The Difficulties of Diffusing the 2030 Agenda: Situated Norm Engagement and Development Organisations

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8.1   Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development represents a milestone for global cooperation, whether we consider the process that led to its ratification or the breadth of its ambitions. The process shaping the 2030 Agenda has been far more inclusive and democratic than any other global political negotiation in the past, including the narrowly conceived Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). That is not to say it was devoid of conflict, contestation, or strong divergences along the way; the alternating inclusion and exclusion of specific goals, such as Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 10 (Reduce inequality within and among countries), during the negotiations are a testament to such normative quarrels (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill 2019). The final outcome is an immensely ambitious and wide-ranging agenda for global development as we move towards 2030. It may be clearly underfinanced and suffer from inadequate attention to its actual implementation, yet in its normative form it represents a strong political guidepost, waging a clear battle with different ideologies and diverse national politics.

This chapter draws on Cold-Ravnkilde et al. (2018) and Fejerskov et al. (2019).

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The challenge that lies ahead then—prompted by its universal nature—is to implement the agenda's rapid diffusion into national policies and reforms needed all over the world if the agreement is to ensure extensive transformation before its deadline. This is no easy task. The historical legacies of global normative agreements such as the 2030 Agenda—the ones both broad and narrow in scope—have taught us that global norms are rarely diffused or implemented straightforwardly and rarely bring about the forms of change written into their global agreements (Czarniawska and Joerges 1996; Engberg-Pedersen et al. 2019; Van der Vleuten et al. 2014; Zwingel 2016). Change may never come about, or it may arrive in a form far removed from what was imagined—for both good and bad. How can we explain these apparent challenges of spreading global norms across the world? In addition, is the 2030 Agenda faced with this very same problem? Whereas the answer to the first question requires quite a few more pages, the second question can be answered more certainly with a yes. Thus, an international agreement is far from enough to establish normative support everywhere; the politicians who pushed for the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs must contemplate how they can mobilise people in all corners of the world around these global norms. The adoption of the agenda in 2015 was actually only the end of the beginning. In order to realise the goals, a straightforward implementation is not to be expected, as the goals imply significant social, political, and economic changes that will challenge both vested interests and normative practices in different societies. Accordingly, pro-SDG politicians should foresee considerable obstacles and resistance. Moreover, there is the significant political challenge that the responsibility for implementing the agenda to some extent has been diluted. The primary responsible is, and should be, governments. But how do governments in countries without significant resources implement a highly ambitious agenda? Wealthy countries managed to avoid taking responsibility at the UN Conference on Financing for Development at Addis Ababa, where the question was supposed to find an answer. Thus, the inequalities between countries and the disparate capacities to address the SDGs are a fundamental condition for the subsequent discussion on norm engagement.

When endeavouring to make an argument for why the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs will not be easily diffused throughout the world and bring about the changes they are expected to from the outset, it is tempting to point to the political developments that have taken place since the agreement was negotiated. The election of Donald Trump and the return of American unilateralism, deteriorating US–China relations, Brexit, and European political chaos amidst an advancing, if economically weak, Russia, together indicate a rising nationalism. This phenomenon has also been witnessed in parts of South America, Africa, and Asia, stimulating conflicts between countries, interests, ideologies, and values rather than leading towards the partnership called for in the agreement. The improbability that the 2030 Agenda can be agreed upon in today's political climate is very real. Still, we argue, a solely political explanation for why the 2030 Agenda cannot easily be diffused—and even an

agreement that builds on the contemporary rise of nationalism's preference for hard-boiled interests or right-wing populism's challenge to multilateralism and internationalism—is not adequate.

We argue in this chapter that the diffusion of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs is not only challenging due to contemporary political circumstances, but also because of the fundamental situated nature of how actors engage with global norms. As attempts are made to integrate the SDGs in international, regional, or national politics, they are not merely carried from one place to another in a fixed and unbreakable form, despite them having been given formal numbers, targets, and indicators. This is not just because of their inconsistencies (see Fukuda-Parr and McNeill 2019; Gasper et al. 2019), but also because—as global norms are present at their core—they find themselves in muddy, multi-actor, and multi-level processes of interaction that occur whenever such norms are used, manipulated, bent, or betrayed by actors. The inter-subjective nature of global norms means that these are addressed, reproduced, or changed during social interactions and cannot be understood as existing outside such processes. They do not have any inherent energy that transports them across boundaries from one place to the other. Rather, actors relate to them in different situations—sometimes intentionally and sometimes not—both through discourses and practices. In doing so, they may be influenced by the norms, but they may also influence them in return and change their meaning. This situated understanding of norm engagement leads us to argue that the SDGs' potential for spreading and inducing change is as shaped by local cultural, social, and conjunctural factors as it is by political ones.

