



Sustainable Development Goals: Concept and Challenges of Global Development Goal Setting

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Abstract

The power dynamics in the global development agenda setting are known. Traditionally, debates are pitched on platforms glorifying how the developed Global North arm twists the developing Global South to comply and/or conform to specific policy positions. Through actor-network theory, document analysis, and critical discourse analysis, the chapter traces global development agenda setting mainly from the Rio+20 Summit whose outcome document is code-named “The Future We Want.” From Rio+20 emerged a global development road map leading to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (AfSD) and its 17 inseparable sustainable development goals (SDGs). A 3-year negotiation period was established, terminating in the new global sustainable development agenda that succeeded the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2016. Although the SDGs have received unanimous endorsement by global governments, their development was not as straightforward as many may think. With the rallying banner “Let no one be left behind,” the global goals indicator

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development caused a consultation storm that led to meeting venues avoiding New York. From the *Our Common Future* report of 1987, through the Rio Declaration of 1992, to the MDGs in 2000, and ultimately the 2030 AfSD concluded in 2015, this chapter chronicles how stakeholders came together in shaping the SDGs discourses and agendas. The key findings are that the 2030 AfSD presents a new and innovative approach to global governance, where goal setting is an essential strategy. Furthermore, the process produced nonbinding SDGs and weak institutional arrangements and gives an extensive leeway that states enjoy.

Keywords

SDGs · Goal setting · Contestations · Stakeholders · Complexity

Introduction and Background

Fukuda-Parr (2014) argues that the United Nations and international partners have been scaling up the use of global development goals (GDGs) to address and promote priority objectives and targets. Although many such GDGs have been in place since the 1960s, the most common and popularized were the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Liverman 2018; Marten 2018). The MDGs opened a new chapter that “led to the use of global goals and target-setting as a central instrument defining the international development agenda” (Fukuda-Parr et al. 2014: 105). To this end, GDGs have become policy tools whose effectiveness, limitations, and broader consequences require ongoing documentation (Fukuda-Parr 2014). The author further highlights that GDGs have twin effects, namely, governance and knowledge, which result in both intended and unintended consequences in global development strategies and actions. This is a point also fully endorsed by Langford and Winkler (2014), as well as Yamin and Boulanger (2014). For example, the 2015 deadline presented a scenario where governments and other stakeholders worked on unsustainable short-term solutions mainly driven by the donor communities (Fukuda-Parr and Orr 2014).

In the lead to the post-2015 GDGs, the United Nations established a road map that would witness the replacement of the MDGs. The road map gave the intergovernmental processes time to conclude the new development agenda by September 2015 following the Rio+20 Summit in 2012 (UNCSD 2012). From historical lessons, intergovernmental processes are shaped through politics and knowledge (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill 2019). With new institutions created, particularly the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) that replaced the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) and the Open Working Group (OWG) on the post-2015 development agenda, it was all systems go. From its inaugural meeting in New York, the HLPF made it clear that the main issues shaping the new development agenda would be putting poverty eradication and sustainable development at the epicenter of the new development agenda (HLPF 2013). However, as observed by

Biermann et al. (2017), governance through goals implies inclusive goal setting, development of nonbinding targets, dependence on weak institutional setups, and extensive leeway for states to enjoy.

Drawing from the actor-network theory (ANT) (Latour 1999) as well as document and critical discourse analysis (Nhamo 2017; Antwi-Agyei et al. 2018), this chapter focuses on the SDGs, teasing out the concept and challenges of global development goal setting. The ANT permits researchers to trace and track key actors (humans), actants (nonhumans), and their network as these interact in space and time to shape the GDGs and agenda leading to the proclamation of the 2030 AfSD and the 17 SDGs (McNeill 2019; Elder and Olsen 2019). Given this focus, many starting points may emerge. To this end, the work will be restricted to commence from the year 1987, when the world came to a consensus on the concept of sustainable development (United Nations 1987), through to 2000, when the MDGs were ratified (United Nations 2014). It will also look at the Rio+20 in 2012 (United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development – UNCSD 2012) and ultimately 2015, the year that witnessed the birth of the 2030 AfSD and its 17 aligned and connected SDGs (United Nations 2015a) and related key GDGs including the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (United Nations 2015b), Paris Agreement (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change – UNFCCC 2015), and the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction managed by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction – UNDRR (2015). Further analysis will also be made to assess how the world has been doing to ensure that the SDGs, their 169 targets, and several hundred indicators are being embraced 5 years later.

What then is sustainable development and why talk about it? Sustainable development is defined in the book *Our Common Future* as “development that meets the needs of the current generations without compromising the needs of future generations” (United Nations 1987: 11). The concept emerged after years of searching for a development paradigm that could take the world away from the dominant and capitalist model of development that prioritized the bottom line (profits) more than anything else. From Lorenzo Fioramonti’s book *Gross Domestic Problem: The Politics Behind the World’s Most Powerful Number*, the world challenges are predominantly centered on the desire to measure development and progress using the gross domestic product (GDP) (Fioramonti 2013). This scenario resulted in industries and the so-called developed countries exploiting the environment and ecosystems to unsustainable levels. The environment was considered an externality in the production processes and the multinational corporations extracted resources anyhow, which lead to heavy pollution. Although the GDP is viewed problematic, it has not been easy to find a suitable replacement for this measure (De Beukelaer 2014) as the world is still using this measure in the era of the SDGs leading to 2030. Although several critiques emerged from *Our Common Future* definition of sustainable development, with many more definitions coming up, the world has remained fixed on this definition (Nhamo 2014). This definition has now gained global acceptance and was used both in the lead to the Rio+20 in 2012 (UNCSD 2012) and New York 2015 where the SDGs were finalized (United Nations 2015a). Given the foregoing, the same definition applies in this chapter. Needless to observe that

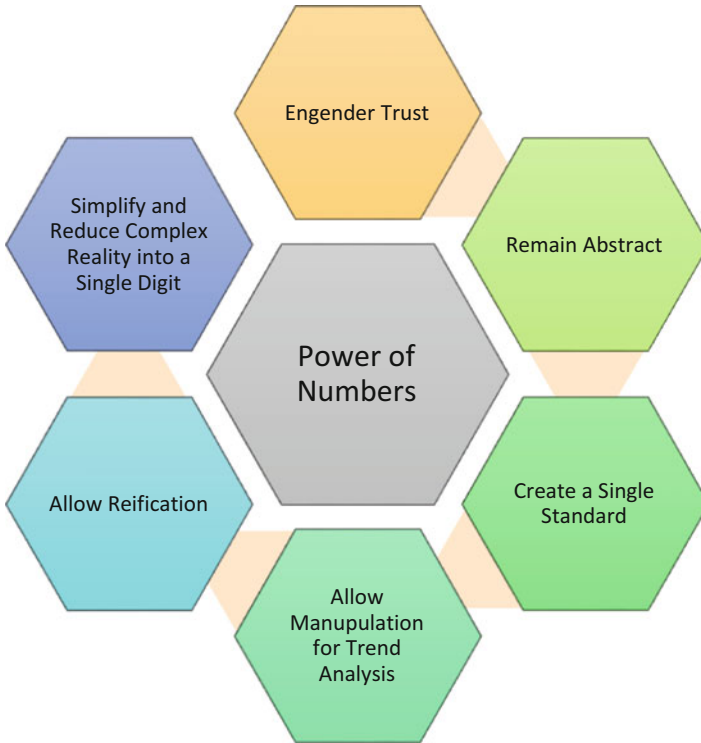


Fig. 1 The power of numbers in GDGs and their implementation. (Source: Authors, based on Fukuda-Parr 2014: 119)

Connelly (2007: 259) also raised concerns by arguing that “despite the continuing salience of sustainable development as a norm for planning and policymaking, there is still no consensus over the societal goals that would count as sustainable development.”

The GDGs prescribe some form of a global norm, in the case of the MDGs, the desire to end poverty (Fukuda-Parr 2014). For such to happen, there is a transition that takes place at national and subnational government levels in response to the global call to action. Selected indicators are developed in a contested policy environment to translate qualitative norms into measurable, quantitative, and time-specific targets through indicators (Kapto 2019). By default, the power of numbers comes into play as it is presented in Fig. 1.

As highlighted earlier, this chapter narrows down to the concept of SDGs, tracing the challenges and opportunities in global development goals agenda setting. The debates are traced mainly from the Rio+20 Summit whose outcome document is code-named “The Future We Want.” From Rio+20 emerged a global road map to the 2030 AfSD and its 17 inseparable SDGs. The issues surrounding the global indicator frameworks and the SDGs, as well as how challenges in measurement associated with the lack of data, are also presented. This is in line with Gasper et al.’s (2019)

thinking that much in global development goals processes has to do with framing. Lastly, the chapter highlights how particular global development agendas like the green economy that was one of the twin discussion tracks during the Rio+20 Summit fell of the post-2015 development agenda.

From the MDGs to the SDGs (15+ Years of Global Development Goals Setting)

The Millennium Development Goals Agenda

The MDGs probably marked an era in GDGs refinement and agenda setting. Natrass (2014) highlights that the MDGs were developed as a tool to focus attention and platform to mobilize resources for development. Fukuda-Parr (2014) is of the view that the MDGs could activate the power of numbers that created incentives for national governments and other stakeholders to rally behind its objectives. However, the powers of simplification resulted in unintended consequences as the GDGs were mistaken for national planning targets and strategic agendas. The MDGs were a set of 8 goals, 18 targets, and 48 indicators (United Nations 2000, 2001). The full set of the MDGs and their targets are reflected in Table 1. Having goals, targets, and indicators provides a platform to monitor and report progress both nationally and across the regions and ultimately globally (Fukuda-Parr 2014). In addition, not only can this be done as a once-off but periodically bringing in the notion of time series. Although the nature of poverty is “not amenable to such precise planning and commitment,” the setup gives credibility to the seriousness of the intent from global leaders and other stakeholders (Fukuda-Parr 2014: 122). Apart from the fact that heads of state and governments that ratified the MDGs suffer from lack of resources – means of implementation to attain the set goals – many other complex parameters can retard progress toward the attainment of such goals. Examples include unforeseen and massive natural and human-induced disasters like wars, famine, extreme heat, droughts, fires, and floods to mention but a few that will demand resource allocation shifts.

