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RESEARCH ARTICLE

What role for regional organizations in goal-setting global governance? An analysis of the role of the European Union and ASEAN in the Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the current role of regional organizations in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We construct a conceptual model and distinguish four potential roles that regional organizations can play in the implementation of the SDGs: the translating role, supporting role, coordinating role and monitoring role. We apply this framework to the European Union and ASEAN. The case studies are analyzed on the basis of document analysis from primary and secondary sources, voluntary national reviews and interviews. We show that regional organizations play different roles in the implementation of the SDGs.

Keywords Global governance · Regional organizations · Sustainable development goals · Goal-setting

Introduction

Global governance through setting goals constitutes a relatively new form of global public policy. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the United Nations (UN) constitutes the most advanced form of such global governance through goal-setting. It is known for its far-reaching and ambitious vision with its 17 goals and 169 targets that are listed as part of the so-called "universal policy agenda" (UN, 2015). Securing agreement and participation of UN member states (MS) and

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relevant stakeholders on the Agenda was possible as it was treated as a goal set through an inclusive and consultative process, rather than as a rigid binding agreement imposed top-down by a small number of actors. The "bottom-up, non-confrontational, country-driven, and stakeholder-oriented" character of this goal-setting model enabled the adoption of the Agenda, and is also perceived as a factor for its potential success (Biermann et al., 2017).

Within the scholarly literature, much research has been done on the evolution, theories, debates, and practices of the sustainable development governance at the global level (Browne, 2017; Dodds et al., 2017; Kanie & Biermann, 2017; Meuleman, 2019; Monkelbaan, 2019); on individual country's implementation (Hazra & Bhukta, 2020; Holzhacker & Agussalim, 2019; Jung, 2018; Keitumetse et al., 2020; Khemka & Kumar, 2020; Wang & Zhang, 2020) and on implementation of specific goals of the SDGs (Kaltenborn et al., 2020; Nhamo & Mjimba, 2020; Valentini et al., 2019; Walker et al., 2019). Interestingly, little research has focused on the role of regional organizations in the SDG framework. There seems to be a dismissal of their role because of the global-driven and country-led character of the SDGs.

Given the recognition of regional organizations in the SDG document, one can assume that they constitute an important link in the multi-level governance framework of the SDGs and deserve more scholarly attention. Our analysis starts from the observation that the SDG agenda constitutes a relatively new form of global governance which revolves around global goal-setting and country-level implementation. For such a model to work, its architecture is crucial and involves many different actors on multiple levels of governance. Each actor in the design has an important role to play. Such a global goal-setting framework should not be a loose, soft or voluntary system but needs sufficient dynamic accountability/reporting mechanisms between different levels to achieve goals. In such an architecture, regional organizations play a role since they can strengthen the implementation of global goals by fostering coherence, learning, and ratcheting up through benchmarking between their Member States.

The paper analyzes the current role of regional organizations in the implementation of the SDGs as an example of goal-setting global governance. It takes a descriptive and comparative approach by analyzing the role currently played by the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). By comparing the two, we aim to understand the different ways in which regional organizations play a role in the implementation of the SDGs. The study of international institutions has identified different institutional designs of regional organizations in terms of membership, centralization, scope, control, flexibility and mandates (Koremenos et al., 2001; Acharya & Johnston, 2007). However, these studies focus more on the different factors shaping their design than on how a regional organization operates with regard to implementing global agendas and public policies. By examining the different ways regional organizations play a role in the SDGs, the paper aims to fill this gap and to explore how we can conceptualize regulatory governance by regional organizations (Bianculli, 2021). Before we proceed with analyzing the EU and ASEAN, we first introduce the role of regional organizations in the SDGs and develop an analytic framework.

The Sustainable Development Goals and regional organizations

The SDG approach is constructed around three levels of governing through goals. First, 17 goals make up the SDGs. Each of them is made up of a number of targets honing in on specific problems. Targets are monitored by indicators which act as proxies to measure the progress made on a certain target. To track progress, the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) has been established as a mechanism for countries to share their voluntary national reports (VNR). The VNRs are presented at the yearly HLPF and 'have the central role in overseeing follow-up and review at the global level' (UN, 2015, p. 47). The SDGs do not replace existing international law commitments and conventions but in a way complement and operationalize these commitments. As such, they are mutually reinforcing (Danish Institute for Human Rights, 2019).

Although the SDG agenda reflects a global vision with country-led implementation, the 2030 Agenda document identifies the importance of regional organizations (UN, 2015), defined as 'regional groupings of states that institutionalize cooperation by establishing formal institutions' (Marks et al., 2014, p. 1). First, the document reaffirms the importance of SDGs implementation and review at the national, regional, and global levels. The interconnectivity and economic integration at the regional level have also been acknowledged as important factors in SDGs implementation in individual countries. SDGs 1, 2, 9, and 11 specifically highlight the need for regional cooperation, policy frameworks, and connectivity to promote agendas on poverty alleviation; zero hunger; industry, innovation, and infrastructure; and sustainable cities and communities, respectively. Second, regional organizations are envisaged as playing an important role in localizing the SDGs by facilitating the translation of the global agenda into national action. Third, regional organizations are equally important in implementing the SDGs at the national level by facilitating regional dialogue and coordination for mutual learning, exchange of best practices, and discussion on shared targets. Finally, in the area of monitoring, regional organizations with their existing review mechanisms are expected to conduct voluntary review and follow-up of the national implementation in individual MS.

