development and the use of renewable resources on the other one, is a pivotal aspect of the SDGs, as well as the Paris Climate Agreement. Without a clear transformation towards a green economy, Europe cannot move towards a just and prosperous society in the long term.

*Joint advocacy actions*

NGOs or NGO alliances have also utilized joint lobby letters sent to government officials as advocacy tools. Organizations of several countries, including Austria, Denmark and the UK have made use of this tool to call their government to account for the delivery of their commitments towards the implementation of SDGs. In January 2017, 144 environmental and development organizations sent a joint letter to the Federal Government of Austria asking for a concrete action plan to ensure the implementation of the SDGs. They called for an overarching SDG strategy, structured involvement of all stakeholders, transparent reporting and faster implementation of the goals, especially in areas that are not yet subject to existing legislative processes. The letter was addressed by official responses by Christian Kern (Chancellor of Austria), Sebastian Kurz (Foreign Minister) and the Federal Ministry of the Interior providing assurance that delivering on the national commitments will happen in close cooperation and open dialogue with civil society. While such response should be welcomed, the role of acting as a watchdog will be of prime importance.

*Global Focus* and the *92 Group*, a coalition of 23 Danish NGOs working on environment and development issues sent a similar letter to the Danish prime minister about their concerns on the SDGs with recommendations for action. The NGO alliance formulated a Civil Society Initiative for the National Action Plan urging the government to develop

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29 https://www.globaleverantwortung.at/sdgs-umsetzen-brief-von-144-organisationen-an-bundesregierung
concrete policy objectives in line with all 17 goals, carry out annual progress reporting and set up a sustainability council. While there is no information available on the effectiveness of the initiative, it constitutes an example of the available instruments in the toolbox of NGOs.

In the UK, the UKSSD network also sent an open letter to the Prime Minister in 2016, published in The Times, uniting 80 major businesses (e.g. Coca Cola, IKEA, KPMG) to deliver on the government’s commitments to meet the Sustainable Development Goals. The letter received a lot of attention on social media and in the press, and got an official response from the Department for International Development via The Independent.
3.2 Good practices in the role of raising awareness of SDGs

The Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development (ASVIS) - Educational Initiatives

ASVIS, the Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development was established in 2016 with the aim of increasing the awareness of the Italian society about the importance of the 2030 Agenda and to mobilize them. Among its versatile set of activities, ASVIS established a cross-cutting working group on Education for Sustainable Development. In cooperation with the Italian Ministry of Education, ASVIS set up a Network of Universities for Sustainable Development with 51 participating universities and launched three Master’s degree programs as part of training students to become experts in the field of sustainable development and spreading the culture of sustainability. A free e-learning course for teachers has also been released to increase their knowledge on the 2030 Agenda and provide them with tools for the development of global citizenship competencies. Furthermore, the Alliance also launched the “Let’s score 17 Goals. Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” national school contest on the SDGs for the first time in 2017 with the involvement of 300 schools across Italy.

The Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development (ASVIS) Sustainable Development Festival

The first Sustainable Development Festival was run from 22 May until 7 June in 2017 in Italy and was the main contributor to the European Week for Sustainable Development (ESDW). Over 200 events (conferences, seminars, workshops, shows, etc.) were held around the country to draw attention to the 17 SDGs. The organized conferences, workshops and seminars addressed cross-cutting dimensions that characterize Agenda 2030 covering topics such as education, financing, tools for designing and evaluating policies, and changes needed to reform the institutional landscape to foster policies for sustainable development. In addition to the above mentioned events, the Festival also arranged meetings with prominent figures and experts more informally through cultural and entertainment activities (cinema, theatre, exhibitions, food and wine events, flash mob). In the presence of high level government officials the alliance handed the product

31 http://asvis.it/education-for-sustainable-development/
32 http://asvis.it/home/46-1979/i-giovani-per-la-sostenibilita-i-progetti-vincitori-del-concorso-miur-asvis#.WnCO_6inFPb
33 http://www.asvis.it/sustainable-development-festival/
of the festival – 17 days of reflection by civil society – to the government and national institutions.