At regular and regulated reporting intervals (5 years apart), the MDGs provided the framework upon which the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and nations shared responsibility in addressing high poverty levels (Fukuda-Parr 2014). The MDGs progress reports were used by civil society and opposition parties in making governments more accountable and transparent in resources allocation (Natrass 2014). How then was the MDGs agenda set?

Fukuda-Parr (2014) records that the MDGs emerged out of the Millennium Declaration (United Nations 2000). The Millennium Declaration came out of the United Nations Secretary-General’s desk, supported by his staff and was negotiated by some diplomats. The Millennium Declaration tapped into the agendas adopted at various United Nations development conferences, and the voices of interest groups that included sectoral ministries and social activists remained loud in such adopted agendas. The technocrats that included experts from United Nations’ agencies with

Table 1 The MDGs and their targets

The MDGs	Targets	Number of indicators
Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger	Target 1. Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than US\$1 a day Target 2. Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger	5
Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education	Target 3. Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling	3
Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women	Target 4. Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and to all levels of education no later than 2015	4
Goal 4: Reduce child mortality	Target 5. Reduce by two-thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate	3
Goal 5: Improve maternal health	Target 6. Reduce by three quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio	2
Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases	Target 7. Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS Target 8. Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases	7
Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability.	Target 9. Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs and reverse the loss of environmental resources Target 10. Halve by 2015 the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water Target 11. By 2020 to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers	7
Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development	Target 12. Develop further an open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system Target 13. Address the unique needs of the least developed countries Target 14. Address the unique needs of landlocked countries and small island developing states Target 15. Deal comprehensively with the debt problems of developing countries through national and international measures in order to make debt sustainable in the long term	17

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

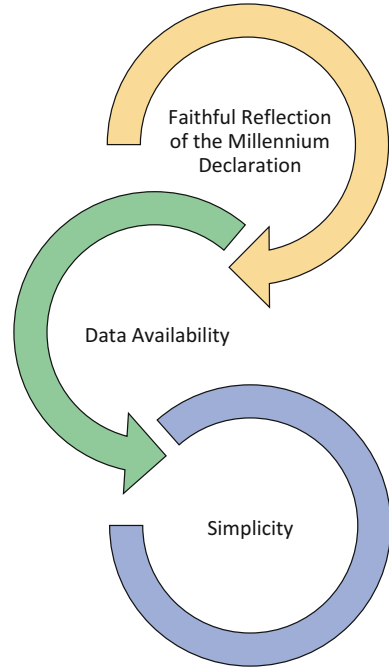
The MDGs	Targets	Number of indicators
	Target 16. In cooperation with developing countries, develop and implement strategies for decent and productive work for youth Target 17. In cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries Target 18. In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications	
Totals	18 Targets	48 Indicators

Source: Authors, based on United Nations (2001: 55–58)

expertise and experience transformed the Millennium Declaration into the MDGs. A working group chaired by one, Michael Doyle, did much of the work. In Fukuda-Parr's (2014: 128) observations, "[t]he dominant members of the working group were the representatives of the United Nations Development Programme, the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development – OECD who had worked together on reporting on the Development Assistance Committee's (DAC) International Development Goals." The three representatives were predominantly development economists, rather than statisticians. Although not realized at that point, this top-down approach and the nature of representatives caused a challenge as some voices disputed the processes, leading to a different approach during the post-2015 agenda setting (United Nations 2015b). The World Bank and the OECD were unusual participants in the United Nations agenda setting activities, and this resulted in resentment from United Nations' statisticians that were part of the processes (Fukuda-Parr 2014). Not surprising, the United Nations' MDG 1 was adopted from the OECD-DAC goal. The only difference was that it defined extreme poverty using the dollar-a-day metric as this indicator was the only once included in the Millennium Declaration (Greenstein et al. 2014).

Overall, the processes leading to the design of the MDGs had to fulfil three fundamental principles (Fig. 2) and were ongoing and interactive (Greenstein et al. 2014). While the principle of faithful reflection of the Millennium Declaration remained a political matter, the remaining two followed typical professional imperatives (Fukuda-Parr 2014). In as much as the United Nations statisticians would have wanted as many data points as necessary, the development economists had learnt that too many such data points would result in confusion during policy debates. The Human Development Index (HDI) simplicity had proven that simplicity remained key if the message is to be communicated to broader audiences, among such, politicians. A similar experience was reported by Kararach et al. (2018) in dealing with the Green Growth Index for the African continent. There were too many missing data points for some indicators resulting in only 22 out of the 54 countries making it to the computed index.

Fig. 2 Fundamental principles in the MDGs design process. (Source: Authors, based on Fukuda-Parr's 2014: 128)



Criticisms have emerged on the MDGs in the light of the new global development agenda. Caliori (2014) noted that the targets and indicators for MDG 8 were not compatible with the then understanding from the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. “The selectivity of MDG 8 incentivised a partial and incomplete approach to the mobilisation of resources on the side of rich countries. Its focus on debt, trade and aid left out other important policy areas in which rich countries could contribute to supporting human rights in developing countries” (Caliari 2014: 279). The situation was aggravated by the fact that the world was already in motion negotiating the means of implementation through a preparatory session in the lead to the International Conference on Financing for Development that was held in 2002. The conference took a holistic approach to all sources of financing for development as opposed to the limited scope presented in MDG 8. In conclusion, the author found that MDG 8 targets and indicators were indifferent to the established human rights principles. On similar views, Van Der Hoeven (2014) looked at the full employment target of the MDGs, with the view to draw lessons for the post-2015 development agenda. The key finding was that traditional development aid intervention presented in the MDGs was a less effective response to move the majority out of poverty, inequality, and unemployment. Furthermore, there was also the changing geopolitical landscape that had to be addressed.

Regarding education, Unterhalter (2014) believes that the MDGs had a narrow framing of the education targets and indicators. This resulted in the omission of salient aspects about the quality, context, and equity in the education deliberations. Instead, much focus was placed on schooling, to ensure that boys and girls complete primary schooling by 2015. In all fairness, completing primary schooling is not good enough, especially that we have knowledge of Industry 4.0 and what skills and competencies are needed (Nhamo et al. 2019a). In her reflection on how the HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases MDG 6 found its way on to the agenda, Natrass (2014) highlights that it emerged from a context of intense prior international mobilization. The move reflected an expanding international health agenda where the intellectual idea of “health as development” featured strongly in the deliberations. The idea of health as development could be traced as far back as 1978 when the conference on primary health took place at Alma-Ata. However, further international work and the constant noise from policy domains resulted in the political traction and fund-raising successes from HIV/AIDS activists. As such, MDG 6 targets were extended to include antiretroviral treatment. With this experience, the post-2015 deliberations on health goals were already highlighting the desire to setup country-level health targets if the goal on health for all was to be met.

Following the Stockholm Declaration in 1972, the social dimension of water witnessed the inaugural quantification at the 1977 United Nations Conference in Mar del Plata (Langford and Winkler 2014). Resolution II(a) of the 1977 Declaration was explicit in that people should have access to drinking water in quantities that meet their basic needs, and such water should be of acceptable quality. The Mar del Plata Action Plan marked the first worldwide water strategy resulting in the declaration to attain universal access to drinking water by 1990 that was conveyed through the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade for 1981–1990. Sadly, the targets were not met, but good progress was made. The target for universal access to drinking water was augmented through Rio Summit’s Agenda 21, with countries required to:

Ensure that all urban residents have access to at least 40 litres per capita per day of safe water; 75% of them were provided with on-site or community facilities for sanitation. In relation to solid waste and wastewater management, industrialized countries (by 1995) and developing countries (by 2005) were to ensure that at least 50% of all sewage, waste waters and solid wastes were treated or disposed of in conformity with national or international guidelines; with a rise to 100% by 2025. (Langford and Winkler 2014: 248)

In 2010, an estimated 89% of the global population had access to an improved drinking water source (Langford and Winkler 2014). Although there was no sanitation target initially in the MDGs, this was added during the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) that took place in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2002 (Langford and Winkler 2014). This development further projects how the global development agenda and related goals and targets find their way into critical policy pronouncement like the MDGs. What readers may not find explicitly is how the policy entrepreneurs play in the background, pushing certain positions onto the

global development agendas. The exclusion of sanitation matters in the MDGs was an anomaly that required urgent redress. The positioning removed sanitation from the trinity and nexus of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), an aspect that remains critical in most developing countries like those from the African continent.

Sen and Mukherjee (2014) narrow down to addressing matters about empowerment and rights. In their view, the MDGs agenda did not adequately address gender equality and women's empowerment, as this did not take a human rights-based approach. Hence MDG 3 was found wanting in this regard, a mistake that required rectification in the post-2015 era. Furthermore, the lack of the vision to recognize the strong linkages between the MDGs created what the authors termed "development silos." To this end, the authors advocate for post-2015 development agenda whose pivot is human rights, with issue-based development goals and people-centered targets. It is essential to place our finger on this proposal and observation as there was a strong push to make sure that the SDGs remain aligned and interrelated.

Cohen (2014) focuses on the city as an organ missing from the MDGs. Although MDG 7, Target 11 sought to improve living conditions of about 100 million slum dwellers, the target remained opaque and a thump sacked. More importantly, the framing is viewed as diverting attentions from the critical role cities are supposed to play as centers of production and consumption. An estimated 60% of GDP for many countries rides in cities. As the author sums it up, "Target 11 thus 'misses the target' of urban development and, more broadly, the target of development and human development altogether" (Cohen 2014: 261). Of further interest is the fact that Target 11 brings back the population debate into many global development challenges, an aspect that found its way back onto the Rio+20 agenda as one of the key sectoral matters for deliberation (UNCSD 2012). Apart from the demographic aspect, Cohen (2014) further presents the city as a space where poverty and inequality manifest as a site of vulnerability to extreme weather events and climate change. This posture supports earlier calls to view the GDGs as intertwined, touching on several other development imperatives.