Few studies, however, explore the role of regional organizations in the governance of the SDGs (Kapfudzaruwa et al., 2017; Karlsson & Silander, 2020; Mickler & Wachira, 2020). Karlsson and Silander, for example, focus on the role of political entrepreneurship within the EU on the implementation of each SDG goal. While the approach allows for understanding how a regional organization adopts creative measures to respond to the SDGs, this applies only to certain circumstances where political entrepreneurship occurs, that is when traditional EU/European institutions, formal and/or informal, are challenged and changed by new institutions, formal and/or informal, better suited to promote entrepreneurial activity on the SDGs (Karlsson & Silander, 2020, p. 9).

Two other studies draw their analysis from different cases in Asia and Africa. These studies, however, focus more on policy recommendations for specific SDGs rather than providing an in-depth analysis. A study by Mickler and Wachira (2020) explores the role of the African Union (AU) through its African Governance

Architecture (AGA) in the implementation of SDG 16. The study identifies a role of the AU AGA in the goal-setting process and in the implementation of the SDGs. However, the authors only identify potential roles that the AU, through its AGA, could play in the implementation of a specific SDG ranging from coordinating, promoting normative change, reporting, and providing policy supports without further analyzing AGA's actual role. Drawing from the SDGs implementation in Asia, Kapfudzaruwa et al. (2017) also advance policy recommendations for regional organizations to use their convening power to promote mutual learning among members, to coordinate cooperation between scientists and policy makers, and to assist MS in monitoring and reporting. Similarly, no further analysis is made on the actual roles of regional organizations in the implementation of the SDGs.

In short, these studies provide a good starting point in identifying potential roles for regional organizations in the SDGs. However, they focus on specific roles, such as promoting normative change or coordinating between scientists and policy-makers, and do not develop a comprehensive framework to analyze the multiple roles regional organizations can play. The fact that regional organizations can play multiple roles is recognized in the literature on comparative regionalism and the notion of regional regulatory governance (Bianculli, 2021). In the next section, we develop a framework to analyze these different roles which correspond with the goal-setting nature and logic of the SDGs.

Analytic framework

To analyze the role of regional organizations in global governance through goal-setting, we start from different authors who focused on the design of goal-setting models and the tasks which need to be performed by different actors in such a global governance model.

First, in a study by Young (2017, p. 31), goal-setting model is seen as a governance strategy defined in a broad sense as "social function centered on steering individuals or groups toward desired outcomes". In this context, goal-setting is an alternative to rule-making in that the former focuses on the articulation of explicit goals and active campaigns to achieve the stated goals while the latter focuses on the use of regulatory arrangements to enforce compliance. In a more comprehensive definition, Young identifies goal-setting as a governance approach which seeks to steer behavior by: "(i) establishing priorities to be used in allocating both attention and scarce resources among competing objectives, (ii) galvanizing the efforts of those assigned to work toward attaining the goals, (iii) identifying targets and providing yardsticks or benchmarks to be used in tracking progress toward achieving goals, and (iv) combating the tendency for short-term desires and impulses to distract attention or resources of those assigned to work of goal attainment" (Young, 2017, p. 32). Thus, the three features of goal-setting model are setting a well-defined goal, tracking progress through a clear-cut metric, and maintaining commitment to the goal (Young, 2017, p. 33). Young further argues that although goal-setting and rule-making constitute different strategies, they could complement each other.

Second, the global experimental governance literature develops frameworks to analyze goal-setting in a multi-level context. Theorized by Sabel and Zeitlin, experimentalist governance in its most general definition constitutes a recursive process of provisional goal-setting and implementation based on insights gained from different policy approaches and experiences (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2010, p. 169). Experimental governance is assumed to dissolve a strict distinction between top-down and bottom-up perspectives (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2010, p. 411) and involves multiple actors on multiple levels of governance in the implementation of policy goals. The ideal-type (de Búrca et al., 2013, p. 727) experimental governance architecture involves a multi-level architecture based on four steps. First, central actors in consultation with relevant stakeholders jointly define provisional sets of open-ended framework goals and metrics (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2010, p. 171). Second, the implementation of these goals is delegated to a range of lower-level governance actors. Third, lower-level governance actors enjoy considerable discretion in translating these objectives to local circumstances. Fourth, revision and implementation of goals occurs as a recursive exercise to achieve goals. In this process, all actors on multiple levels of governance can adjust their approach. The SDGs approach could be considered an experimentalist governance approach with the exception that the goals and targets cannot be revised through the process but the approaches to achieve them can and foster learning effects.