Part of this handbook's rationale is to analyse a growing normative competition and contestation between different groups of actors such as Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)/Development Assistance Committee (DAC) and non-OECD/DAC members, not least to underline an argument of how the SDGs are treated differently across the world. The situated understanding of norm engagement, as it is furthered here, contributes to this discussion with an argument that we should be careful in assuming that strongly diverging ways of interpreting, implementing, and advancing the SDGs only exist across regions or levels of development. The approach to the SDGs may be as different within these imagined groups as it may be between them. There is little homogeneity even among OECD development actors as to how the global norms of the 2030 Agenda should be interpreted, understood, and pursued.

In this chapter then, we attempt to unpack the question of why global norms such as the SDGs cannot be easily diffused across the world. First, we sketch out the basics of how a situated understanding of norm engagement can be conceptualised by confronting conventional perceptions of diffusion to show that global norms are made and remade as actors engage with them in different situations under different circumstances. Second, we extend that understanding to show that we do not have to draw up normative contestation

between blocs of countries or regions to see differing views to, interpretations of, and attempts at implementing the 2030 Agenda. Even among OECD development organisations and donors, the situated nature of norms means that these are engaged with in strikingly diverse ways across different actors. We draw on the findings of a four-year research programme entitled Global Norms and Heterogeneous Development Organizations, in which seven major development partners were studied for the way they engage with global norms on gender equality and women's empowerment, which are today largely inscribed into SDG 5.[1] We end with a set of conclusions on where this leaves discussions on how the SDGs may be spread across the world and bring with them much needed transformation.

8.2   SITUATED NORM ENGAGEMENT

The 2030 Agenda and its SDGs fundamentally represent what can be called prescriptive norms, understood as *acknowledged, but not necessarily accepted, understandings of collective ambitions* (Fejerskov et al. 2019). This way of understanding prescriptive norms emphasises their contested nature and draws attention to the distinction between formally acknowledging certain ideas and normatively internalising them. Actors may very well acknowledge particular collective ambitions without having any intentions of turning them into concrete policies. It may be politically expedient for governments to sign international agreements even though they do not subscribe to their contents. The factor that turns such internationally acknowledged ideas into global norms is that relevant actors who which to be seen as legitimate players in a field all refer to the ideas as being important. However, they are likely to interpret them differently, partly because they may not accept them, partly because they operate in different contexts. Despite the formally agreed ambitions of the SDGs, there is no single understanding of the norms inherent in them—across the globe or across history. Even when diplomats and politicians signed the 2030 Agenda, different interpretations of the document surely existed. However, this does not mean that any interpretation is valid—although there is substantial leeway, as we see below. Certain views and practices may be difficult to defend because they are widely perceived to contradict global norms.

Prescriptive norms are fundamentally of a political nature, as they typically address issues of resource allocation between different social groups. Global norms are often developed to challenge existing practices in different parts of the world, and if they are taken seriously in these societies, they will change who gains and who loses in specific situations. Thus, both the elaboration and implementation of global norms are political processes in which actors struggle to make particular ideas dominate social, political, and economic interactions. In an interdependent world where legitimacy is a key asset to furthering one's concerns, the competition for elaborating international prescriptive norms is fierce, as these norms constitute significant reference points in the struggle for influence.