The concept for the Festival was born with the aim to engage and raise awareness of wider population groups on sustainable development issues. The Festival is therefore aimed at both private and public body representatives and experts in the subjects covered by the events, as well as for all citizens interested in deepening their understanding of the various themes of Agenda 2030.34. The Festival aims to spread the culture of sustainability, make sustainable development an issue of topicality and draw national and local attention to the issues and opportunities associated with the achievement of SDGs, thus contributing to bringing Italy to a path of sustainability.

*People’s Budget campaign*

The “People’s Budget” was created as a cross-sectoral campaign aimed at the sustainability reform of the long term EU budget.35 Realising the potential of the EU budget to facilitate the sustainability transition of the EU, the campaign aims to unlock a positive new vision and rethink the EU budget to make it work for citizens and reconnect the EU to its people and values. The People’s Budget campaign, advanced by SDG Watch Europe, is the only overarching European campaign initiative on the EU budget, which reflects on all aspects of sustainability (social, environmental, economic and governance) and pushes for holistic approaches and key policy messages that mutually reinforce each other, which approach is strongly connected to the integrated approach of the 2030 Agenda. The campaign’s key ask is introducing sustainability proofing for the next EU budget cycle based on a set of eight sustainability principles that can help increasing coherence in the decision making in both the policy and programming cycles of the EU budget.

Among other the campaign calls for supporting democracy within the EU, strengthening the rule of law with the help of the EU budget, providing better safeguards for public participation in the regional and other funding, prioritising the improvement of local infrastructure and the local economy over large scale trade agreements that benefit multinational companies and large conglomerates. This entails moving away from

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34 http://www.festivalsvilupposostenibile.it/
35 http://www.peoplesbudget.eu/our-campaign/
wasting taxpayer money on unsustainable programmes such as fossil fuel subsidies, harmful farming projects or developments that harm both people’s health and the integrity of our environment.

*Frag den Staat – Open Knowledge Foundation Germany*

The Open Knowledge Foundation Germany is a nonprofit organization that advocates open knowledge, open data, transparency, and civic participation. One project is the Frag den Staat (“Ask The Government’) portal. This enables interested citizens to request information from a variety of public sector organisations by making a Freedom of Information (FOI) request. On the project’s website, the requests, their current status and the responses to them are transparently documented and published. So far over 20,000 requests have been made. Frag den Staat wants to empower citizens and hopes to generate further interest in FOI. FragDenStaat.de is inspired by the British FOI-portal *What Do They Know* and cooperates with other FOI portals around the world. This also allows more accountability on SDG implementation as citizens and NGOs are able to request data on indicators of what has been achieved so far37.

*Global Goals Accelerator*

Earth Charter Netherlands together with the Sustainability Dialogue platform launched the Global Goals Accelerator in 2016, a program that, as its name suggests, aims to accelerate the national implementation of the SDGs and the engagement of citizens and NGOs through a number of actions. Partners leading the initiative have mapped relevant actors in the Dutch Global Goals Community, identified their roles, their impact potential and what they need to embrace the Agenda on a national level, and organized several thematic relay meetings. At these meetings, having taken place in the summer of 2016, participant organizations had the opportunity to present already existing or potential future initiatives and create collaborative partnerships, thus contributing to the national achievement of the goals and their incorporation into policy objectives38.

37 https://okfn.de/en/projekte/fragdenstaat/
38 http://www.globalgoalsaccelerator.nl/over-ons.html
3.3 Good practices in partnerships

Alliances and coalitions have been formed by a diverse set of actors embodying different objectives and strategies with respect to their mission, scope of activities, scale and sectoral relationships. Some of them were established with the specific aim of furthering the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, while others contribute to the SDGs in a more indirect way through strengthening linkages between their activities and particular targets outlined in the Agenda. All collaborative formations of organizations described below represent a shared vision of sustainable development and work towards achieving it in their respective countries, linked to ongoing activities and using tools available to them at national level.