Third, Meuleman focuses on governance arrangements linked to the goal-setting model and identifies four characteristics of such a goal-setting model. First, goal-setting tends to include broad goals and targets to accommodate various actors' interests. Second, it involves many actors which require complex coordination to ensure policy coherence. Third, it does not have separate binding mechanisms to ensure compliance but rather relies where possible on existing commitments and binding mechanisms. Finally, it is designed to accommodate unique contexts of individual stakeholders who have their own preferences for specific governance styles to achieve the goals (Meuleman, 2019).

Following these authors, there are at least four main factors contributing to the success of the goal-setting model: (1) the ability of participating actors to clearly define the goals and procedures to achieve them, (2) the ability to mobilize support and resources through coalition, social movement, and compelling motives to achieve the goals, such as rewards, honor, moral obligation, sense of solidarity, and social norms, (3) the ability to ensure policy coherence among actors, and (4) the ability to track progress (de Búrca et al., 2013, 2014; Kanie, et al., 2019; Young, 2017). Consequently, the actors involved in the goal-setting governance model will be involved in four main types of roles, namely the translating, supporting, coordinating and monitoring roles. These roles correspond to the roles governments play in implementing national policies (Cairney, 2019).

First, participating in formulating a clear global vision along with its targets and indicators and translating these visions to institutional/local setting of individual actors constitute the translating role. At the global level, actors participate in the formulation of global goals to build their sense of belonging, commitment, and willingness to mobilize resources to achieve the goals. Actors, however, need to agree on limited numbers of goals which represent their priorities expressed in well-defined

goals and measurable targets along with clear means of implementation (Young, 2017). Making the goals public and including them in a "high profile document or declaration" are ways to enhance actors' commitment (Young, 2017). Global goals need to be further translated into context-specific goals to ensure their operationability in regional and national contexts, as well as to build a sense of awareness and belonging to the goals. This could be done by mapping and aligning global goals with regional or national goals or by prioritizing goals.

Second, socializing these goals, mobilizing support and implementing goals requires a supporting role. Coalition building is important to pool resources to attain the goals. Therefore, actors at the global, regional, and national levels participate in mobilizing financial, technical, and institutional supports. Resource mobilization can be encouraged by increasing incentives for participation or setting non-participation costs, and by promoting social norms that help mainstream the goals within the local social context (Young, 2017). As Young (2017) also notes, creating social narratives is important where logic of appropriateness is central in a community. In this context, regional organizations can play an important role as 'intermediaries' as defined in the regulator-intermediary-target (RIT) model elaborated by Abbott et al. (2017). In the RIT model, intermediaries can perform different functions including providing capacity for the achievement of rules or goals. This function is of importance in relation to the supporting role. Regional organizations as intermediaries can bring several 'capacities' to the implementation of the Goals, including (Abbott et al., 2017, pp. 20–21) inter alia operational capacity, bridging capacity, and knowledge capacity. Regional organizations bring operational capacity by carrying out concrete activities in the field for which their members lack technical or financial capacity. They bring bridging capacity by linking MS to the UN level. Finally, they bring knowledge capacity through specialized knowledge or a knowledge exchange mechanism between MS on how to implement global commitments.

Third, coordinating policies between actors (i.e. MS) to ensure policy coherence makes up the coordinating role. As the goal-setting model tends to have a loose institutional arrangement connecting numerous actors, actors involved in regional organizations can participate in conducting horizontal and vertical coordination. Horizontal coordination is conducted across institutions within actors' own internal structure or with other external institutions. Vertical coordination is conducted between the level of the regional organization and the MS level. Coordination allows regional organizations to foster policy coherence and diffuse policy practices between members (Gebhard, 2017).

Fourth, regional organizations can play a monitoring and progress reporting role. As goal-setting most often does not have a binding mechanism to ensure compliance, tracking progress through indicators, timetables, and benchmarks is important for maintaining actors' commitment in pursuing long-term goals. The importance of monitoring and the involvement of different actors therein is further developed in the literature on governing through indicators. Indicators are used by a variety of global governance actors to quantify, rank and measure compliance with various international treaties and commitments or progress toward certain goals, including sustainable development (Davis et al., 2012). Davis et al. argue that indicators can be considered a "technology of global governance" and have the potential to impact