As for the origins of MDG 7, Target 11, Cohen (2014) tracks it down to international discussion of urban issues in the mid-1990s starting with the Habitat II Conference where "slums" were mentioned. Habitat II raised global consciousness about urban issues, especially slums, and this resulted in a strong call for a coordinated international effort to address urban problems. This became the basis for the establishment of the Cities Alliance in 1999, with a declared focus to eliminate slums from city spaces. The Cities Alliance emerged as a coalition of the World Bank, United Nations Habitat, United Nations Development Programme, several bilateral agencies, and selected governments including Brazil, South Africa, India, and Kenya. Repeatedly, it has become clear how global development agendas are set and followed up. Strong actors and their networks take a position and push specific proposals through to their finality (Nhamo 2006). In concluding arguments, Cohen (2014: 272) proposes criteria to be used in establishing a new urban target post-2015. Among the criteria are the following pointers:

- The new target should not be linked to housing but rather to some aspect of income generation, employment, and the productive side of urban life.
- The target should be relational . . . thereby permitting some assessment of the performance of a specific urban area in terms of efficiency and equity.
- The target should also be sensitive to exogenous processes such as cycles in the global economy.
- The target should be understandable by the general public but should be not so oversimplified.

With the discussions surrounding the MDGs, the next section deliberates on the Rio+20 agenda setting as a platform for the post-2015 development agenda. What remains fundamental is that the Rio+20 Summit established clear time frames and institutions that would take the GDGs setting agenda forward.

Rio+20 Initiates Framing for New Global Development Agenda

“The Future We Want” is an outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development that took place in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil from 20 to 22 June 2012. The Summit 20 years after the 1992 Rio/Earth Summit is commonly known as Rio+20. From the document are presented seven key sections dealing with: the world’s shared vision, the review of political commitment, the concept of a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication, and institutional framework for sustainable development, framework for action and follow-up and lastly, means of implementation (UNCSD 2012). It is a known fact that state exerts power in GDGs agenda setting. This is done through heads of states, who act more subtly behind the scenes and closed doors to support and leverage other actors (Marten 2018).

From Rio+20, the world’s heads of state and government, in partnership with civil society, renewed their commitment to sustainable development. There was not only a need to have new GDGs but also a different development paradigm (Gore 2015). This was to be undertaken through the promotion of the three pillars of sustainable development that include the social, environmental, and economic. Poverty was identified as a persistent challenge, and its eradication had to remain at the epicenter of sustainable development (UNCSD 2012). This meant the world had to commit to poverty eradication as a matter of urgency. A commitment was also made to accelerate the achievement of GDGs, among them the MDGs. Since people remain at the center of sustainable development, every effort was to be made to embrace a just, equitable, and inclusive world. This understanding makes more sense if one is to consider the different levels of development between countries of the northern hemisphere and their southern hemisphere counterparts. This was to be further realized in the context of the United Nations Charter that recognizes that all countries are equal. Although the United Nations Charter accords equal status to all its members, this remains so only on paper, and there remains dominance from powerful nations. This has a strong bearing on how global development goals are set and finalized.

There was also affirmation of the respect of human rights, with specific focus on the right to development and adequate standard of living “including the right to food, the rule of law, gender equality, women’s empowerment and the overall commitment to just and democratic societies for development” (UNCSD 2012: 2). Global leaders and civil society affirmed their commitment to grow and strengthen international cooperation in the attainment of sustainable development, particularly with developing countries. They also expressed their determination in addressing the twin themes of the Rio+20 Summit, namely, a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication as well as the institutional framework for sustainable development. The reading of this commitment remains fundamental as 3 years down the line to 2015, and the green economy narrative did not make it to the final SDGs as planned originally. Such progressing usually speaks to the geopolitical setting in GDGs (Liverman 2018).

On renewing political commitment, the heads of state and governments and civil society reaffirmed the 1992 Rio Principles and past plans that include Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Declaration of 2002 (UNCSD 2012). Among the Rio Principles of importance in relation to this chapter is Principle 7 that focuses on common but differentiated responsibilities. The stakeholders further acknowledged that since the Earth Summit in 1992, there remain areas reporting limited progress in the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development. Grave concern was expressed on the ever-rising levels of unemployment, especially among the youth. There was also the recognition that “Planet Earth and its ecosystems are our home and that ‘Mother Earth’ is a common expression in several countries and regions, and we note that some countries recognise the rights of nature in the context of the promotion of sustainable development” (UNCSD 2012: 10).

The heads of state and government recognized the need to continue engaging major groups and other stakeholders (Nhamo 2014). The major groups highlighted include women, children and youth, indigenous peoples, nongovernmental organizations, and local authorities, and it seems their voices were loud and clear in the outcome for 2030 (Nhamo et al. 2018a). Others included workers and organized labor, business and industry, the scientific and technological community, and farmers. The local communities, volunteer groups and foundations, migrants and families, the elderly, and persons with disabilities also featured in the equation. These groups were to be actively involved in decision-making, planning, and implementation of policies and programs related to sustainable development at all spatial scales. The involvement of the private sectors was to be encouraged through the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC) resulting in public-private partnerships (UNCSD 2012).

Deliberations took place regarding the green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication (IISD 2013). Given the resentments emerging in the run to Rio+20 where some regions were not comfortable with the concept of the green economy replacing the sustainable development narrative of being detrimental to trade (Nhamo 2013), the stakeholders to Rio+20 had to find middle ground. In this regard, the green economy was considered as “as one of the important tools available for achieving sustainable development and that it could

provide options for policymaking but should not be a rigid set of rules” (UNCSD 2012: 14). As such, green economy policies had to harness principles and provisions of the MDGs, Rio Declaration, Agenda 21, and other key United Nations agreements. The summary of what the green economy policies had to embrace in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication is provided in Box 1.

Box 1 Green Economy Policies in the Context of Sustainable Development

- (i) Be consistent with international law.
- (ii) Respect each country’s national sovereignty over their natural resources.
- (iii) Be supported by an enabling environment and well-functioning institutions at all levels, with a leading role for governments and with the participation of all relevant stakeholders, including civil society.
- (iv) Promote sustained and inclusive economic growth, foster innovation, and provide opportunities.
- (v) Take into account the needs of developing countries, particularly those in special needs and strengthen international cooperation.
- (vi) Avoid unwarranted conditionalities on official development assistance (ODA) and finance as well as not constitute a means of arbitrary or unjustifiable discrimination on international trade.
- (vii) Contribute to closing technology gaps between developed and developing countries, and reduce the technological dependence of developing countries, using all appropriate measures.
- (viii) Enhance the welfare of indigenous peoples and their communities.
- (ix) Enhance the welfare of women, children, youth, persons with disabilities, smallholder, and subsistence farmers.
- (x) Mobilize the full potential, and ensure the equal contribution of both women and men.
- (xi) Promote sustainable consumption and production patterns.
- (xii) Continue efforts to strive for inclusive, equitable development approaches to overcome poverty and inequality.

Source: UNCSD (2012: 14)

In the stakeholders’ belief, the green economy would enhance the ability of nations to manage their natural resources in a sustainable manner (UNCSD 2012), thereby addressing negative environmental impacts through resource efficiency and reduce unnecessary waste (Kararach et al. 2018). The waste emerged from the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production. Looking ahead, one can identify the link between this observation and the finalized SDGs that had a specific goal (SDG 12) dealing with sustainable consumption and production (United Nations 2015a).

From the institutional framework for sustainable development narrative, several issues emerged; among them was the desire to strengthen the three dimensions of sustainable development (Caballero 2019). The three dimensions of sustainable development had to be integrated in a balanced manner. The framework had to be “inclusive, transparent, and effective,” finding standard solutions to attaining sustainable development (UNCSD 2012: 19). A number of institutions were identified, as well as their functions and/or critical responsibilities. These are presented in Table 2.

The HLPF is a key organ in the 2030 AfSD and its 17 SDGs. From the Rio+20 outcome document, the HLPF has mandate to provide political leadership, guidance, and recommendations for sustainable development (UNCSD 2012). The HLPF also has the mandate to establish platforms for ongoing dialogues, tacking stock, and setting agendas to promote sustainable development. The HLPF also reviews progress in the implementation of sustainable development commitments from both old and new platforms. Lastly, the HLPF was tasked with promoting the sharing of good practices and experiences in implementing sustainable development. These good practices would also present the success, challenges, and lessons learnt to move forward with the sustainable development agenda.

The Rio+20 outcome document “The Future We Want” was evident in establishing the 2030 AfSD framework. The stakeholders agreed and recognized that “goals, targets and indicators, including, where appropriate, gender-sensitive indicators, are valuable in measuring and accelerating progress” (UNCSD 2012: 29). Fukuda-Parr (2014) argues that goal setting dominated processes leading to the post-2015 global development agenda, and this was against a background that constantly asked questions as to whether targets set would have been achieved. To this end, several thematic and cross-sectoral issues were identified to take forward in the post-MDGs era (UNCSD 2012). These issues included poverty eradication, food security and nutrition and sustainable agriculture, water and sanitation, energy, sustainable tourism, sustainable transport, sustainable cities and human settlements, health and population, as well as the promotion of full and productive employment, decent work for all, and social protection. More issues emerged that included oceans and cryosphere, small island developing states (SIDS), least developed countries (LDCs), landlocked developing countries (LLDCs), Africa, regional efforts, disaster risk reduction (DRR), climate change, forests, biodiversity, as well as desertification, land degradation, and drought. Other issues included the mountains, chemicals and waste, sustainable consumption and production, mining, education and lastly, gender equality and women’s empowerment (UNCSD 2012). What comes out from the thematic and cross-sectoral issues is that these became the basis for negotiating and framing the 2030 AfSD. Many of the issues that were identified from Rio+20 became embedded in the final 2030 AfSD and the inseparable 17 SDGs. Hence the SDGs agenda was set during and from Rio+20. Other matters of interest were that the MDGs framework on having goals, targets, and indicators was also cast in stone. What this implied was that the world would work within a defined framework constrained by the goals, targets, and indicators setup.