A situated approach to global norms underlines the broader social processes of norm engagement and the discontinuous transformation that they imply. Norm engagement is a social process that is inseparable from situations, their history, and their likely future. Norms are shaped by actors and are not fixed structures to be carried around from one locality to the next. Rather, norms are in themselves social interactions and relations. Though some actors are influential and therefore seek to be norm entrepreneurs, whereas others have fewer opportunities and may be perceived as "norm receivers", the distinction is relative. In the end, global norms are intended to change the widespread practices undertaken by the actors who support them. Therefore, these actors are unlikely to just "receive" and accept global norms. It is argued that the more global norms challenge existing practices, the less they are likely to be accepted and integrated in societies (Merry and Levitt 2019). In such a situation, one may expect global norms to be either rejected or adapted to local conditions. In the latter case, they are changed by those who are expected to "receive" them. Though this change may not have global outreach, reinterpretations of global norms are far from uncommon. In the field of gender equality, several norms have changed over time. The protection of women in labour markets was once a global norm; today, however, it is viewed as a practice that marginalises women (Zwingel 2016). Likewise, the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 conceptualised "women's empowerment" as a way to confront patriarchal practices, whereas different actors later interpreted it as an instrument to accelerate growth (Eyben and Napier-Moore 2009). Perceiving norms as fixed is "process-reduction", that is, making static in substantial ways that which is dynamic and unfolding. Regardless of the apparent strength of the SDGs, norms should not be seen as agents in themselves, but as ideas shaped and given meaning through interaction.

Thus, it varies greatly across actors how they engage with norms, just as it does from situation to situation, meaning that the same actor may approach the same set of ideas in different ways over time because of contextual changes. The social position of an actor significantly influences norm engagement and may define whether actors address norms at all, and whether their interpretations of a norm influence other actors, including in organisational contexts (Battilana et al. 2009). As social positions define access to networks and webs of social relations, they facilitate or prevent the influence of particular normative interpretations. Nevertheless, they do not determine how norms are interpreted, as even the marginalised have opportunities for resistance (Scott 1985).

Global norms are made, sustained, and changed inter-subjectively by actors engaged in political struggles. As such, these norms are the object of conflicts of interpretation rather than of continued homogenisation. Although the SDGs capture elements of many different norms and constitute a reference point for discussions in particular fields, they do not provide a fixed interpretation of a collective ambition to which actors respond passively through a logic of appropriateness. Actors continuously interpret, adapt, and change the

SDGs as they address them. Thus, every reference to the SDGs simultaneously works to strengthen them as an important normative issue and to adjust or change them in terms of their concrete contents. Sometimes, moreover, actors deliberately seek to resist global norms (Bloomfield and Scott 2017).

Other dimensions such as space and time also influence the way actors engage with the SDGs. The physical, social, or economic nature of any space shapes social interactions and norm engagement. Time and space confine what is perceived as legitimate human activity. All spaces produce certain shared understandings that help interpret action, but such understandings are never uniform. More or less different interpretations are likely to exist, given the diversity of individuals who—with different purposes, experiences, and expectations—share the space. This is evident when diplomats from different countries meet. Although they may have gone to the same universities, may have participated in the same international negotiations for years, and may all be acutely aware of the dos and don'ts at the negotiating table, they are likely to interpret the texts in front of them differently. Space does not determine understandings, but it helps in shaping them.

Temporality, or time, similarly influences norm engagement. The agentic dimension of social action is significantly shaped by the flow of time (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Agency is informed by the past (habitual aspects), the present (contextualising past habits and future projects within the moment), and the future (capacity to imagine alternative possibilities). When engaging with the SDGs during social interactions, actors thus simultaneously revisit past patterns of thought and action, try to imagine future trajectories or imageries, and do so while confronted with the dilemmas, demands, and ambiguities of the present moment. Because the perceptions of the past, the present, and the future change over time, the same actors are likely to engage with particular ideas differently at different points in time. There is also a significant element of temporality to the SDGs because they are imaginations of the past, present, and, most importantly, the future. They are constructed as ideal states of what should be, reflecting inter-subjective hopes and desires based on past experiences and present challenges.

8.3   DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATIONS AND THE DIFFUSION OF THE SDGS

Closer to the reality of the 2030 Agenda, what does this somewhat abstract conceptualisation of situated norm engagement mean for the way the SDGs are engaged with and understood by development actors? To try and answer that question, we now draw on the findings from a four-year research project on how different development organisations respond to global normative pressures, primarily at the policy level (see Cold-Ravnkilde et al. 2018). Much like this handbook, the project worked from the fundamental observation that international development cooperation today is caught at the intersection of homogenising global forces and increasingly heterogeneous development

organisations. What happens at this intersection? Do global norms diffuse and homogenise different development organisations "behind their back"? Do development organisations consciously translate global agreements into their own specific contexts, subverting or supporting the agreements accordingly?