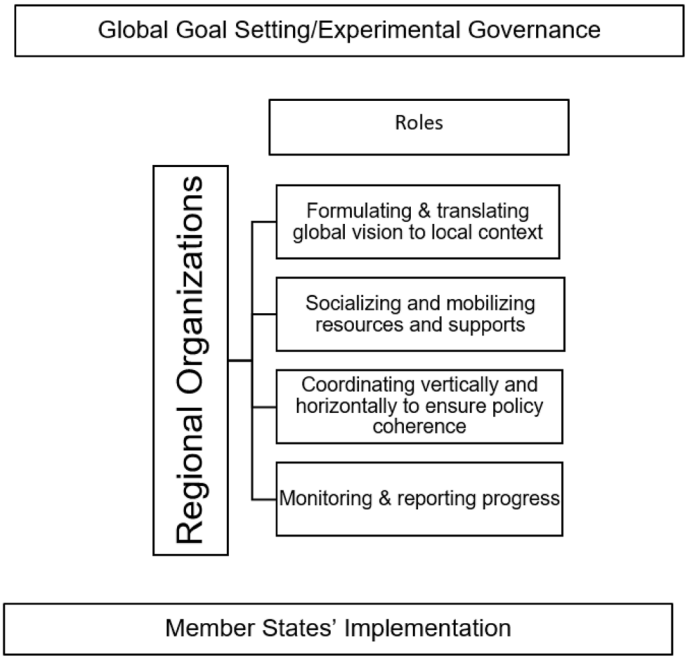

Fig. 1 Roles of regional organizations in the SDG architecture. Source: authors

"where, by whom, and in relation to whom governance takes place…; the processes through which standards are set; the processes through which decisions are made about the application of standards to particular cases; and the means and the dynamics of contesting and regulating exercises of power in global governance" (2012, pp. 12–13). The use of indicators has a special relevance for the SDGs, which specify 231 indicators to measure progress on the SDGs (UN, 2015).

Figure 1 summarizes our theoretical approach in a model, which highlights the role of regional organizations in a global goal-setting/experimentalist governance model through the above-mentioned four roles.

In the next section, we apply the framework to two case studies of regional organizations, namely the European Union and ASEAN, based on a close analysis of primary and secondary sources as well as interviews. The EU and ASEAN were selected since they constitute two leading regional organizations which score, however, differently on the degree to which they are integrated and institutionalized, i.e. the degree to which their member states create regional institutions that are not composed of member-state representatives and which have the competence to make decisions (Lenz, 2021, p. 3 and 87) The EU is the most institutionalized and integrated regional organization with a set of supranational institutions having competencies to coordinate policies in various issue areas. ASEAN has also transformed into a regional community and has been acknowledged for its success in maintaining regional stability with no major military conflict among its members since its establishment, but is less institutionalized than the EU. Indeed, ASEAN

is an intergovernmental organization with loose institutional arrangements and limited power to deal with regional issues, let alone domestic issues of its individual member states. According to Lenz (2021, p. 4 and p. 91ff), who developed an index of institutionalization of regional organizations, the EU is the most institutionalized regional organization while ASEAN is one of the prominent examples of a medium-integrated regional organization. Hence, our case studies represent different regional organizations in terms of institutionalization. In addition, the EU and ASEAN also operate in very different environments, with the former operating in Europe, which consists mostly of economically developed and politically democratic countries. Meanwhile, ASEAN operates in Southeast Asia, which is diverse economically, politically, and culturally. Economically, it comprises of both lower income countries such as Laos and high income countries such as Singapore (World Economic Outlook 2018 in IMF, 2018). Politically it consists of socialist, semi-democratic and fully democratic countries. And culturally, it has a wide variety of ethnic groups, languages and religions. Looking at these two different regional organizations, therefore, is expected to better capture the possible variation of roles among individual regional organizations.

For the EU, we base our research on primary documents of the different EU institutions, including Parliament's resolutions, Commission's communications, Council's conclusions, reports and briefings. For EU MS, we base the research on their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). For ASEAN, data is collected from VNRs, national development plans and other official documents from individual countries; reports and official websites of key developmental stakeholders in Southeast Asia, such as the UNESCAP, ASEAN, the UNDP, the IMF, and the World Bank; in-depth interviews with the ASEAN Secretariat (ASEC), the UN ESCAP, and the UNDP Indonesia; and participant observation in the Multi-stakeholder Forum on Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. The two case studies were selected since a comparative approach allows us to understand whether regional organizations play different roles in the SDGs and how these roles are operationalized.

The European Union and the implementation of the SDGs

The EU is a unique political system since it is neither a full federal state nor a pure intergovernmental organization. Three institutions—the European Council, European Parliament and European Commission—are important for policy-making in the EU. The European Council brings together all heads of state or government of the 27 EU MS. It serves to set the agenda, political direction and priorities of the Union. The European Commission is responsible both for proposing legislations and for implementing them, as well as for the day-to-day operations of the EU. It operates as an executive with 27 Commissioners, appointed for five years (Lisbon Treaty, 2007, Art. 9D). The European Parliament is the EU's only directly-elected institution and counts 705 Members of Parliament elected for 5 years (Lisbon Treaty, 2007, Art. 9A).

The EU political system (Hix & Hoyland, 2011) involves multiple levels of government across which responsibilities for policy areas are distributed (Marks et al.,

1996). The competences conferred upon the EU are classified into three principal categories: (1) exclusive competences; (2) shared competences; and (3) supporting competences. Where a matter falls within the EU's exclusive competence, the EU only can legislate to the exclusion of EU MS action. In the areas of shared competences, both the EU and the EU MS are entitled to regulate, although the EU enjoys a right of pre-emption. Finally, there are competences to coordinate, support or supplement the EU MS' actions. These latter are the weakest in terms of EU's power to legislate.