Table 2 Sustainable development institutional arrangements

Key institution	Action and/or key responsibilities	Status
General Assembly	To further integrate sustainable development as a key element of the overarching framework for United Nations activities and adequately address sustainable development in agenda setting, including through periodic high-level dialogues	Old
United Nations Economic and Social Council	To be strengthened as a principal organ in the integrated and coordinated follow-up of the outcomes of all major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic, social, environmental, and related fields and recognize its key role in achieving a balanced integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development	Old
High-Level Political Forum (HLPF)	Universal and intergovernmental; building on the strengths; experiences, resources, and inclusive participation modalities of the Commission on Sustainable Development; and subsequently replacing the Commission The HLPF shall follow up on the implementation of sustainable development and should avoid overlap with existing structures, bodies, and entities in a cost-effective manner	New
Open Working Group (OWG) on SDGs	Constituted no later than at the opening of the 67th Session of the United Nations General Assembly and would comprise 30 representatives, nominated by the member states from the five United Nations regional groups. The aim was to achieve equitable and balanced geographical representation. The OWG had to decide on its methods of work, including developing modalities to ensure the full involvement of relevant stakeholders and expertise from civil society, the scientific community, and the United Nations system	New
Inter-agency Technical Support Team and Expert Panels	These would be established by the United Nations Secretary-General on ad hoc basis, and these teams would report progress of work regularly Two reports on technology facilitation mechanism were then issued later by the United Nations Secretary-General, one in September 2012 and another in September 2013	New

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Key institution	Action and/or key responsibilities	Status
Regional Economic Commissions (RECs)	These were to assist the SDGs formulation process with scientifically based information	Old
Intergovernmental Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development Financing	Comprising 30 experts nominated by regional groups, with equitable geographical representation. To assess financing needs, consider the effectiveness, consistency, and synergies of existing instruments and frameworks, and evaluate additional initiatives, with a view to preparing a report proposing options on an effective sustainable development financing strategy to facilitate the mobilization of resources and their effective use in achieving sustainable development objectives Established in June 2013 and had to conclude its work in 2014. The report of the Committee would provide input into the means of implementation discussion and feed into the United Nations Secretary-General's December 2014 synthesis report	New

Source: Authors, based on UNCSD (2012: 21–23) and HLPF (2014a: 2)

The last section in the Rio+20 outcome document deals with the means of implementation. The means of implementation remains a thorny issue for developing countries that still expect some form of assistance and/or compensation from the developed countries. Overall, the agenda was set to have domestic mobilization of SDGs resources (UNCSD 2012). The stakeholders reiterate that each state had “primary responsibility for its own economic and social development and that the role of national policies, domestic resources and development strategies cannot be overemphasized” (UNCSD 2012: 65). Other matters considered under the means of implementation include technology, capacity building, and trade.

Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

The Rio+20 outcome document “The Future We Want” was elaborate in presenting the SDGs agenda. As the stakeholders underscored that the MDGs remained a useful tool for achieving global development agendas and goals, another framework had to be found as the MDGs era was coming to an end in 2015. The goal-focused approach was reconfirmed as a useful tool for pursuing focused and coherent action on sustainable development (UNCSD 2012). To this end, heads of state and government as well as civil society and other stakeholders reached a consensus that SDGs:

Should address and incorporate in a balanced way all three dimensions of sustainable development and their interlinkages. They should be coherent with and integrated into the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015, thus contributing to the achievement of sustainable development and serving as a driver for implementation and mainstreaming of sustainable development in the United Nations system as a whole. The development of these goals should not divert focus or effort from the achievement of the MDGs. (UNCSD 2012: 63)

Herein was laid the agenda for global sustainable development goal setting. From the citation above, it becomes clear that the SDGs agenda had to harness the three dimensions of sustainable development as discussed earlier they had to replace the MDGs and should enhance the achievements of the MDGs. Furthermore, the SDGs had to be action-oriented, brief, and easy to communicate to the world citizenry (UNCSD 2012). These scenarios were playing out based on the 12 years of experience in implementing the MDGs. Other conditionalities on the SDGs were that there had to be “limited in number, aspirational, global in nature and universally applicable to all countries while taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities” (UNCSD 2012: 63). The stakeholders also resolved to establish an inclusive and transparent intergovernmental process on the SDGs process that would result in consensus by the United Nations General Assembly members in 2015. The OWG was tasked to submit its first report with proposals on the SDGs to the General Assembly during the 68th Session for determination and respective action.

Consultations Leading to the 2030 Development Agenda

As highlighted earlier, the HLPF was established in July 2013 through Resolution 67/290 of the General Assembly to play a leading role in the negotiation processes to come up with a post-2015 global development agenda (HLPF 2014b). This process was launched by United Nations Member states on 25 September 2013 at the beginning of the 69th Session of the General Assembly (HLPF 2014a). The process had to be intergovernmental drawing from the decision taken during Rio+20 that the SDGs had to be coherent with and integrated into the United Nations development agenda post-2015. Other work streams that were looking at the post-2015 agenda were recognized by the HLPF and these included:

- The Intergovernmental Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development Financing
- The structured dialogues on a technology facilitation mechanism
- The third financing for development conference

Given this development, the United Nations Secretary-General was requested by the stakeholders to prepare a synthesis report integrating components from the work streams by December 2014 to facilitate intergovernmental negotiations (HLPF 2014a). Reference was also made to the OWG established during Rio+20, whose mandate was to provide a set of ambitious goals and targets. These goals and targets had to have strong political buy-in and embrace all the three dimensions of

sustainable development, being of universal nature, brief, measurable, limited in number, and easy to communicate to a broader audience. Furthermore, the set of the GDGs and targets had to pivot on an accountability framework, with an appropriate means of implementation. Such were the conditions set for the new GDGs in the form of SDGs.

With regard to the SDGs Agenda setting, the United Nations Secretary-General had to provide the initial input to the OWG in consultation with the national governments (UNCSD 2012). He also had to receive a series of reports including a 2013 key report from the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the post-2015 development agenda (High-Level Panel 2013). To embrace all other intergovernmental processes and remain holistic, the Secretary-General called for the post-2015 negotiations to embrace processes from United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Convention on Biodiversity (CBD), the review process of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Beyond 2014, the Sendai Framework, etc. (HLPF 2014a). The idea was not to preempt the other intergovernmental processes but to ensure that critical issues from these platforms found their way onto the post-2015 development agenda. True to this orientation, there are SDGs that are specific to other intergovernmental processes like the climate action SDGs – SDG 13, biodiversity SDG – SDG 15, etc. (United Nations 2015a).

After Rio+20, in July 2012, then United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon established a 27-member High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the post-2015 development agenda (HLPF 2014a). The role of this High-Level Panel (different from the HLPF) was to advise him on the post-2015 development agenda. The High-Level Panel produced a report presented to the Secretary-General on 30 May 2013. In this report were contained five big transformational shifts palatable to both developed and developing countries (Caballero 2019). The five big transformational shifts from the High-Level Panel (2013: iii) considered to be “the right, smart, and necessary thing to do” to move from vision to action were:

1. Leaving no one behind
2. Putting sustainable development at the core
3. Transforming economies for jobs and inclusive growth
4. Building peace and effective, open, and accountable institutions for all
5. Forging a new global partnership

What is of interest is how the High-Level Panel reflected on the MDGs. In its view, and drawing from past reports on the MDGs, as of 2013, the world had witnessed fastest reduction in poverty in human history, with half a billion fewer people living below \$1.25 a day (High-Level Panel 2013). Furthermore, child death rates fell by more than 30%, and deaths attributed to malaria reduced by 25%. Given this level of success, the High-Level Panel realized “it would be a mistake to simply tear up the MDGs and start from scratch” (High-Level Panel 2013: iii). With this statement, the MDGs foregrounding of the new global development agenda was solidified further. The High-Level Panel also identified human rights as a critical

ingredient to eradicating extreme poverty come 2030. Although global leaders had promised to eradicate extreme poverty repeatedly in history, the High-Level Panel was of the view that time to recommit and act had arrived. However, for this to be realized, the new global development agenda had to go beyond the MDGs and address its shortfalls highlighted in Box 2.

Box 2 The Glaring Shortfalls of the MDGs (2000–2013)

- The MDGs did not focus enough on reaching the very poorest and most excluded people.
- The MDGs were silent on the devastating effects of conflict and violence on development.
- The importance of development of good governance and institutions that guarantee the rule of law, free speech, and open and accountable government was not included, nor the need for inclusive growth to provide jobs.
- Most seriously, the MDGs fell short by not integrating the economic, social, and environmental aspects of sustainable development as envisaged in the Millennium Declaration and by not addressing the need to promote sustainable patterns of consumption and production.
- The result was that the environment and development were never properly brought together. People were working hard – but often separately – on interlinked problems.

Source: High-Level Panel (2013: iv)

From the issues being put on the table herein, one could see how the new GDGs agenda is shaping up. The five big transformational shifts are presented, and the shortfalls of the MDGs, which require redress in the SDGs era, are also popping out. The poorest of the poor were not reached by the MDGs. Conflict and violence remained on the periphery. Good governance and accountable institutions remained on the periphery, and there is the continued decoupling of the economic development and environmental agendas. With all these challenges before it, the High-Level Panel had to ask simple questions starting with “what to keep, what to amend, and what to add?” from the MDGs (High-Level Panel 2013: iv). To respond to the questions raised, the High-Level Panel “listened to the views of women and men, young people, parliamentarians, civil society organizations, indigenous people and local communities, migrants, experts, business, trade unions and governments” (High-Level Panel 2013: iv). Voices came from all over the world, including those from hundreds of thousands of citizens in face-to-face meetings and interviews, surveys, and polling that took place over mobile phones and the Internet. As the High-Level Panel realized that 1.2 billion poorest people are responsible for a mere 1% of the global consumption, while a billion wealthiest take up 72% of consumption, the 2030 AfSD had to do something to address such glaring inequality. Adding to these woes, climate change was singled out as another layer of challenges that the world

Table 3 Some quotable quotes from the inaugural HLPF (2013)

Speaker	Quotable quote
General Assembly President, John Ashe	Today, we confirmed that we are ready to implement the vision of Rio+20, putting poverty eradication and sustainable development at the core of the post-2015 development agenda
UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon	I am pleased to see such high-level representation here today. Your forum is a key platform for examining today's challenges in a holistic and integrated manner
Brazilian President, Dilma Rousseff, who presided over the Forum as the President of Rio+20	States had taken a decisive step toward consolidating the Rio sustainable development agenda having agreed that eradicating poverty was the most prominent global challenge. We must live up to the expectations of our peoples
World Bank President Jim Yong Kim	Rio+20 created momentum. We have the opportunity to take it to the next level
Christine Lagarde, former Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund	We are here today for one reason and one reason only – to agree on the actions we must take as a global community to support global sustainable development

Source: Authors, based on HLPF (2013: 1–2)

had to address as a matter of urgency. Droughts, floods, storms, wild fires, extreme frost, etc. were among the consequences of the changing climate that the new global development agenda had to address. There had to be climate action “now” as this would cost the world less.