SOLIDAR (International)

SOLIDAR is a civil society organisation with over 60 members in 22 EU countries, and five internationally. It voices the concerns of its member organisations to the EU and international institutions by carrying out active lobbying, project management and coordination, policy monitoring and awareness raising across its different policy areas.

In the framework of the 2030 Agenda and as a member of SDG Watch Europe, SOLIDAR International Network will keep working to contribute to the implementation of the decent work and social protection goals and targets to end poverty in all its forms everywhere. Their particular commitments lie in education, international cooperation and social affairs, with a specific focus on migration, proper work and standards of living. The specific goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda SOLIDAR is working towards are directly related to their vision of securing decent work and social protection for all.

They have been particularly vocal with regards to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), and strongly advocated against the inclusion of social services in international trade. In 2015, they produced a booklet uncovering the flaws and fallacies of

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39 http://www.solidar.org/
40 http://www.solidar.org/en/focus/international-cooperation
TTIP drawing on opinions of experts from both sides of the Atlantic as a tool for fair trade advocacy\(^1\).

**SDG Watch Europe (Europe)**

SDG Watch Europe is a continent-wide alliance that brings together NGOs from developmental, environmental, social and humanitarian backgrounds. The alliance and its activities have already been introduced in Chapter 3.1 as two of the four key dimensions along which their work is structured are strongly focused on holding EU bodies and national governments to account. The two other dimensions, civic engagement and reflection illustrate how the multifaceted nature of their activities enable them to be a voice of influence in the political process of the SDG implementation. Engaging NGOs and citizens at local, national and EU level involves bridging the gap between people and high level policy and decision making, thus strengthening momentum for more participatory bottom-up approaches. Their fourth work strand, reflection, is dedicated towards facilitating capacity building amongst members of civil society and creating a shared space for knowledge transfer, cooperation, and on-the-ground implementation. They form the only international coalition of NGOs that work towards furthering the implementation of the SDGs.\(^2\).

**Alliance Sud, Switzerland (National)**

The Swiss Alliance of Development Organisations strives to influence Swiss policy in pursuance of global justice. With a specific 2030 Agenda, they are campaigning for global development frameworks, and monitor and lobby for more just bilateral foreign, economic and trade policy, as well as a reform of the WTO. One of their other core concerns is securing safe drinking water for all, which could be supported through an international water convention that would be binding under international law\(^3\). Together with the Environment Alliance and the Centre for Peacebuilding, Alliance Sud organised a conference in October 2016 during which Swiss NGOs focusing on environment, labor, development, peace, education, health, gender equality and people with disabilities met to delineate how each of them will work towards meeting the SDGs in Switzerland.

\(^1\)http://www.solidar.org/system/downloads/attachments/000/000/197/original/2015_ttip_flaws_and_fallacies_uncovered.pdf?1457601267
\(^2\)https://www.sdgwatcheurope.org/
\(^3\)http://www.alliancesud.ch/en
In addition, they frequently publish InfoDocs, providing the public with information about development issues, developing countries, and North-South relations and have produced a report describing the ways in which Swiss government policy needs to change to align with the 2030 Agenda\textsuperscript{44}. In 2016, they also organized a conference for civil society members to discuss what their role can and should be in the implementation process. 50 organizations took part at the event, where they mapped their respective activities to the individual goals and identified the areas of responsibility. They have since been working towards enhancing the collaborative framework for a more effective governance of the alliance\textsuperscript{45}.

\textit{Danish 92 Group (National)}

The Danish 92 Group is a coalition of 23 Danish NGOs working on issues related to the environment and development. The group was established in 1991 with the mandate of coordinating the Danish NGOs' preparations for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, 1992.

Today the Danish 92 Group is working on the follow-up of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg 2002, the Rio+20 UN conference on Sustainable Development in 2012 and related issues on sustainable development at both national and international level. Activities include joint actions on advocacy, lobbying and information activities coordinated in different thematic working groups. Currently the secretariat of The Danish 92 Group is based at CARE Denmark\textsuperscript{46}.