The European Union and the translating role

As far as we could observe, the EU has not yet developed an overarching and integrated SDGs implementation strategy, despite repeated calls to do so. Shortly after the adoption of the UN SDGs, the European Parliament called on the previous Commission to "come forward with a proposal for an overarching Sustainable Development Strategy" (European Parliament, 2016). In its first formal response to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the European Commission did not present any strategy to achieve the SDGs, nor an intention to do so (European Commission, 2016). The Commission stated that, in essence, the SDGs were already being pursued by the EU through its existing policies and committed to be "a frontrunner in implementing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs", along with EU MS in accordance with the subsidiarity principle.

Since then, the Parliament and the Council have repeatedly called on the Commission to develop an overarching and comprehensive SDGs implementation strategy. In 2019, the European Commission issued the Reflection Paper "Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030" (2019a) presenting three scenarios on how to best achieve the SDGs: develop an overarching EU-wide SDGs implementation strategy; continue mainstreaming the SDGs in EU policies; or explore the mainstreaming of the SDGs in EU external policies, relying on multilateral international cooperation. The Commission did not prescribe which scenario to follow and noted that they were only illustrative. Moreover, there was no follow-up or public consultation following the publication of the Reflection Paper. This arguably shows a lack of engagement from the Commission to develop a strategy to achieve the SDGs. Even in areas in which the EU has exclusive competences, it remains largely absent. For example, the EU has exclusive competences in the conservation of marine biological resources under the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). The CFP aims to ensure that fishing and aquaculture are sustainable through, for example, catch limits and fishing licenses. Actions of the EU in this matter therefore de facto influence progress on SDG 14 on Life below water, and more particularly on target 4. So far, the SDGs are not explicitly mentioned in the CFP.

The European Union and the supporting role

We find evidence that the EU plays a minimal supporting role in the implementation of the SDGs.

In 2016, the European Commission presented two work streams to support the implementation of the SDGs in the EU (European Commission, 2016, p. 3): (1) "to fully integrate the SDGs in the European policy framework and current Commission priorities, assess where we stand and identify most relevant sustainability concerns"; (2) "to launch reflection work on further developing our longer term vision and the focus of sectoral policies after 2020, preparing for the long term implementation of the SDGs". In 2017, the Commission launched a Multi-Stakeholder Platform (MSP) on the SDGs to share best practices and to support and advise the Commission and other stakeholders on the implementation of the SDGs. The Council and the Parliament welcomed the creation of the MSP but called for enhanced mainstreaming mechanisms of sustainable development in EU policies and financial instruments (European Parliament, 2017). On 31st December 2019, the mandate of the MSP ended and has not been renewed.

In addition, the EU only provides indirect financial support for the implementation of the SDGs. There is no dedicated instrument to finance the SDGs in the EU, notwithstanding the repeated calls that have been made by, inter alia, the Parliament, the Council and the MSP to reorient the 2021–2027 Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) towards the implementation of the SDGs (European Parliament, 2017; European Council, 2019; MSP, 2018). The MFF is a 7-year framework to regulate the EU's budget and is the main budgetary instrument of the EU. The 2021–2027 MFF, complemented by the NextGenerationEU, a temporary recovery financial instrument, do not directly allocate resources for the SDGs implementation, yet they finance several EU programs that share common goals with the SDGs, some of them making explicit references to the SDGs. The 2021–2027 MFF also requires the Commission to report annually on the implementation of the SDGs in those programs (European Parliament, Council of the European Union & European Commission, 2020). For example, the European Green Deal shares common objectives with the SDGs, such as supplying clean and affordable energy (SDG 7), promoting circular economy and resource-efficient industry (SDGs 9 and 12), ensuring a fair, healthy and environmentally friendly food system (SDGs 2 and 12), reducing greenhouse gases emissions (SDG 13), or preserving and restoring ecosystems and biodiversity (SDGs 14 and 15). The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), supported by the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (EAGF) and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), aims to support farmers, improve agricultural productivity and ensure stable supply of affordable food, and to keep the rural economy alive by promoting jobs in the agricultural sector, in line with SDGs 2 and 8. The Just Transition Fund aims to reduce the social and economic costs of the EU's transition to a climate neutral economy, thus contributing, among others, to SDGs 8 and 10. Financial support for SDG implementation is therefore indirect at the EU level and mainly occurs through programs that inherently contribute to the SDGs.

The European Union and the coordinating role

The coordination role of the EU consists of vertical coordination between the EU and EU MS and of horizontal coordination within EU institutions.

Table 1 Overview of different types of EU MS in relation to cooperation with the EU. Source: authors

Quality	Quantity	
	Few	Many
Superficial	Bulgaria, Czechia, France, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, Slovakia	Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Slovenia
Strong	Estonia, Finland, Malta, Spain	Austria, Denmark, Germany, Latvia, Portugal, Romania, Sweden

The degree of vertical coordination and cooperation partly relies on the position of EU MS towards the EU to take up a coordinating role on the SDGs. In order to assess this, we looked at how EU MS were referring to cooperation with the EU to achieve the SDGs and we measured this based on EU MS VNRs by focusing on two dimensions: the quantity and the quality of references to cooperation with the EU. Each dimension is divided into two categories. We used the distinction few/many with regard to the quantity dimension (number of references to EU; more than 5 references resulting in a code of "many") and the distinction superficial/strong with regard to the quality dimension (content of references to EU; EU MS that see the EU as a pillar of their SDG implementation coded as "strong").