To narrow the scope of analysis, the research project focussed on seven new and old development organisations, including Agencia Mexicana de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo (AMEXCID) in Mexico, Danida[2] in Denmark, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Oxfam Great Britain (Oxfam GB), South Africa's development cooperation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the World Bank. The project explored how global normative pressures to address issues of gender equality and women's empowerment specifically, as an example of a strong global norm, affect these development organisations in terms of their policies and organisational cultures.

It is clear that development organisations respond markedly different to normative pressures, sometimes with effects on policies and core organisational goals, at other times with resistance or lip service that leaves organisational practices untouched, decoupling deed from word. Such processes take place through institutional negotiations, conflicts, and interpretations, in which individuals, groups, and departments contest for the dominant interpretations. It is also clear that distinctions between so-called new and old development organisations or donors, as well as between multilateral, bilateral, and private aid agencies, should not be exaggerated when it comes to matters of how they engage with global norms such as those of the SDGs. In some respects, there are astonishing similarities across these lines of difference. The way that gender equality is interpreted in distinct organisational cultures is rather similar in the World Bank, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and Islamic Relief Worldwide. Gender equality was taken on board with enthusiasm in all three organisations, but in ways that fit the dominating views in the respective organisations. The processes in Oxfam GB and the World Bank also resembled each other to the extent that they were rather introverted exercises that paid little attention to the views of their peers. AMEXCID, Islamic Relief Worldwide, and Danida were all concerned with gaining credibility through references to global gender equality norms; the difficulties involved in turning a strong formal commitment into concrete action are shared by Danida and South Africa's development cooperation, albeit for different reasons. These observations call for less rigid perceptions of aid agencies than those based on "newness" or whether organisations are international, national, or non-governmental.

The way global norms on gender equality have been addressed in these development organisations demonstrates that the scope for furthering global norms is heavily circumscribed by contingent and contextual factors. In certain situations, there is little or no room to move the agenda forward, and it may be counterproductive to insist on specific norms, as these will be undermined by rejecting their importance. In other situations, contingent events or

unforeseen occurrences may suddenly pave the way for strong engagement with a global norm. This leads us to conceptualise a set of explanatory dimensions that greatly shape how global norms such as the SDGs are engaged with in development organisations under different situations. These are (i) organisational history, culture, and structures; (ii) actor strategies, emotions, and relationships; (iii) organisational uncertainty, pressures, and priorities; and (iv) the normative context and stakeholders. Global norm engagement in development organisations will always be shaped by these different factors, if to differing degrees—sometimes tipping engagements towards a rapid adoption of global norms, and at other times speaking against it. We expand on these in the following and discuss how they influence norm engagement in the seven development organisations.

8.3.1   *Organisational History, Culture, and Structures*

When global norms enter into organisational contexts, they do not encounter empty halls but layers of practices, rules, and ideas, all embedded in institutional history. Having a religious, entrepreneurial, banking, anti-apartheid, ministerial, or voluntary historical origin greatly shapes how global norms are conceptualised in organisations. The framing of the SDGs is thus highly dependent on how the organisational culture legitimises different arguments, ideas, and concerns. Over time, organisational cultures will develop relatively coherent meanings, beliefs, rituals, and images (Schein 1996; Scott 2014). Although far from unchangeable, uncontested, or unambiguous, these cultures become institutionalised in the organisation's mandate, history, iconography, and procedures. They shape the ways in which external demands, changes, and contexts are interpreted (Barnett and Finnemore 2004), and they make certain interpretations of global norms more feasible than others. This is not least because organisational cultures substantially shape the way staff relate to each other—both within departments and in intra-organisational relations with other departments—during which clashes over issues of power, authority, and both material and immaterial resources may occur.

Within the World Bank, the (re)turn to "gender equality as smart economics" around 2006 gained legitimacy and credibility by being framed in a way that was particularly appealing to the dominant logic of economists. Furthermore, the way in which gender equality was packaged using the image of women as active agents resonated in an organisation that was increasingly characterised by micro-economic thinking (Jones 2018). Similarly, norms on gender equality have had to assimilate to the dominant organisational culture in the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which is characterised by quantitative impact measurements and technology-as-progress mantras (Fejerskov 2018a). The organisational history of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation means it is deeply embedded in private-sector practice and thought, with a strong belief in technology and measurability as cures to the illnesses of

the world. Such cultures are not easily challenged or transformed. Elsewhere, Zilber (2002) has shown how, over the course of decades, organisational practices may remain the same, though the logics with which they are associated change on the surface. Such a decoupling between foreground discourses and background practices speaks to the persistent nature of organisational culture and history.