Their work is primarily focused on the political process of sustainable development, multilateral environmental conventions, Agenda 2030 and Denmark's international work on development and environment\textsuperscript{47}. After the adoption of the SDGs in 2015, the Danish 92 Group and Global Focus organized an event for civil society organizations to engage and mobilize around the SDGs and jointly develop recommendations for the government on how to deliver their commitments. More than 100 Danish NGOs participated and produced a report containing recommendations on what tools and mechanisms the government and civil society can employ to further the follow-up and review processes of

\textsuperscript{44} http://www.alliancesud.ch/en/politics/agenda-2030
\textsuperscript{45} http://www.swisspeace.ch/apropos/implementing-the-2030-agenda-what-role-will-civil-society-take/
\textsuperscript{46} http://www.climatenetwork.org/profile/member/92-gruppen-danish-92-group
\textsuperscript{47} http://www.92grp.dk/about-the-danish-92-group.html
the implementation process. The two NGO alliances published the report and presented it to the Danish government at a high-level event in February 2016. They have since been actively engaging in dialogue with public and private stakeholders and monitoring the Danish National Action Plan for the Sustainable Development Goals.

**Lithuanian NGDO Platform (National)**

The National Non-Governmental Development Cooperation Organisations’ Platform (Lithuanian NGDO Platform) brings together 21 Lithuanian non-governmental organisations working in the field of development cooperation and development/global education. The NGDO Platform was established on March 29, 2007.

Members include the Lithuanian Women’s Society, the Lithuanian Children’s Fund and the Economic Research Centre among others. Their main areas of activities are public awareness raising and civic education on sustainable development issues; increasing opportunities for Lithuanian NGOs to participate in international development cooperation; representation of the NGDO Platform and its members at national and international organisations and networks; active participation in shaping and implementing Lithuanian, EU and UN development cooperation policies; and developing and strengthening the capacities of the NGDO Platform and its member organisations.

Competences of their member organisations include promotion of democracy, social policy, education, equal opportunities, healthcare, food security, children’s rights, sustainable development, and HIV issues.

Since the adoption of the SDGs in 2015, the Platform has been an active advocate for the goals. Three Lithuanian NGOs – the Lithuanian NGDO Platform, the Baltic Environment Forum and the Sustainable Development Initiatives – joined the voices of global civil society in support for a stronger reflection on climate change in the SDG framework.

In 2017, the Lithuanian NGDO Platform decided to employ creative, innovative and interactive tools to raise awareness of the SDGs among the Lithuanian public. The most successful initiative is called SDG Ambassadors, which engaged young people from all

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48 http://www.pagalba.org/en/about_us
49 http://www.pagalba.org/en/our_members
50 http://www.pagalba.org/en/un_policy/lithuanian_ngos_call_for_a_climate_change_goal_in_sustainable_development_goals_framework
over the country to present the SDGs in workshops organized in community centres, secondary schools and universities. Other initiatives included a Hackathon for ICT students to develop technological solutions for global challenges such as human trafficking and the method of forum theatre to create greater cultural awareness and challenge preconceived notions on inequality and migration by actively engaging the audience. The NGDO Platform also used a variety of other more traditional methods including the organization of a photo exhibition, panel discussions, interactive workshops as well as the preparation of informative leaflets on SDG best practices51.

Coalition 2030 (National)

Coalition 2030 is an alliance of leading civil society groups working for the achievement of the SDGs. They represent over 100 organisations, working in Ireland and in over 50 countries across the globe. Their expertise ranges from children’s rights to environmental sustainability and from humanitarian relief to education. The Coalition aims to promote the implementation of the SDGs in Ireland and worldwide through its member organizations.

Coalition 2030 calls for three key commitments with respect to the SDGs. Firstly, they advocate for an ambitious National Action Plan led by the Department of An Taoiseach, involving all government departments to steer, implement, monitor, and report on the SDGs. This Plan needs to emphasise the interlinked nature of the Goals - linking for example, agriculture and climate change to trade policy and global poverty. Secondly, they propose to establish an Inclusive SDG Monitoring Forum in which civil society, and in particular those vulnerable groups – both Irish and internationally – who stand to gain or lose most from Ireland’s work on the Goals, are fully represented. The third commitment suggested by the coalition is that of Increased Financing for Development to support the delivery of the SDGs. These measures would enhance the efforts needed to implement a clear and credible plan to reach the UN ODA target of 0.7% of GNI.