Table 1 Four types of vertical of cooperation between the EU and EU MS. First (few-superficial), a total of nine EU MS give only a few and superficial references to EU cooperation, often referring only to EU statistics as a comparison to their own data, or mentioning their participation in European projects such as Erasmus + or Natura2000. In the second category (many-superficial), seven EU MS report many of the same type of references, but more often throughout their VNR. In the third category (few-strong), four countries make only a few, but strong references to the EU. Spain, for example, states that 'within the EU it is necessary for the EU MS and European institutions to bring to bear their political leadership in order to place the SDGs at the center of the European project' (Government of the Kingdom of Spain, 2018, p. 115). Finally, seven EU MS (many-strong) made such references both strongly and often. Sweden is one of them, stating that it makes an effort to place the 2030 Agenda at the core of EU policy and emphasizing its support for both internal and external EU policies to achieve the SDGs (Government of Sweden, 2017, p. 67). This shows that there is variation on how EU MS see the EU as the main coordinating body for the implementation of the SDGs.

In addition, there is no dedicated mechanism at the EU-level for EU MS to coordinate on the SDGs, although existing and well-established soft law practices among EU institutions ensure it to a certain degree, through the 'Open Method of Coordination' or expert groups for example (European Parliament, 2019, p. 73). With the new Commission, the coordination role of the European Commission might nonetheless be strengthened through integrating the SDGs in the European Semester:

current President von der Leyen's assigned to the Commissioner for Economy Paolo Gentiloni the role of "contribut[ing] to turning the European Semester cycle of economic governance into an instrument that integrates the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals" (European Commission, 2019b, p. 4). The European Semester is a multi-annual mechanism which enables EU MS to coordinate their economic policies and to monitor progress at specific times throughout the year.

The European Semester 2020 was marked by the inclusion of the SDGs and might become an important instrument for EU coordination on the SDGs. First, the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy replaced the Annual Growth Survey, the main tool for setting economic and social priorities for the EU, and shows a shift in priorities by stressing the transition towards a sustainable and inclusive economy (European Commission, 2019c). In addition, the Country Reports (which underline, for each EU MS, the economic situation and forecasts, the progress regarding the implementation of the Country-specific recommendations (CSRs) from the previous years, and the reform priorities needed) explicitly integrate the SDGs: SDG-relevant policies and challenges are identified across the Country Reports, and a new annex sets out the individual EU MS' performance on achieving the SDGs, including a 5-year trend based on Eurostat data.[1] A preliminary assessment of the first 2020 Country Reports shows, however, that the links between policy developments and the SDGs are not systematically made or remain superficial. One could interpret this as the Commission failing to really operationalize the SDGs in the European Semester. Yet, it shows proactive efforts to put sustainable development on the agenda. Similar to the 'socialization' of the European Semester between 2011 and 2016, which took some time to fully operationalize, the European Semester is gradually adopting a sustainability approach. The European Semester is thus a potentially powerful mechanism to strengthen vertical coordination on the SDGs in the EU, since recommendations on the SDGs can potentially be integrated into country-specific recommendations.

Horizontally, there is no one dedicated EU mechanism for horizontal coordination on the SDGs between the EU institutions, but several practices among EU institutions ensure it to a certain degree (European Parliament, 2019, pp. 69–72). The Commission established an Inter Service Group on the SDGs to gather Directorates General on cross-sectoral topics. In addition, the Council created a 'Working Party (WP) on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' in November 2017 to improve horizontal coordination, in particular to bring together the external and domestic dimensions of SDGs implementation. It is composed of representatives from each Member State and chaired by the delegate of the country holding the rotating 6-month presidency of the Council, and countries are encouraged to have representatives from the internal and external policy dimensions participating. Moreover, the Commission's First Vice-President (FVP) has been assigned a lead coordinating role on sustainable development issues and created the Sustainable Development Project Team, gathering Commissioners twice a year to discuss

[1] To consult 2020 European Semester Country Reports, see: https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2020-european-semester-country-reports_en.

cross-cutting issues. More recently, in 2019, President von der Leyen included in all Mission Letters to Commissioners that "each Commissioner will ensure the delivery of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals within their policy area. The College as a whole will be responsible for the overall implementation of the Goals", thereby furthering the intention of the Commission to mainstream the SDGs into all EU policy areas. This might signal a positive shift in the Commission's ambition to achieve the SDGs.

The European Union and the monitoring role

On the monitoring and reporting role of the EU, the Commission mandated the Eurostat to conduct regular reporting on EU MS progress on the SDGs as of 2017 (European Commission, 2016). However, the EP underlined that the EU's reporting framework contains gaps on some SDGs and on their interlinkages, and lamented the lack of reporting on the spill-over effects (2019). Similarly, the Council welcomed the Eurostat reports as key documents for measuring EU's progress on the SDGs, but expressed the need to continue developing indicators to monitor the EU's progress and the need for continuous improvement of the database (European Council, 2019). The integration of the SDGs in the European Semester might also constitute an important additional mechanism to monitor EU MS's progress on the SDGs.