As was witnessed in the final 2030 AfSD outcome document, “Leave no one behind” was adopted as a rallying point to scaling up SDGs implementation (United Nations 2015a). The High-Level Panel also gave examples of how the new goals and targets could be crafted aligned to the five transformational shots drawing lessons from the MDGs and Rio+20 Summit (HLPF 2014a). Member states also decided that the third international conference on financing for development was to take place from 13 to 16 July 2015 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The primary mandate was to deliberate on means of implementation and come out with a strategy for the SDGs financing mechanism drawing from the 2002 Monterrey Conference on Financing for Development that focused on the MDGs (HLPF 2014a). The political shape of the post-2015 GDGs emerged during the inaugural HLPF that took place in New York on 26 September 2013. Details regarding some quotable quotes from this event are shown in Table 3.

The concept of universality was vast in leading to the 2030 AfSD and the SDGs. From the HLPF (2014a), universality was manifested in two forms. The SDGs had to propel the prospect for the social and economic advancement of all global citizens yet at the same time promoting sound environmental stewardship and sustainability. The SDGs also had to present a vision of shared responsibilities across countries and global actors so that sustainable development could be realized. The process of

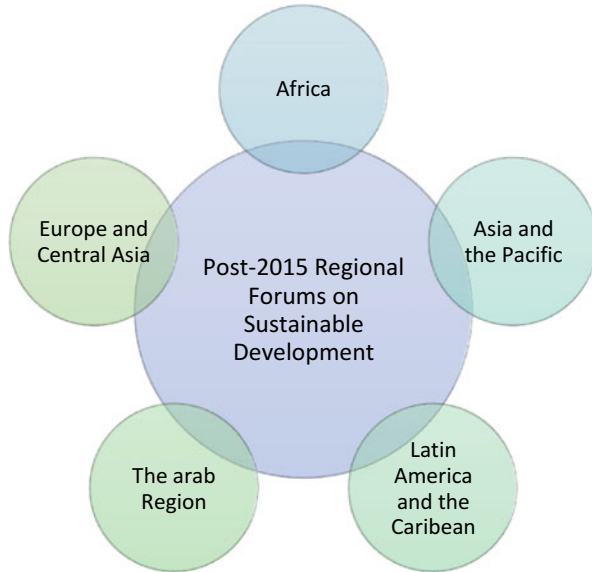
reaching the finishing line in 2015 was not only demanding (Caballero 2019) but also at times very antagonistic. The role played by the OWG remained fundamental and gave the process good shape.

Other events of interest in the lead to the finalization of the SDGs were those emanating from the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) consultations, regional consultations, and civil society engagement (HLPF 2014a). An estimated two million people were involved in sharing their priorities for the future development agenda in 2013. This was done from the UNDG initiative rolled out in 88 countries through 11 thematic consultations. The consultation also included a global survey code-named “MY World” that led to a report titled “A Million Voices: The World We Want.” From the title of the report, it becomes clear that it influenced the outcome document that borrowed the word “World” from this report (United Nations 2015a). More UNDG dialogues on the implementation of the post-2015 development agenda were announced in March 2014, and these were undertaken in 50 countries (HLPF 2014a). While these mega UNDG consultations were taking place, the United Nations Regional Commissions led other multi-stakeholder regional consultations with their member states. Drawing lessons from the limited and contested consultation during the MDGs era, the purpose of rolling out extensive consultations that also involved civil society this time around was to ensure global and national buy-ins. Although knitting together several strands leading to a post-2015 global development agenda remained a mammoth task, there was an understanding that “the Secretary-General’s synthesis report will play an important role in setting the stage for the intergovernmental negotiations leading up to the adoption of the new development agenda in 2015” (HLPF 2014a: 3).

Several RECs conducted their consultation involving key stakeholders that included governments, civil society, organized labor, the business community, and the academia. These consultations led to priority regional matters coming up for consideration in the lead to the post-2015 development agenda. The main Regional Forums on Sustainable Development (RFSD) that were recognized by the United Nations for dialoguing are shown in Fig. 3. From Africa, the RFSD resulted in the Common African Position adopted by heads of state and governments in Addis Abba in January 2014 (HLPF 2014b). Africa’s priorities centered on six thematic pillars, namely, structural economic transformation and inclusive growth; promoting science, technology, and innovation; a people-centered development; environmental sustainability, natural resources management, and disaster risk management; peace and security; and financing and partnerships. Complementing this effort, and before the African RFSD, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) worked with the African Union Commission and the African Development Bank to organize a meeting on SDGs in November 2013 that led to the adoption of 12 SDGs, which informed the formulation of the Common African Position priority on its areas.

The Asia and the Pacific region worked with the Asian Development Bank and UNDP and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) resulting in the Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD), which was held 19–21 May 2014 in Pattaya, Thailand (HLPF 2014b). Several priority areas emerged including the following: eradicating poverty and

Fig. 3 Regional Commissions in the lead to the post-2015 development agenda. (Source: Authors, based on HLPF 2014a: 1–4)



narrowing inequality; pursuing sustained and inclusive economic growth; gender equality and women’s empowerment; responding to population dynamics and urbanization; enhancing resource efficiency and natural resource management; and the desire to address climate change. Greater focus had to be placed on disaster risk reduction (DRR) and building resilience to a range of shocks, especially for SIDS. Young employment and regional integration and connectivity were other matters arising.

In partnership with the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), a conference on Sustainable Development in Latin America and the Caribbean was organized in Colombia in March 2013 (HLPF 2014b). There was another regional consultation with civil society that took place in Mexico with the support of ECLAC in April 2013, while a Regional Meeting of the Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development Financing supported by ECLAC took place in January 2014. The ECLAC felt that there was an urgent need to continue addressing social and economic inequalities that had ballooned in the region. Other aspects of interest were that the post-2015 processes had to be transparent in order to strengthen the global commitment to eradicating poverty and promoting sustainable development. The SDGs agenda had to be universal but taking into account differentiated capacities and responsibilities from the regions and countries. Furthermore, social compacts from the private sector and civil society and other stakeholders that could help in implementation were needed.

The SDGs consultations from the League of Arab States took place in partnership with the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA). Three main events were the Arab Regional Consultation on the post-2015 UN development agenda that took place in Beirut in March 2013, the Arab

Consultative Meeting on SDGs in Tunis of November 2013, and the Arab High-Level Forum on Sustainable Development in Amman that took place in April 2014 (HLPF 2014b). From the consultation emerged three key conceptual issues namely:

- (i) Achieving a universal agenda that is owned by all national governments, i.e., universal goals that cater for national diversity
- (ii) Effectively integrating environmental, social, and economic considerations into a balanced, coherent framework
- (iii) Establishing a new global partnership, which embeds the SDGs in an effective governance framework that will include adequate means of implementation and robust accountability mechanisms

The consultations in the League of Arab States further came up with key messages. Among such messages were that sustainable development could not be realized without long-term peace, stability, and end of the occupation of Palestine and other Arab territories (HLPF 2014b).

The consultation in the European and Central Asian region was massive. They took place in 15 countries involving about 250,000 citizens that gathered in town halls and got engaged in online discussions and the “MY World Survey” discussed earlier (HLPF 2014b). The regional consultation was done in Turkey in November 2013. The priority messages covered the need for “radical changes in how societies are built, how economies produce goods and services and how they generate inclusive and sustainable growth and jobs” (HLPF 2014b: 4). Poverty eradication was identified as the overarching goal of the SDGs, and this could be realized if the critical drivers like employment creation, reductions in inequalities, and the provision of access to critical facilities like health, education, transport, energy, and water were realized. The region also pinpointed the desire to have good governance as a standalone SDG that needed to be mainstreamed into other SDGs. Lastly, matters of reliable and new sources of data were highlighted, giving birth to the notion of Big Data (Nhamo et al. 2019b). Such Big Data include some collected and hosted by non-state entities such as companies, NGOs, and universities (Merry 2019). Private companies host data on the internet shopping, Google searches, mobile phone calls, and taxi rides that could be useful in measuring progress toward the SDGs. Banks, for example, Big Data on home mortgages, including declines and defaults, both measure that could be used to measure poverty levels in communities. Similarly, debt recovery companies also have reliable data needed for tracking progress toward the SDGs. The list goes on.

The High-Level Panel (2013) agreed that the new targets had to be bold, yet practical. Furthermore, drawing from the MDGs experience, they had to remain nonbinding but had to be tightly monitored. There had to be an indicators framework to track progress, and this meant the indicators had to be disaggregated to ensure no one is left behind. Given the gaps presented by the MDGs, the new targets were to be considered “achieved” only after they met all relevant income and social groups, especially those previously disadvantaged. The High-Level Panel proposed an independent and rigorous monitoring system reported for overseeing to the HLPF.

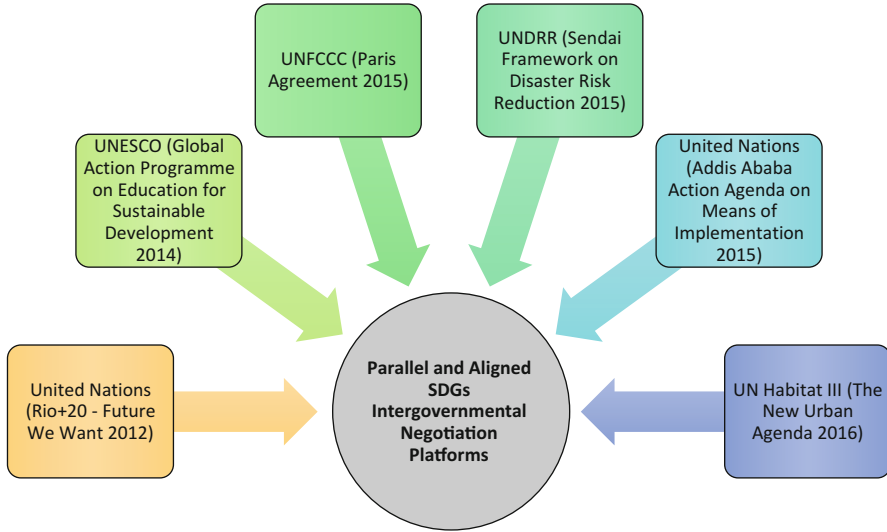


Fig. 4 The 2030 AfSD and SDGs intergovernmental negotiations platforms. (Source: Authors)

The reporting had to show progress made by countries, including challenges faced. Drawing from the 2030 AfSD outcome document, one can see where the Voluntary National Review (VNR) system emerged from (United Nations 2015a; Nhamo and Mjimba 2020a). The High-Level Panel (2013) also called for a data revolution for sustainable development. This was to be driven from a new international initiative, and this gave birth to the United Nations Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators – IAEG-SDGs (2019). To sum up, the 2030 AfSD and the SDGs took advantage of several intergovernmental negotiation processes as outlined in Fig. 4.