ASVIS Italy – The Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development (National)

ASVIS has over 160 member organisations and involves thousands of individuals in Italy. It aims to raise awareness in Italian society and institutions of the importance of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to bring together groups already involved in SDG implementation. ASVIS brings together associations representing social partners (businesses, trade unions and third sector associations); networks of civil society associations pursuing specific Goals (health, education, employment, environment quality, gender equality, etc.); associations of local public administrations; public and private universities and research centres; associations of stakeholders working in the fields of culture and information; foundations and networks of foundations; Italian organizations that are members of international associations and networks dealing with the SDGs.

The Alliance hopes to encourage a culture of sustainability at all levels, align production and consumption models with the SDGs, provide analyses of the benefits and challenges for Italy in relation to the Agenda, contribute to Italy’s strategy for SDG implementation and establish a monitoring system for tracking progress in this implementation. ASVIS Italy engages in a wide range of activities to promote its mission, of which the ‘Educational activities’ and the ‘Sustainable Development Festival’ are described in detail in Chapter 3.2.

Dutch SDG Charter (National)

Businesses and NGOs (125) in the Netherlands signed a Charter on the role of business, civil society and cross-sector partnerships in the post-2015 development agenda52. Working on enabling SDG Solution Partnerships together with the Major Alliance (a joint initiative of philanthropy, business and government), they provide expertise, innovative products and technologies, financing solutions and business and collaboration models. The solution partnerships, led by partners of the Charter, offer tangible solutions to each SDG. These include initiatives such as the Community Life Center that strives to improve access to health care for communities in need; the Human Cities Coalition aiming to improve access to basic services in informal settlements and promote SDG 11, sustainable and resilient cities. As a lead organization, SDG Charter also supports the Dutch SDG

52 http://sdgcharter.nl/
Investing (SDGI) Agenda in which 18 Dutch financial institutions and three enabling networks work towards collaborative public-private partnerships for more effective and harmonized financing of the Goals and institutions\textsuperscript{53}. The results of the incubating initiative are outlined in the report Building Highways to SDG Investing (SDGI, 2016).

4. Barriers to NGO ownership of SDGs

The implementation of the SDGs in the European Union has been highly criticised by NGOs due to the lack of high political commitment and the lack of strategy and plan of implementation. The sustainable development agenda is scarcely on the table, with more “urgent” political issues, such as Brexit or the migrant crisis monopolising high-level discussions. The European Union as such has not embraced the 17 SDGs yet, and significant effort needs to be dedicated to the cause. Urgent action needs to be taken on also a national level to increase the political engagement with the sustainable development agenda, to disseminate information and raise awareness of the SDGs, provide financial support to civil society, and apply the SDGs to public sector policies and establish a credible and committed implementation framework within countries. The following section takes a closer look at the four issues identified above.

4.1 Lack of knowledge of SDGs

The immediate criticism of the goals is that there are seventeen of them - this is more than double the number of MDGs, therefore more difficult to remember and implement into an NGOs’ daily agenda. Also these 17 goals are also often considered “too abstract” (IDDRI, 2016). Furthermore, the creation of 169 targets that the SDGs include, although a commendable effort at clarity and precision that the MDGs lacked, is far too complex to be used regularly (Schmidt-Traub, 2015) or with sufficient ease.

Action towards SDG implementation still remains more in the hands of NGOs that have a more international focus and therefore are familiar with the UN working platforms, the MDGs and Rio+20. Without effective communication of the goals and their meaning by the national governments, national NGOs are not necessarily exposed to the channels of information that would make them engage with the goals at home (IDDRI, 2016). In

\textsuperscript{53} https://gateway.sdgcharter.nl/SDGI2
addition, the prevailing rhetoric surrounding ‘development’ indicates that efforts should be concentrated in less developed countries, rather than in developed nations such as EU member states. Hence, national NGOs that operate in ‘developed’ countries exhibit less interest in the Charter (Stetter, 2016), or fail to focus on the truly significant problems, such as Goal 10, aiming to “Reduce inequality within and among countries.”