As organisations are formed to achieve certain goals, departmental structures are essentially set up to distribute roles, tasks, and activities to staff and units, as well as standardised and formalised coordination mechanisms to govern relations. The structures of development organisations are fundamental in shaping organisational narratives and practices. In particular, the organisation of policy-making units and implementing organs creates a separation of fundamentally different kinds of practices in different socio-economic contexts (Engberg-Pedersen 2014; Mosse 2005). Despite the formally one-dimensional relations between such units, organisational structures are characterised by a multiplicity of dimensions that shape narratives and practices by compartmentalising and separating organisational subcultures, resulting in different practices and beliefs. Accordingly, organisational structures are important in defining actors' access to—and possession of—the formal and informal authority with which they can initiate and influence processes of engaging with global norms.

8.3.2   Actor Strategies, Emotions, and Relationships

Actors are central in facilitating and shaping the spread of global norms across contexts. Individual actors can act and work to shape the implementation of a new idea, norm, or practice, and adoption will always be facilitated or blocked by human action, just as processes of institutionalisation and translation are shaped by it. However, organisational actors are faced with numerous challenges when they seek to initiate and influence processes of norm engagement. They may have to undermine existing logics and practices and legitimise new ones in the eyes of other organisational actors, or create hybrid forms in which new and old ideas are melded together—that is, if the SDGs do not resonate with existing activities or ideas in an organisation in the first place, the actors will have a very difficult time making a difference there (Merry and Levitt 2019). For the purpose of seeing their organisations engage with norms, actors need strategies. They need to mobilise different forms of material, political, and organisational resources, frame new organisational practices or rules inspired by the 2030 Agenda in an acceptable manner, and create resonances to inspire other organisational actors. Analysing the Women and Land project, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Fejerskov (2018b) shows how actors become central as the project moves from the top layers of management in the Gates Foundation's headquarters through an intermediary organisational level to its implementation in concrete localities. Staff involved

in implementation actively engage in reinterpretations of the meaning and objectives of the project to make it fit the context and resonate with ideas that are perceived to be legitimate.

To create a coherent vision for change that appeals to other organisational actors, including implementing staff (Battilana et al. 2009), actors may frame their change projects to align with the organisation's dominant values. They often do this while being confronted with "institutional defenders" (DiMaggio 1988), who benefit from the organisational status quo. Actors may construct imageries that lend coherence to new norms and ideas or create stories through which heroes and villains are defined. For staff members who do not possess formal authority, it is especially important to attract the intellectual attention of central managers and decision-makers in the organisation. The scope for conducting such normative work may relate to the actors' abilities, characteristics, or qualities (Beckert 1999), their social and organisational positions (Battilana et al. 2009), or the degree to which their organisation is receptive to change. Juul Petersen (2018) shows how the staff of Islamic Relief Worldwide actively make use of "double speak" to satisfy different audiences and organisational priorities by, for example, highlighting how particular verses in the Qur'an can support mainstream development approaches to gender equality. However, attempting to bridge different concerns in this way means diluting the contents of gender equality norms to make them acceptable to the more conservative constituents in the organisation.

The way norms "travel" into organisations is intertwined with emotions and relationships. In the institutional literature, little is known about how individuals experience institutions or the emotional aspects of engaging in institutional work (Barley 2008; Lawrence and Suddaby 2006). By contrast, other areas of contemporary social science and the humanities are devoting increased attention to emotions (or "affect") as part of a material (re)turn to the body (Massumi 2002; Rose 2013), even to the point of engaging in the neurosciences of emotions. In this interpretation, emotions are considered a set of automatically triggered brain–body behaviours and expressions that are inherently independent of intentions (Smail 2007). In other manifestations, the turn has served in part to challenge the (over)use of rationality in making over-flat accounts of what forms opinions, motivates action, and shapes judgement. In this line of thought, emotions should not be regarded as purely individual-level psychological factors that are divorced from individuals' social positions or rational cognitive processes (Voronov and Vince 2012).