Monitoring on the EU level is complemented with monitoring on the EU MS level, since for many of its datasets, Eurostat relies on the data provided by national statistical bureaus. The majority of EU MS rely on their own statistical institutions for data and monitoring achievements on the SDGs. These efforts are guided by guidelines on SDG reporting by the UN Statistical Commission or by guidelines provided by the OECD.

The EU is therefore fulfilling a monitoring role in the governance of the SDGs by governing through indicators, both through the Eurostat and through the integration of reviews on the SDGs into the European Semester Country Reports.

ASEAN and the implementation of the SDGs

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was founded in 1967 by five leaders from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand later joined by Brunei Darussalam, Vietnam, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Cambodia. ASEAN emerged from the need of developing countries in Southeast Asia to promote regional stability and cooperation. However, suspicion towards external powers and existing conflicts among members resulted in an intergovernmental organization where MS retain full power in relations to others within the organization.

This character can be seen in the organizational structure of ASEAN where the highest decision-making body is the ASEAN Summit. The ASEAN Annual Meeting of Foreign Ministers (AMM) and other ministerial meetings are also convened every year to initiate and review policies agreed by the Summit. To support this political process, ASEAN has a secretariat headed by a Secretary General and that

functions as the administrative body responsible for the follow up of the Summit and the Ministerial Meetings as well as the day-to-day activities of ASEAN. However, the ASEAN Secretariat (ASEC) has limited funds and staff, which reflects the dominance of interstate political processes among ASEAN members. In addition, ASEAN decision-making is characterized by the so-called 'ASEAN Way' which is based on consultation and consensus. ASEAN generally can only make a decision if all members agree, or otherwise they agree to disagree (Narine, 1998, p. 202).

In 2003, ASEAN MS declared their vision of establishing a more integrated cooperation in the form of the ASEAN Community by 2020 which later accelerated to 2015. By ASEAN Community, ASEAN aims to become "politically cohesive, economically integrated, and socially responsible" (ASEAN, 2009a). ASEAN Community consists of three pillars—the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio Cultural Community (ASCC). The APSC is responsible for developing peaceful, just, democratic, and harmonious interstate relations in ASEAN (ASEAN, 2009b, p. 6). The AEC is responsible for creating a single market and production base, equitable economic development, and a highly competitive region that is fully integrated into the global economy (ASEAN, 2008, p. 5). Lastly, the ASCC is responsible for promoting "human development, social welfare and protection, social justice and rights, ensuring environmental sustainability, building the ASEAN identity, and narrowing the development gap" (ASEAN, 2009a, p. 1). With its current institutional design, ASEAN has the potential to contribute to the governance of the SDGs in Southeast Asia as it is the main avenue for interstate cooperation in the region and because each of the ASEAN Community pillars is relevant to the SDGs.

ASEAN and the translating role

ASEAN performs a significant role in translating the SDGs to the regional context. ASEAN has the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 as the post-2015 regional integration agenda after the establishment of ASEAN Community in 2015. The document clearly mentions sustainability as one of the visions of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, makes reference to the 2030 Agenda, and explicitly recognizes the complementarity between the two documents (ASEAN, 2015, p. 105). Therefore, taking advantage of the growing partnership between ASEAN and the UN since the ASEAN-UN Summit in 2000, Thailand as the ASEAN coordinator for Sustainable Development Cooperation, initiated cooperation between the ASEAN Secretariat and the UN ESCAP to map complementarities between the ASEAN Vision 2025 and the 2030 Agenda, named as Complementarity Initiative. This mapping exercise highlighted complementarities of goals, values, operational elements, and cross-cutting priority areas between both documents (UNESCAP, 2017, p. 10).

The Complementary Initiative also proposes initiatives to enhance the existing efforts to achieve the goals in each priority area, such as the ASEAN Council for Sustainable Infrastructure, ASEAN Resource Panel to deal with resource management, ASEAN Risk Transfer Mechanism to promote regional resilience, and ASEAN Centre for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue

(ASEAN-CSDSD) (UNESCAP, 2017). All of these initiatives are still under consideration, except the ASEAN-CSDSD that has been established in 2019. Linking to the goal-setting model, ASEAN performs the translating role not only through the Complementarity Initiative as a regional guideline for the implementation of SDGs but also by taking concrete actions to better localize the global vision to the regional context.