Thus, even if NGOs are well-informed about the SDGs and the agenda, they do not feel the need to change their strategies to fit these new goals, even if they are “supported by the goals” (Spitz et al., 2015). Hence, they do not take ownership or responsibility of them, and often believe that it is the role of the government to direct effort in order to meet the specific targets. This is, quite understandably, due to the fact that it is the national governments, not the NGOs, who are committed to the agenda and there is therefore no direct responsibility of NGOs to take action on them (IDDRI, 2016).

4.2 Lack of financial resources

After adopting the SDGs within an NGO’s mission statement or strategy, the next step is obtaining appropriate finance to carry out the desired work. Financial resources are always a significant obstacle in such work, and with the rising complexity of the problem and continuing international focus on the poorest and developing countries (SDKP, 2017), this poses a challenge to obtaining non-governmental funding for these activities in developed countries.

One of the main debates in the European Union at the moment revolves around the post 2020 budget of the EU. The People’s Budget campaign as presented in Chapter 3.2, aims to significantly alter the focus towards mainstreaming sustainability, the principles of which also form a key part of the “6th Scenario” alternative vision of Europe (FOEE, 2017), something that current ideas by the European Commission about the future of Europe and the future EU budget do not envisage. The outcome of this campaign is yet to be seen.

As another practical challenge, the unrealistic separation of international climate funds and development funds needs to be overcome (Schmidt-Traub, 2015). With the introduction of SDGs as an integrative platform for development, previously silo sectors such as environment and development should not compete for the same funding (IDDRI, 2016). An example of this integration might be the Clean Development Mechanism
(CDM), however this remains to be highly climate change and carbon dioxide emissions mitigation focused. In addition, this merging of financing opportunities increases the administrative burden on NGOs in the form of having to not only fulfil more and more accreditation requirements (UNFCCC, 2015), but comply with additional conditions that mechanisms such as results-based financing brings. Whether this additional competition for financial resources benefits some causes over others depends on the preferences of the donors, and on the administrative capacities of the NGOs. This, by default, benefits larger, international NGOs more than smaller, local ones.

Certain donors have already begun changing the wording of their tender requirements to align projects with the SDGs (IDDRI, 2016). If NGOs are not aware of the specifics of SDGs, this may pose additional obstacles to obtaining funding for purposeful activities. However, compared to the MDGs which were tangibly more narrowly focused, the SDGs are wider in scope and therefore do provide more freedom than the MDGs did in terms of financing opportunities.

Another issue lies in ensuring the effective distribution of public finance to different causes and determining which targets should take priority when financial resources are limited. For example in the Netherlands, financial support for NGOs has been declining since 2010 (Spitz et al. 2015); in France, financial support for NGOs is long considered to be lacking. In Germany, however, where NGOs are coincidentally the most vocal and active in the sustainability agenda, the government typically offers sufficient finance for non-profit activities (IDDRI, 2016). Thus, there appears to be a chicken-and-egg paradox of being aware of the sustainable development agenda in the first place versus having money to develop active projects and being vocal about them in order to obtain more funding for actions towards achieving the goals and further increasing awareness of the issue.

4.3 Lack of credibility of state implementation processes

The above section identified the importance of national financial contributions to the sustainable development agenda in order to achieve the goals. Lack of reliable and transparent financing implies a lack of credibility of the state implementation processes, and therefore generates mistrust and lack of engagement with the SDGs within civil society.
The UN process is voluntary and the implementation of SDGs is not legally binding (IDDRI, 2016). This means that NGOs may feel reluctance to become engaged in the framework and incur the entry cost of gaining knowledge on the subject, only to have their government abandon or not implement the goals themselves. This lack of trust in the UN pledge and review process is significant and may have serious implications not just for the SDGs, but for the Paris Climate Agreement, REDD+ and other UN programmes.