While the above narratives were playing out on the ground, the HLPF (2014c) propelled discourses surrounding the desire to develop multi-stakeholder partnerships and voluntary commitments for sustainable development. Collaborations between state and non-state actors remained the key for greater success. Key non-state actors included international organization, multilateral development banks (MDBs), philanthropic organizations, academia, think tanks, and civil society among others. The HLPF (2014d) also deliberated matters on the need to migrate from silos to integrated policymaking and institutional setups. The silo mentality was highlighted as remaining entrenched in institutional arrangements at all spatial levels. International agreements, targets, and financial commitments were deemed sectoral impacting negatively on coverage, coherence, and consistency in public financing for sustainable development. Similar sectoral approaches were prevalent at the national and subnational levels, including the local government.

2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Its 17 SDGs

Fukuda-Parr and McNeill (2019) mention that the 2030 AfSD and the SDGs came out of two parallel processes: The post-2015 development agenda led by the United

Nations Secretary-General and the OWG process. The processes were recorded to be having different origins, visions, actors, epistemic communities, and political dynamics. The post-2015 process was initiated in July 2011 and was designed to be deliberately open and consultative. Through an inter-agency technical team, the process had to review the MDGs experiences. There was also supposed to be multi-stakeholder consultations at all spatial levels from the national, regional, and global. This was capped by the establishment of the HLPF as presented earlier. The OWG led by member states and had to undertake consultations but with non-state actors. This was a departure from the United Nations General Assembly norms that did not allow the involvement of non-state actors, a process that was not permitted during the MDGs processes. A total of 13 sessions were convened by the OWG from March 2013 and July 2014. This process resulted in an agreed global development agenda with a list of the 17 SDGs and 169 targets.

In September 2015, world governments and critical stakeholders accepted and ratified the 2030 AfSD and the 17 SDGs. Known in full as “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” is the outcome document from New York 2015. The United Nations (2015a: 1) recognizes the AfSD as a plan of action for people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership (the 5Ps), and seeking “to strengthen universal peace in larger freedom.” Eradicating poverty in all its forms as presented from the Rio+20 Summit and subsequent intergovernmental negotiations platform was recognized as the greatest challenge to the world with every potential to derail the attainment of sustainable development. What also comes out of the 2030 AfSD document is that all countries and stakeholders had jointly developed the plan of action and were happy to support and implement it. The SDGs and their 169 targets were ambitious and universal, building from the MDGs with the aim of completing what the MDGs left out. This meant that the SDGs brought some continuity in the development agenda, something that is rare in this space. A summary of the SDGs is shown in Box 3.

Box 3 Summary of SDGs

- Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere.
- Goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture.
- Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
- Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
- Goal 5: Achieve gender equality, and empower all women and girls.
- Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
- Goal 7: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all.

(continued)

Box 3 Summary of SDGs (continued)

- Goal 8: Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all.
- Goal 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation.
- Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries.
- Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.
- Goal 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.
- Goal 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.
- Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development.
- Goal 15: Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.
- Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.
- Goal 17: Strengthen the means of implementation, and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development.

Source: Based on the United Nations (2015a: 14)

The SDGs further sought to realize human rights and attain gender equity and empower women and girls (United Nations 2015a). These matters had been repeatedly raised in various platforms as the new global development agenda was being lobbied for and developed. The 2015 outcome document further made it clear that the SDGs were “integrated and indivisible and balanced the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental” (United Nations 2015: 1). Agreeably, the SDGs spelt out a global development agenda that remained ambitious and transformational, being embedded in several intergovernmental commitments that include the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Millennium Declaration. The world also reaffirmed the outcomes of crucial United Nations conferences including the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, the WSSD, the World Summit for Social Development, the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, the Beijing Platform for Action, etc.

It was not an easy road down to 2015. Caballero (2019) records that although development was defined for the first time as a universal agenda, many countries rejected this proposal. However, the understanding, which was fundamental to the entire process, was finally agreed after persistence, lengthy negotiations, and consensus-building. This resulted in the 2030 AfSD that broke down the silos between environment and development. Much of the resistance, even to the notion

of the SDGs that was brought as early as 2011 in the lead to Rio+20 by Colombia, resonated around the question “why a brilliant idea from Colombia” of all the countries and possibly places in the world (Caballero 2019). As many developed countries were comfortable with the MDGs setup, the concept of a MDGs plus approach was fully supported.

Gaspar et al. (2019) lay down the concept of framing and draw insights on how SDG 12 (sustainable consumption and production) got framed. The authors are of the view that business interests were at the forefront of steering the narrative of sustainable growth. Such a narrative, by its nature, will advocate for self-regulatory targets and indicators. In addition, the authors realize that the framing drew heavily from the production- and design-cantered perspective of the 1990s. From the 1990s debates, solutions to most business come through new technologies. The hand of UNIDO cannot be missed in the mix too. Hence what the world sees as an outcome from the processes and framing is much complex than it looks. Ruggiero et al. (2014) picked both the hands of the World Health Organization and International Labour Organization (ILO) in shaping the decent work (SDG 8) agenda. The author highlights that the WHO conceptualization of health as a human right was a key factor and the World Bank identified the ILO’s agenda of decent work as departing from the traditional views on job creation and job access.

The means of implementation has a dedicated section in 2030 AfSD and draws from the 3rd International Conference on Financing for Development that took place in Addis Ababa from 13 to 16 July 2015 (United Nations 2015a). From this conference emerged the Addis Ababa Action Agenda that is part of the 2030 AfSD. The Addis Ababa Action Agenda apportioned primary resource mobilization from domestic sources that include finance, capacity development, and the deployment of environmentally sound technologies. The governments further agreed upon a follow-up and review mechanism at national, regional, and global levels with the HLPF as the custodian for such. At the national level, the VNR remains the vital instrument. The follow-up mechanism would use a global set of indicators developed by the Inter-agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators that was due in March 2016, adopted through the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly.

Like in the case of the MDGs, a lot has been written by academics and other interested parties regarding the 2030 AfSD and its 17 SDGs. The following paragraphs will be dedicated to present some of the critical issues coming up 5 years down the line to 2030. Leal Filho et al. (2019) are of the view that implementing the SDGs presents unrivalled opportunities in advancing equal opportunity resulting in economic empowerment, thereby assisting states in promoting the cause of sustainable development. Caballero (2019) realizes that both the process and product of the post-2015 development agenda were more refined compared to the MDGs. The entire process was led by a country from the Global South – Brazil. This was proper given that many middle-income countries criticized the MDG process and agenda that were formulated “without consultation, drafted by the Secretary-General’s advisers on the 38th floor of the United Nations and data experts from the OECD, World Bank and UNDP” (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill 2019: 10). Among the many

positives that have come out of the new SDGs agenda is the manner in which institutions of higher education (IHE) are embracing the proposals starting from the exclusive education SDG – SDG 4 (Nhamo and Mjimba 2020a).

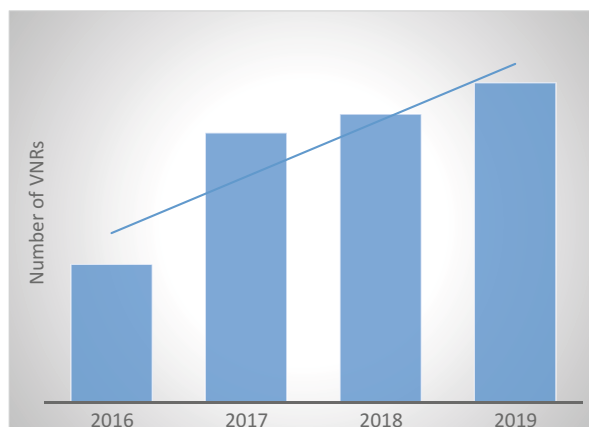
However, there has been growing critique on the indicators, and a separate section that follows is dedicated to address these. Vandemoortele (2018) sees no major diversion from the MDGs. In the author's view, most SDG targets that remain verifiable are not dissimilar from the MDGs. The setting of the targets reflects a difficult intergovernmental compromise traditionally magnified by the deepening North–South divide. They bring up inherent East-West tensions and the resurging sense of nationalism, particularly by the USA. To this end, the SDGs bring three key governance challenges, namely, achieving as a collective, need for making difficult trade-offs, and weak accountability mechanisms (Bowen et al. 2017).

Monitoring, Reporting, and Verification of the SDGs

From Winkler and Satterthwaite (2017: 1073) argument, “the litmus test for whether the SDGs will truly ‘leave no one behind’ is not the inclusion of such (aspirational) language, but whether this language will translate into implementation.” As such, monitoring, reporting, and verification through indicators will play a central role, with data sufficiently disaggregated for purpose. During the debates leading to the finalization of the post-2015 development agenda, stakeholders were clear that they favored simple and quantifiable targets (Langford and Winkler 2014). To this end, lessons were drawn from the water sector where such targets were developed and applied before to the MDGs. While quantification remains an anchor point of global goals, there should also be simplification, reification, and abstraction (Fukuda-Parr et al. 2014). Drawing from experiences of the MDGs, Yamin and Boulanger (2014) are of the view that political will and championing are able to generate appropriate data collection. The authors further allude to the fact that once an item is placed on the agenda, politicians and other stakeholders make effort to invest in finding ways to measure it. In support of the previous, Nhamo et al. (2018b) advocate for measuring parameters to be established in order to manage development goals. Earlier, Yamin and Boulanger (2014) presented what they termed the desirable characteristics of goals and targets. Such cover elements include the scope, level, quantification, and focus. Taking an example of communicating the goal and its targets to the political heads, these need to be memorable but narrow – simplicity (scope), ambitious and aspirational (level), concrete and measurable (quantification), and outcome focus – easy to understand (focus). The authors give another example of how to structure indicators for uptake by political heads. The indicators should have policy relevance, data must be available and reliable, there should be a designated level of aggregation, and lastly the indicator should be measurable, quantitative, or qualitative (Nhamo et al. 2019b). However, we need to remain vigilant when dealing with indicators as a number can mean anything and be manipulated to someone's advantage or to drive a narrative home.