The notion of emotions emphasises the importance of actors in organisations and sheds light on how an organisation's staff mobilises energy around a norm, which is necessary for it to mobilise attention (Benford and Snow 2000; Czarniawska and Joerges 1996). Adopting a "relational approach" to development, Anne-Marie Fechter (2012) considers relationships and emotions as essential attributes of development practices. In that sense, staff's personal relationships as well as their beliefs, values, and motivations are likely to affect how

norms on gender equality travel and manifest themselves within development organisations (Mosse 2011). In Oxfam GB, staff members often hold strong beliefs about gender, resulting in fierce emotional contestations over gender programmes. Crewe (2018) shows that such contestations reflect not only a conflict between different feminist and non-feminist values, but also the antagonism between different organisational imperatives. However, the struggles are fuelled by deep personal commitments and alliances, which significantly influence policy outcomes.

8.3.3   Organisational Pressures and Priorities

Whenever actors engage with the SDGs in organisations, such interaction will be strongly influenced by organisational pressures and priorities at a given time and place. These pressures and priorities are management concerns and organisational threats and opportunities that staff feel override the more immediate daily purposes of their work. Particularly in relation to new projects and policy-making, organisational pressures and priorities tend to set a determining framework for organisational processes. They include what can be labelled as political opportunity structures—in which organisational leaders assess whether such windows of opportunity are central to their organisation—but threats to organisational survival and processes of organisational typically change the agendas of top leaders and managers. Thus, staff perceptions of formal and informal priorities influence whether and how norms on gender equality become a strong focus in concrete development programmes. When Warren Buffett decided to grant some $30 billion to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in 2006, it considerably reframed the organisational context into which gender equality norms were travelling at the time (Fejerskov 2018a). In some organisations, the pressure for disbursement is significant, and gender equality is rarely a concern that can move a lot of money quickly. Conversely, in the case of Danida, when faced with continuous administrative cuts, a significant organisational priority shaping the context of a new gender equality policy was that it should require as little administrative capacity as possible (Engberg-Pedersen 2018).

Formal priorities in terms of development policies emphasising the SDGs may not automatically turn into a strong emphasis on the issue in concrete development programmes. For instance, Danida staff are very adept at sensing the "real" priorities of development ministers and top managers, regardless of official policies. Many Danish development ministers have repeatedly stated their support for gender equality, but several evaluations note the limited success of gender mainstreaming. Thus, the absence of the minister when a new gender policy is presented to the public sends a signal about how it is prioritised. Nonetheless, formal priorities may be important, especially if they are in line with staff perceptions of informal pressures and priorities.

Whereas some explanatory dimensions, such as organisational cultures and history, only experience incremental change over the course of years, if not decades, organisational pressures and priorities often go through rapid change as a consequence of changes in leadership, the influence of different stakeholders, and shifts in the normative environment. This is not least the case with public aid agencies, with elections being a frequent source of disruption in political priorities, and thus organisational pressures. In South Africa, departmental infighting over the establishment of an overarching organisational framework for development cooperation—the South African Development Partnership—as well as continuous (re)structuring processes within the Women's Ministry have contributed to a stronger gender push in South Africa's development cooperation being impeded (Cold-Ravnkilde 2019). In Oxfam GB, recent discussions on gender equality and its conceptualisation have been heavily influenced by both organisational restructuring and funding pressures. The Oxfam family is changing its organisational arrangements in a strategic process going up to 2020, which staff see as almost the only concern of top managers. At the same time, fundraising was challenged both politically and through increased competition. All this produced a conceptualisation of a gender-related programme being described as tumbleweed—blown in all directions and never settling down (Crewe 2018).

8.3.4   *Normative Environment and Stakeholders*

The notion of a normative environment refers to actors sharing organisational or social spheres with the organisation in question. It espouses specific values and influences the organisation and the actors within it through normative measures because actors in the normative environment do not have any relations of formal authority with the organisation. They may be part of a similar institutional or organisational field, but they also include others who are perceived as legitimate stakeholders, such as the media or academic environments. Normative actors encourage particular forms of action, logics, and goals, and they may accordingly favour particular kinds of translation, exerting indirect power through knowledge, legitimacy, or prestige.