Lack of clear implementation and monitoring frameworks, indicator design and baseline data collection all make it more difficult to ensure the transparent and proper implementation of goals by the public sector, or even their endorsement, due to the above mentioned lack of simplicity that would make SDG implementation ‘easy’. Even in countries with high development aims, such as the United Kingdom, government departments struggle to include SDGs in their Action Plans (UK International Development Committee, 2016). The rhetoric in less advanced EU economies is often to copy best practice examples from other countries (Jackson et al., 2015) - if these do not exist, the likelihood of public sector SDG implementation in such countries is often even lower.

There is also a lack of universal implementation directives; nations are free to assess their own needs independently and develop indicators and steps they deem necessary for the successful attainment of the goals. The ‘utopian’ agenda that the SDGs set does not require commitments that would necessitate immediate action. Hence, there is a risk that other, more urgent issues, will be given political priority. In addition, this also makes between-country comparison more challenging, and by reducing the transparency of the decision-making approach, provides space for the states to lower their effort.

On the other hand, in countries with high civil society engagement with the public sector, such behaviour and lack of adoption of SDGs may have the opposite effect; rather than demotivating NGO involvement, it may galvanise the civil society to take the problem into their own hands, and take ownership of their function as government watchdogs. A famous example of this is, for example, the platform SDG Watch Europe.
4.4 Lack of political support for SDGs at the highest state level

Little attention may be paid to SDGs and sustainable development as such in countries with high amounts of political tension, elections or change (IDDRI, 2016), among civil society, governmental bodies and country leaders alike. On the highest European Union level as such, Jean Claude Juncker himself was criticised for omitting the SDGs in his list of 10 Priorities for Europe (Bassot and Hiller, 2016).

Even in countries that are exemplary in foreign development aid provision, domestic implementation may be lacking due to insufficient pressure from the highest levels. The UK, for example, has national legislation that obliges the government to donate at least 0.7% of the annual budget to foreign aid, and SDG implementation is the responsibility of the Secretary of State for International Development. However, there is no Secretary of State for domestic development, and as such there is no authority responsible for domestic implementation of the SDGs. It is therefore unsurprising that, according to the UK Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals Report (2016), none of the Single Departmental Plans of the government mention SDGs in their 2015-2020 plans, and they suggest that the Secretary of State of International Development should take over the responsibility for domestic development and SDG implementation as well. This is a clear example of where a lack of political leadership, even in a very engaged country internationally, leads to a lack of governmental concern and awareness at the domestic level.

4.5 Other issues

For civil society to make the case for the need to change path or raise awareness on unsustainable policies and activities, it needs to have the necessary space to manoeuvre. The need for support to civil society is even greater, as civil society must often urge governments to take action on the commitments they made in September 2015. Given the threats to civil society and the shrinking space for NGOs to act in some countries, an inclusive and participatory approach to implementing the SDGs will not come about without decisive and targeted support to civil society.

Even with political support, however, civil society engagement with the SDGs is not guaranteed. The IDDRI also identifies the unwillingness of NGOs to take on the watchdog
role for SDG implementation and hold the private sector to account; they fear the establishment of a “new partnership” that would reduce the distinction between the regulatory role of the state and NGOs, as well as blur the lines as to whose responsibility it is to implement the SDGs. As such, currently neither the state nor the NGOs are taking over the role of monitoring the private sector; the job is instead left to the market and conscious consumers.

Furthermore, two additional criticisms of the SDGs arise that may impede its acceptability and use - the lack of integration with other international agreements, and the lack of ambition encompassed within some goals. The first critique is often raised by international NGOs and civil society platforms that observe a wide discrepancy between international agreements such as the Canada-Europe Trade Agreement (CETA) (Spitz et al., 2015) and Goal 8 of the SDGs, to “Promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all.” Nonetheless, this criticism should not impede NGOs abilities to implement SDGs, and it is understandable that the creators of the SDGs would not have been able to make them compatible with all other international agreements.