Having highlighted some of the setbacks pertaining to the numbers and indicators' game, the post-2015 era demands that we manage and measure progress. To this end, the perspectives on monitoring and reporting of SDGs happen mainly

Fig. 5 Trends in Voluntary National Reviews (2016–2019). (Source: Nhamo and Mjimba 2020a: 10)



at the national level through the Voluntary National Review (VNR) (Nhamo and Mjimba 2020b). The VNRs are submitted to the HLPF by countries, with various SDGs stipulated for reporting during a certain year. The VNRs have gained momentum (Fig. 5), and since 2017, the following reporting frameworks and thematic focus areas were established:

- 2017 – Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world with SDGs 1–3, 5, 9, 14, and 17 reported
- 2018 – Transformation toward sustainable and resilient societies with SDGs 6, 7, 11, 12, 15, and 17 reported
- 2019 – Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality with SDGs 4, 8, 10, 13, 16, and 17 reported

Ordaz (2019) starts by illuminating that the 2030 AfSD remains an outcome of a political process led by the OWG. However, in determining the indicators, IAEG-SDGs were requested to put on the table a simple and robust framework that would not disturb the political equilibrium. To this end, the IAEG-SDGs sought a balance between what was feasible in the short term and the demands in the long term. The IAEG-SDGs now come across as the space for open and constructive dialogue between national statistical offices and international agencies. Doubt abounds where global indicators are concerned as some may think of dark forces behind the selection of these indicators. Ultimately, 232 indicators were agreed upon initially in March 2016, following the inaugural meeting of the IAEG-SDGs from 1 to 2 June 2015. The agencies had limited scope in that they had to compile the least possible number of indicators within their area of work and expertise. This implied that the International Labour Organization (ILO), for example, had to deal with labor-related indicators, etc. This approach on its own had an inherent challenge of duplications and leaving gaps in certain areas. However, the challenge of gaps was addressed through a mechanism that requested the agencies to describe interlinkages across the

Table 4 IAEG-SDGs meetings, host cities, and host organizations

Meeting	Date of meeting	Host city and country	Hosting organization
First	1–2 June 2015	New York, USA	United Nations Statistical Commission
Second	26–28 October 2015	Bangkok, Thailand	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP)
Third	30 March to 1 April 2016	Mexico City, Mexico	National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Mexico
Fourth	15–18 November 2016	Geneva, Switzerland	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)
Fifth	28–31 March 2017	Ottawa, Canada	Statistics Canada
Sixth	11–14 November 2017	Manama, Kingdom of Bahrain	The Bahrain Center for Strategic, International and Energy Studies (DERASAT)
Seventh	9–12 April 2018	Vienna, Austria	United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)
Eighth	5–8 November 2018	Stockholm, Sweden	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency Stockholm and Statistics Sweden
Ninth	25–28 March 2019	Beirut, Lebanon	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA)
Tenth	22–24 October 2019	Addis Ababa, Ethiopia	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA)

Source: Authors

indicators. Agencies were also asked to identify the possible data sources and indicate how many countries had the data and the name of the entity hosting the data.

Ordaz (2019: 143), however, observed that after the inaugural IAEG-SDGs meeting which “was a little chaotic due to the urgency to organise it, it was agreed to organise closed meetings among the 27-member countries and the United Nations Statistics Division as Secretariat, before and/or during the plenary sessions.” Similar observations were made by Kapto (2019), who realizes statisticians found themselves in the halls of the United Nations Headquarters in New York together with politicians. Many of these politicians were representatives from their Permanent Missions to the United Nations. In Kapto’s words, during the IAEG-SDGs inaugural meeting “sparks flew, and the meeting descended into a shouting match, chaotic at times, between technically minded statisticians eager to get started and politically minded diplomats.” This resulted in the IAEG-SDGs carefully avoiding meetings in New York. Our compilation of subsequent meetings proves this right, as none of the subsequent nine meetings took place at the United Nations Headquarters in New York (Table 4).

Ultimately, the indicators were grouped into Tiers – Tier I–III (IAEG-SDGs 2019). Tier I indicators have conceptual clarity with established methodology and standards, and countries collect data regularly (Nhamo et al. 2019b). Tier II indicators are similar in nature to Tier I with the main difference being that data is not regularly collected. Tier III indicators are those whose methodologies are not yet developed conceptually and may not even be available at all. From the initial work, it emerged that there were too many Tier III indicators. This was so as to match the degree of ambition from the 2030 AfSD (Ordaz 2019). Fukuda-Parr and McNeill (2019) reveal that in the process of targets and indicator selection, there was contestation about the agenda, with the some of the indicators used to reorient or pervert the meaning of the goal. This was mainly due to the invasion of this traditionally technocrats' space by a politician (Kapto 2019). Burke and Rurup (2019: 137) concur and recognize the process of SDGs indicator development was “a political thriller in which the power struggles are hidden behind the veil of technocratic expertise.” Every indicator hides theories of change and development. Lehohla (2019) adds to the debate and sees indicators being sanitized and sanctified to the status of objectivity as if the process without fault and value-free. In a typical contestation, Unterhalter (2019) highlights that the metrics of SDG 4 (Quality Education) miss many of the values of the targets, especially in relation to quality and free education. Similarly, Razavi (2019) acknowledges that the ambition of having gender equality as a crosscutting matter disappears at targets and indicators levels. This is so given that there are real difficulties in using quantitative indicators to capture context-specific and qualitative dimensions in gender equality.

To continue the refinements of indicators, the IAEG-SDGs have agreed to two comprehensive reviews of the global indicator framework in 2020 and 2025. Weighing in on the nature of indicators, Merry (2019: 146) asks a question “why is it so difficult to produce better indicators? If they are too narrow, why not simply produce more?” The author goes further maintaining that the reliance on quantified indicators transforms the manner sustainable development is conceived. Indicators result in a narrow definition of development to focus on specific accomplishments instead of structural change. A good example is placing attention on the number of people in poverty, rather than looking at the extent of inequality within or between countries and communities. Above all, the Big Data space meant that most national statistical offices could not implement the SDG indicator framework without additional means of implementation (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill 2019). After several revisions, and as of 11 December 2019, there were 116 Tier I, 92 Tier II, and 20 Tier III indicators (IEAG-SDGs 2019). There were also four indicators that have multiple tiers.

Overall, the 2030 AfSD brought out “the good” and “the bad” (Nhamo 2017). “The good” are associated with matters pertaining to the fact that we have a global development agenda finalized. Gender, women and girls, quality education, sustainable energy, and the desire to prioritize technology also featured strongly on the agenda. The intergovernmental process tapped into other ongoing negotiations that resulted in the Sendai Framework, the Paris Agreement, and Habitat III's New Urban Agenda. This led to specific SDGs crafted addressing critical matters from these

other processes. In fact, SDG 13 calling for climate action is fully surrendered to the UNFCCC for implementation (United Nations 2015a). From the UNFCCC, there are stock taking and implementation mechanisms including the use of Nationally Determined Contributions and National Adaptation Plans (UNFCCC 2015). Comparing to similar global development agendas that include the Sendai Framework and the Paris Agreement, the 2030 AfSD came up tops in terms of addressing gender, women and girls (Nhamo et al. 2018a). The environment, for example, was heavily included in the 2030 AfSD (Elder and Olsen 2019). Apart from having many targets and indicators under the environment goals, many others are found across the entire SDGs. The key weakness identified by Vandemoortele (2018) is that the targets and indicator lack precision and clarity. “The bad” from 2030 AfSD relate to glaring omissions that include the silence on the United Nations and other global multilateral political institutions’ reforms and matter pertaining to land and land grab, especially on the African continent (Nhamo 2017). Besides, governments declined a more transformative objective going beyond the GDP, the concept of planetary boundaries, as well as command and control implementation mechanisms (Elder and Olsen 2019). Other low points involve indicators that may bring conflict. For example, in sustainable agriculture (Indicator 2.4.1), there are two contrasting approaches, namely, industrial agriculture and agro-ecology, which are in opposition as each has its own associated discourse and interests (McNeill 2019). Lastly, Beisheim and Simon (2018) bemoan the lack of clear mechanism to monitor and report on progress in partnerships (SDG 17).

The next and last section in this part narrows down to trace how some critical issues like the green economy narrative fell of the 2030 AfSD framing.

Lost in Framing and Transition: Green Economy Narrative Falls Off the Agenda

Agenda setting for global goals remains an area of focus from the academia. In this section, we revisit the entire processes from Rio+20 to New York 2015. A number of issues were placed on the table for further deliberations that culminated in the 2015 outcome document “Transforming Our World.” Table 5 presents the key thematic and cross-sectoral matters from Rio+20 and those that featured in the final 2030 AfSD outcome document.