Responses to such forms of pressure from the normative environment may, of course, take on many forms. Decoupling is a core argument of institutional thought (Meyer and Rowan 1977), in which organisations disconnect foreground (symbolic) changes from more structural or procedural changes in the organisation's machinery. Pressure from perhaps several different normative environments creates multiple, and often conflicting, demands to which the organisation is expected to respond in timely fashion—something that is not always possible. Moreover, public aid agencies are expected to respond simultaneously to the national political environment, which is more often than not of a fragmented nature, and the normative framework espoused by the international community of peer aid agencies. Defiance of pressure from the

normative environment is an equally likely response, yet also one implying potentially significant consequences.

Often, different normative environments entail bridging very different, sometimes contradictory sets of norms in order to appeal to different audiences. In building its identity as a regional development partner, South Africa is navigating between the normative environments of liberal internationalists who believe that South Africa's regional leadership should be pursued through the promotion of human rights and democracy, and of constituents being primarily concerned about non-interference and anti-imperialist discourses. Moreover, historical contestations between feminists and nationalists over the meaning and interpretations associated with gender issues in South Africa continue to shape conflicts over gender norms between stakeholders both inside and outside the administration (Cold-Ravnkilde 2019). In the case of AMEXCID, debates around gender equality and women's rights are introduced and framed to simultaneously resonate and address a national feminicide (Sørensen 2018). By emphasising its own national historical experiences of (unsuccessfully) addressing violence against women, gender policy-making has come to form an important part of building AMEXCID's identity as a development partner in the region. Mexico's gender-related development activities emphasising South–South cooperation reflect an attempt to appeal to domestic constituencies, international donor communities, and targeted partner countries in the region (Sørensen 2018). Despite having similar characteristics as so-called emerging actors embedded in national contexts of feminicide pandemics, South Africa and AMEXCID have responded rather differently to international and domestic pressures to address gender norms in their respective development cooperation engagements. AMEXCID quite clearly commits itself to working to achieve global norms on gender equality, such as the MDGs and SDGs, including the goal of promoting gender equality and empowering women. Contrary to this, alignment with what is often conceived of as Western-imposed hegemony is contested in South Africa's normative environment, thus impeding the institutionalisation of gender norms into a strategic policy framework (Cold-Ravnkilde 2019).

8.4   Conclusion

The SDGs will undoubtedly influence discussions of development in the years to come. As analysed in this chapter, seven major aid agencies and partners have all embraced global norms on gender equality and women's empowerment, despite the substantially different histories, organisation, and orientations of these agencies. Contemporary development cooperation is heavily influenced by more than 40 years of international discussions and agreements on norms pertaining to gender equality. To be recognised as a legitimate player by peer organisations and development communities, even

organisations established with a strong focus on financial issues (e.g. the World Bank), on technological development (e.g. the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation), or on religious issues (e.g. Islamic Relief Worldwide) feel obliged to address gender equality norms. Despite a normative environment of feminicide epidemics in Mexico, also AMEXCID has taken up gender equality as an important political priority.

Nevertheless, the chapter questions the extent to which global norms are diffused as a recognisable, homogeneous understanding perceived in the same way across social contexts. As we have argued elsewhere (Fejerskov et al. 2019), there is a need to refocus theories on how global norms influence social action—from diffusion to the situations of norm engagement. Norms do not have an energy of their own enabling them to spread from place to place unaffected by social interaction. Rather, they are interpreted in substantially different ways, depending on the actors engaging with the norms and the situations in which this takes place. Thus, global social change does not necessarily move towards increased homogenisation as a consequence of international agreements on prescriptive norms. In the case of the aid agencies, their particular organisational histories, cultures, and structures are one aspect influencing how global norms on gender equality are addressed. Another is how organisational actors and norm entrepreneurs frame global norms within existing organisational concerns and manage to mobilise attention. Particular organisational pressures and priorities may also thoroughly circumscribe the extent to which and how global norms can be promoted in an aid agency. Finally, normative environments shape, stimulate, bias, and/or impede norm engagement. There are, accordingly, a host of factors that may influence how global norms are addressed in any particular situation, and it is unlikely that a particular understanding should prevail across time and space.