The second critique, the lack of ambition the SDGs exclude, is more radical. Whilst the goals are meant to encircle the whole world and help establish a universal baseline of development by 2030, other agreements that also aim to improve levels of development globally, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) are much more detailed and ambitious (IDDRI, 2016). However, they may lack the same level of publicity and reach that the SDGs have. NGOs that offer this critique, however, often already have more ambitious goals in their own mission statements, and tools and indicators that may render the SDG indicators redundant, in their opinions (IDDRI, 2016). Although this in itself does not appear problematic, a fragmented mosaic of indicators and measurements of development and progress may reduce transparency and comparability and may make translation and implementation of best-practice examples from other countries unnecessarily difficult.
5. What is the way forward?

NGOs are increasingly mobilized at the national level (Hege and Demailly, 2016), but there is still a long road ahead and one of the most important tasks is to engage national NGOs who do not have an international profile or experience in the field of development. Organizations addressing pressing social and environmental issues at a local and/or national level should be key players in advocacy and monitoring activities as they possess the knowledge fundamental to creating appropriate objectives and indicators to measure and monitor progress in the national implementation of the SDGs. Smaller NGOs with more limited capacities focusing on specific aspects of well-being and sustainability, often engaged in projects with smaller scope, need to recognize that the global nature of the 2030 Agenda does not render their participation in mobilization efforts irrelevant.

In many cases NGOs are aware of the goals and concrete targets but fail to comprehend the added value the SDGs would contribute to their work. The role of alliances and coalitions, networks and of larger organizations more familiar with the UN system is highly important as they can mobilize smaller organizations and show them how they could benefit from incorporating the SDGs into their strategies and activities. In order for national NGOs to embrace the goals, it needs to be clarified what is expected of them. Is there a role that should have priority over others? Should NGOs channel most of their efforts into holding the government to account or launching initiatives/projects and establishing partnerships? NGOs need to reflect jointly on what form of collaboration will be most effective in delivering results.

The roles of other stakeholders with whom NGOs establish partnerships also need to be defined to further the process of collaboration. What is/should be the role of the private sector? While many NGOs seem reluctant to enter into cooperation with the private sector, they could expedite the much needed transformation of business models and provide assistance in the process through expert knowledge. There is a strong interdependence between NGOs and the government when it comes to each of their respective roles in enhancing the SDG implementation process. Communication and mobilization efforts by NGOs are important to engage the public but they tend to embrace the targets more when the government is also willing to align its strategies with the SDGs and create a legislative environment conducive to civic efforts.
How synergies should be identified and reinforced to strengthen comprehensive cooperation is a question that needs to be addressed by all parties involved in the implementation process. Good practices can emerge from bottom-up initiatives but simultaneously need a top-down approach from the government and public administration bodies to facilitate the work of NGOs through a legislative system that is coherent with the goals. They must be built on existing declarations and conventions in a way that the SDGs strengthen the current international agreements in place and close existing gaps (Rijnhout, 2014). The universal SDGs need to be broken down into national targets and strategies and incorporated into National Sustainable Development Strategies. Government policies in diverse sectors ranging from trade and infrastructure to housing and poverty reduction need to be in line with the SDGs, and an adequate monitoring system should be set up through a jointly developed indicator framework to manage and evaluate progress and adjust concrete objectives and measures accordingly. Governments also have the responsibility of incorporating the SDGs into official curricula on all levels of education. Capacity building will also be essential for teachers to be able to translate the concept of the global agenda and convey the key messages in an appropriate form to all audiences (Rijnhout, 2014).

Addressing the multitude of challenges and questions NGOs face requires closer cooperation within the civil society sector as well as among public and private stakeholders across other sectors. As the report illustrates, many alliances and multi-stakeholder partnerships have been formed with the overall goal of catalyzing the SDGs and many more will follow suit. Some of the tools and methods applied by the organizations and initiatives presented in this report will hopefully help turn this common vision into tangible results and mobilize citizens as they are the key building blocks of a successful implementation of the SDG agenda.
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