What emerges from Table 5 is that most of the thematic and cross-sectoral issues raised from Rio+20 found their way onto the 2030 AfSD and the SDGs in varying levels. The few omissions include green economy, mining, and matters of population. Given that the green economy was one of the twin focuses of the Rio+20, an effort is made to trace how this got removed from the agenda in the lead to the finalization of the 2030 AfSD. It emerged that reference to the concept “green economy” (including green growth) was dropped during transitioning from the MDGs to the SDGs. There is no mentioning of the green economy in the SDGs outcome document from September 2015, yet this was one of the central themes during Rio+20. The green economy transition agenda was also prominent during the Inaugural Meeting of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development that took place on 24 September 2013 in the lead to the SDGs. Although the IISD

Table 5 The Future We Want versus Transforming Our World key matters

Thematic/cross-sectorial matters from Our Common Future (SDGs agenda setting)	Featured in Transforming Our World
Green economy	No
Poverty eradication	Yes (SDG 1)
Food security and nutrition and sustainable agriculture	Yes (SDG 2)
Water and sanitation	Yes (SDG 6)
Energy	Yes (SDG 7)
Sustainable tourism	Partially
Sustainable transport	Yes (SDG 11)
Sustainable cities	Yes (SDG 11)
Human settlements	Yes (SDG 11)
Health and population	Partially (SDG 3)
Promotion of full and productive employment, decent work for all, and social protection	Yes (SDG 8)
Oceans and seas	Yes (SDG 14)
Small island developing states (SIDS)	Yes
Least developed countries (LDCs)	Yes
Landlocked developing countries (LLDCs)	Yes
Africa	Yes
Regional efforts	Yes
Disaster risks reduction (DRR)	Yes (SDG 13)
Climate change	Yes (SDG 13)
Forest	Yes (SDG 15)
Biodiversity	Yes (SDG 15)
Desertification, land degradation, and drought	Partially
Mountains	Partially
Chemicals and waste	Partially
Sustainable consumption and production	Yes (SDG 12)
Mining	No
Education	Yes (SDG 4)
Gender equality and women's empowerment	Yes (SDG 5)
Equity	Yes (SDG 10)
Freedom, peace, and security	Yes (SDG 16)
Promotion of partnerships	Yes (SDG 17)
Goals, targets, and indicators	Yes

Source: Authors based on UNCSD (2012) and United Nations (2015a)

(2013) records green economy as featuring seven times during the almost verbatim documentation of proceedings of the inaugural HLPF, the final document of the HLPF only registers it once. In the HLPF record, participants highlighted that “advancing a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication policies is not only possible, it is also economically affordable” (United Nations 2013: 4). However, inferences were made from the Rio+20 outcome document as other stakeholders affirmed that there were other approaches, visions,

models, and tools that countries could utilize based on their prevailing national circumstances and priorities to achieve sustainable development apart from the green economy.

From the proceedings of the HLPF (IISD 2013), Enrico Letta, the Prime Minister of Italy who was co-leading the consultations with Brazil highlighted that the HLPF should provide stronger global political leadership on sustainable development, inclusive of matters pertaining to the green economy. On the other hand, and in the same platform, Christine Lagarde, the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) indicated that there was a need to get economic foundations right, indicating that pricing for the green economy should be a priority. Greece highlighted that for the green economy transition to work, it was necessary to engage both the private and public sectors resulting in the development of international standards for such. From Finland's view, an inclusive green economy remained a platform for creating green growth. Germany added its voice, highlighting that the inclusive green economy could lead to job creation in environmentally friendly industries. Seychelles linked the green economy debate to SIDS heavy dependence on oceans – the concept of the blue economy. This would imply moving toward an ocean-based green economy in the era of SDGs. With all this support for the green economy to feature prominently in the 2030 AfSD, one wonders what happened between 24 September 2013 and 9 July 2014 as the green economy matters were only highlighted once during the 2nd deliberations of the HLPF and not highlighted at all during the 3rd meeting of the HLPF that ended on 8 July 2015, less than 2 months prior to New York 2015. What is clear, however, is that all the talk on green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication died down. All this was in sharp contrast to the emphasis placed on the green economy during Rio+20 resulting in the concept featuring 22 times in the outcome document “The Future We Want” (UNCSD 2012).

The green economy did not feature a lot in the OWG meetings, with mentions in 6 out of the 13 meetings that took place in the lead to the SDGs. On the other hand, the green economy did not feature at all in the Intergovernmental Negotiation platform on the post-2015 development agenda. All the seven sessions remained silent, and these covered Session 1 (19–21 January 2015), Session 2 (17–20 February 2015), Session 3 (23–27 March 2015), Session 4 (21–24 April 2015), Session 5 (18–22 May 2015), Session 6 (22–25 June 2015), and Session 7 (20 July to 2 August 2015). However, to those that are familiar with the green economy discourse, it should be relatively easy to identify some elements from the green economy that include the call for low carbon transition, need to address climate change, and embracing renewable energy. While the green economy narratives fell of the SDGs agenda globally, many countries still have policies in place aligned to the green economy. For example, as recent as February 2020, South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa, made reference to the green economy in his State of the Nation Address (SONA). From the SONA, the President was of the view that finalizing South Africa's Climate Change Bill will result in the identification of new industrial opportunities in the green economy (Ramaphosa 2020).

Conclusion

There is no doubt that global development goals, in the context of this chapter the 17 SDGs and their targets, remain propositions awaiting full implementation. To this end, the SDGs agenda was framed from an historical and current global positioning between June 2012 and September 2015. The global development goal approach was traced from as far back as the 1960s, through the 1972 Stockholm Convention, and the 1987 United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development publication code-named *Our Common Future*. Other global development goal setting landmarks informing the SDGs include the Rio Declaration and its Agenda 21, the Convention on Biological Diversity, Convention to Combat Desertification, and the Framework Convention on Climate Change. The Millennium Declaration and its MDGs, the World Summit on Sustainable Development of 2002, as well as the Rio+20 Summit and its outcome document, “The Future We Want,” remain central as predecessor platforms for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It also emerged that not every initial idea on the global development goals agenda makes it into the outcome document. Two critical cases in point from the Rio+20 are mining and the green economy.

The world was privileged to embark on a systematic new global development goal setting drawing from the experience of the success and points of failure from the MDGs. From other intergovernmental negotiation processes, the world was negotiating to finalize the Paris (Climate) Agreement and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. The United Nations Habitat III that delivered the New Urban Agenda in 2016 was also taking place. To this end, it came as no surprise that there were standalone SDGs for Sustainable Human Settlements (SDG 11) and Climate Action (SDG 13) for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. There were also other SDGs aligned to crucial United Nations agencies including FAO (SDG 2), World Health Organization (SDG 3), UNESCO (SDG 4), UN Women (SDG 5), UN Water (SDG 6), ILO (SDG 8), UNIDO (SDG 12), and Convention on Biological Diversity and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (SDG 15). The allocation of the SDGs to certain United Nations agencies may be controversial. However, this is what comes out clearly. In a way, one may see through the curtains what kind of horse-trading took place during the setting up of the SDGs agenda. This is confirmed by the major United Nations agencies that grouped into the United Nations Development Group that is still very instrumental in the implementation of the SDGs as well as the United Nations Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDGs indicators that remain active until 2030. The United Nations arm was also influential in regional forums on sustainable development. These regional commissions included the Economic Commission for Africa, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia.

Given the setup of intergovernmental negotiations, the countries were represented through the United Nations High-Level Political Forum. Other influential bodies in setting the SDGs agenda were the World Bank, IMF, the United Nations High-Level

Panel, United Nations Open Working Group, civil society, and development agencies. Furthermore, inbuilt in the SDGs is a national reporting and monitoring mechanism, the Voluntary National Review. Although the local government was represented in the negotiations, their involvement in implementation was not clarified to an extent that reporting on SDGs implementation only started with New York City in 2018 through a Voluntary Local Review. Since then, many more cities have come on board to report progress on SDGs implementation, mainly from Japan.

However, what emerges from the experience in implementing the new global development goals and agenda through the SDGs is that the availability of reliable data remains a huge challenge. This is magnified in many developing countries. Indicators for environment-related SDGs that include climate action, oceans, and biodiversity (SDGs 13–15) are merely scarce or not there. Apart from this, many developing countries, especially those in Africa and small island states, have been left behind. Many of these countries did not domesticate and localize the SDGs on time to get involved in reporting intervals of the High-Level Political Forum. In addition, many more countries did not institutionalize the SDGs agenda across the ministries. Nevertheless, there are functional case studies where the governments took up the SDGs quicker through their own initiatives or with assistance from the United Nations Development Group. Among these countries could be mentioned Rwanda (that translated SDGs into its main local language) and Uganda (that mapped SDGs into its Constitution and National Anthem) as well as Botswana and Nigeria that developed clear road maps on SDGs domestication and localization. The bigger challenge at national level, therefore, is to transmit the SDGs into the national development plans and visions, as well as into sectoral policies for implementation.

There are emerging global issues that are preventing worldwide scaling up of SDGs implementation. These matters range from those that are human-induced, to natural phenomena. The American President, for example, has been controversial from many fronts that include withdrawal from the Paris Agreement to war and trade war threats. This has resulted in negative sentiments on global markets that are a major source of SDGs implementation funds. From Mother Nature, we have witnessed devastating cyclones in southern Africa – Cyclones Idai and Kenneth in 2019, as well as the outbreak of the coronavirus. Such events can wipe centuries of development like what transpired in Malawi, Mozambique, or Zimbabwe. They can also significantly reduce projected growth rates like in China where the epicenter of coronavirus was.

Although contested in many instances, global development goals remain relevant to bring together the world to a common developmental agenda. Challenges could be faced in implementation, but progress in many areas is made. The SDGs agenda took into consideration the old, present, and potentials from the future. As such, it remains one of the most agreed upon and ratified global development agenda of all times. Lessons from the processes remain valuable now and into the future. The current challenge of contradictions in some of the targets and the need for a just transition into The Future We Want should be addressed.

Lastly, there are certain turning points worth highlighting on the SDGs agenda setting that differed or were enhanced from the MDGs agendas setting. The SDGs remain holistic as they used a grass roots and all-inclusive consultation approach. Countries that followed the proposed consultation processes witnessed this process getting even into the classrooms. In terms of data, the SDGs demand a revolution, linking up into Big Data channels to top up traditional data sources. While the MDGs were criticized of lacking a real universal focus, the SDGs are not. Other points of interest are presented by the re-orientation of certain SDGs, like that on education that now emphasizes more on quality. There was also a merging of health SDGs from four that characterized the MDGs to only one under the SDGs. The environment MDG was disaggregated into several SDGs harnessing matters on water, climate, consumption, oceans, and biodiversity. New SDGs were peached on food, inclusion, energy, jobs, infrastructure, equality, and cities. Remaining in the equation was refined MDGs on poverty, gender, and partnerships. Such was the realized outcome of global development goal setting post-2015.

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