This creates a paradox. On the one hand, global norms such as the SDGs are likely to be taken up in discussions of development in most parts of the world. On the other hand, they will be reframed depending on the specific circumstances in different social settings. This means that development discussions will be characterised by tensions between broad global norms that allow for different interpretations and situation-specific factors, pulling the interpretations in very different directions. These interpretations will, subsequently, influence global negotiations whenever the SDGs are revisited. However, this is not to say that the SDGs are irrelevant. Rather, it is to argue that the SDGs do not uniformise development discussions around the world and that their influence depends on two interrelated issues, namely actors' political strengths and political contingencies. Strong actors and norm entrepreneurs advocating the SDGs may be able to shape political agendas, but they will typically have to adapt the goals to local circumstances if they meet resistance. However, even strong actors may get their wings clipped in the face of political contingencies drawing attention away from the SDGs. An example of this is the deteriorating

political support for gender equality in Russia (Gradskova 2019). Despite increasing attention to gender equality during the 1990s and the first years of the new millennium, an alliance between the political regime and the Catholic Church has since emphasised the family above gender issues, implying, inter alia, a softening of the legal regulations addressing violence against women in the family. As noted in this chapter, organisational pressures and priorities may also change rapidly and influence the scope for norm engagement by organisational actors who would like to promote gender concerns.

Accordingly, the SDGs are fragile prescriptive norms that are constantly up for reinterpretation and whose impact on concrete policies and practices is highly dependent on actors and contingencies. As noted in the introduction to this book, development cooperation can be characterised as contested collaboration, not least because two tendencies point in directions undermining collective ambitions about global development: the increasing strength of emerging economies challenges the normative dominance of OECD countries, and the growing nationalism in many countries weakens the appetite for international cooperation. Does this mean that the SDGs were a short-lived attempt to agree on global development? Probably not. First, the 2030 Agenda is not the normative product of an exclusive group of OECD countries. Several powerful countries in all parts of the world have had to put up with one or two things to agree on the agenda. Influential actors in emerging economies and the Global South are pushing for normative developments and strengthened efforts to achieve the SDGs. Even the human rights agenda, which has often been criticised as a project of the Global North, was in the 1960s entirely dependent on support from former colonies (Jensen 2016). Thus, the 2030 Agenda enjoys widespread support, while the pockets of resistance are to be found in all parts of the world. Secondly, several global challenges (e.g. climate change) do not go away if you bury your head in the sand and refuse international cooperation. As they cannot be resolved by any individual country, these challenges are likely to enforce cooperation at some point if war and social collapse are to be avoided. An already established and legitimate framework for which goals should be pursued in that situation is likely to facilitate such cooperation. Thirdly, whereas governments and politicians have diverse interests, often of a short-term nature, populations generally value the fundamental focus of the SDGs on living conditions and well-being. Though the goals cover a vast terrain, they reflect a strong emphasis on issues that regularly come out on top of people's preferences, such as education, health, jobs (United Nations Development Group 2013). Moreover, the inclusive call for "leaving no one behind" has a strong appeal in most societies.

Thus, the SDGs have a significant potential for popular support that norm entrepreneurs may be able to mobilise. Politicians and policy-makers who seek to promote a focus on the SDGs should consider three issues. First, they need

to be aware of and address the paradox between global norms and concrete realities. It is not useful to insist on a rigid interpretation of the SDGs when trying to convince others that the goals are relevant and appealing. The SDGs need to be seen as relevant in relation to both the development problems confronting societies around the world and the norms and values that people in different places nourish. This "bridging" is no easy task, but it will have to be taken seriously. Second, contingent challenges should be recognised. In Europe, refugees and Brexit have topped the political agenda recently, and it is often difficult to get completely different topics on the political agenda. SDG advocates should consider this and try to develop ways of framing the 2030 Agenda that speak to current political concerns while gradually moving attention towards the SDGs. Third, politicians supporting the SDGs should possibly turn more towards the public to exert pressure and build support for the 2030 Agenda over the long run rather than focus exclusively on short-term political struggles. Without a very strong platform, the latter is difficult to control, given that most politicians concentrate on immediate concerns in order to win upcoming elections. The political weakness of the SDGs is their long-term nature, but if they can be turned into pertinent concerns felt by people at large, they may substantially influence our future.

NOTES

1. Articles analysing the case studies are published in two issues of *Progress in Development* (volume 18, issues 2 and 3, 2018).
2. Danida is the term used to describe the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in relation to Danish development cooperation and is no longer used as an acronym, although it is derived from the Danish International Development Agency.

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