ASEAN and the supporting role

ASEAN also performs supporting role in the implementation of SDGs particularly for MS who depend on external supports. However, the loose and minimal institutionalization of ASEAN has direct impacts on the roles it performs. In particular in the area of finance, contributions of MS to the Secretariat rely on an equality principle and therefore align with the ability of the least developed country in the region (ASEAN Charter Article 30.2). By doing so, ASEAN aims to avoid domination of certain countries and to maintain national autonomy of individual MS (Nguitragool & Rüland, 2015, cited in Destradi, 2020), but this principle also has negative consequences on the financing role of the Secretariat. Therefore, ASEAN Secretariat is often said to be underfunded and mostly finances annual meeting and operations of the Secretariat (Destradi, 2020). For other projects, ASEAN prefers to build partnerships with external donors especially from the dialogue partners.

Financing the SDGs in Southeast Asia therefore relies on individual MS. However, the ambitions of the SDGs are not in line with the financial capacity of ASEAN MS, particularly Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar (UN, 2018), leading to a significant financing gap each year in implementing the SDGs (UNDP, 2019). Nonetheless, the ASEAN Infrastructure Fund (AIF) administered by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) offers financing assistance for state and state-guaranteed infrastructure projects in ASEAN. Formed in 2011, the AIF aligns with SDG 9, with the Initiative for ASEAN Integration to narrow the development gap among MS (IAI), and with the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025. To reach its objective, however, the AIF needs to reach more countries and sectors as so far, 67% of this fund is used for the energy sector and 75% of the fund borrower is Indonesia (ADB, 2019, p. 5).

ASEAN demonstrates a more significant role in terms of policy and technical supports. ASEAN uses declarations, guidelines, codes of conduct, or policy recommendations to manage interstate relations, which reflects its preference for norm-setting rather than rule-making. On the SDGs, ASEAN prefers supporting MS through policy recommendations on how to better achieve the SDGs and the ASEAN Vision 2025 simultaneously through the Complementarity Initiative. In a more specific area, ASEAN also adopted Bangkok Declaration on Advancing Partnership in Education for 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in ASEAN, which aims to mainstream SDGs in ASEAN; promote Goal 4 on education; and advance partnerships to achieve the SDGs (ASEAN, 2019a).

In mobilizing technical supports, ASEAN uses two mechanisms. The first is providing a venue for policy dialogue between ASEAN members and potential partners, which is expected to offer mutual learning, sharing of best practices, and

mobilization of resources. Among the well-established policy dialogue forum is the ASEAN-China-UNDP Symposium held annually since 2016 (ASEAN, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2018; UNDP, 2019). The symposium is highly valued as it invites various stakeholders from MS, China, UN agencies, and other non-state actors to discuss various issues in the implementation of the SDGs in the region. ASEAN has also started policy dialogue with the EU since 2017 through ASEAN-EU Dialogue on Sustainable Development which discusses various issues and possible cooperation in those areas. From this cooperation, ASEAN received 200 million euro of financial assistance between 2014 and 2020 and is prepared to receive additional assistance for its ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance facility which is aligned with the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2020).

ASEAN also has forum with various UN agencies which are central in the implementation of the SDGs in the region. In 2018, ASEAN held a sharing session on the SDGs with the IMF, the World Bank, and the UN Secretary General to promote multilateral collaboration in the implementation of the SDGs in the region (ASEAN, 2018). In 2019, ASEAN also used the Joint Review Meeting of ASEAN-UNICEF Framework Agreement of Cooperation to discuss possible joint action between the two organizations (ASEAN, 2019b). With the UN Women, ASEAN also cooperated on gender, peace, governance, and data to monitor the progress on the SDGs (ASEAN, 2019b). Even the High-Level Brainstorming Dialogue (HLBD) on Enhancing Complementarities between the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and United Nations 2030 Agenda, which are part of the process in translating the 2030 Agenda to the ASEAN context, could be seen as a forum for policy dialogue which offers various policy recommendations and initiatives to support the implementation of SDGs in the region.

The second mechanism for ASEAN in mobilizing resource is in more concrete forms of technical assistance to MS, although these are also supported by partners. The ASEAN SDGs Frontrunner Cities Program aims to develop capacity of selected ASEAN cities in promoting best practices on clean and green development (UN, 2020). This program is sponsored by Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF) created in 2006 to support ASEAN integration. Arguably, the supporting role that ASEAN can play is not hindered by the organization's limited financial capacity as it also relies on delegating or enlisting the help of other entities that have more financial and technical capacities to support MS in the implementation of the SDGs through partnership, thereby also progressing on SDG 17.

ASEAN and the coordinating role

ASEAN actively participates in the coordination of SDGs both horizontally and vertically. Horizontally, ASEAN conducts coordination within ASEAN and between ASEAN and other actors at the regional level. Within the ASEAN Secretariat, the Poverty Eradication and Gender Division (PEGD) is the coordinator for the SDGs. Its role is to coordinate, share updates, and follow up on the complementarity document (ASEC, 2020). Other divisions contribute to dealing with the SDGs depending on their issue areas (ASEC, 2020). A challenge in the internal coordination is

the pillarization structure of the ASEAN Community. Although the SDGs also have three pillars, these are not compartmentalized into separate goals. Rather, they are incorporated in each goal of the SDGs. This means that there should be coordination among pillars in ASEAN particularly in tackling cross-pillar issues. For this purpose, ASEAN established the ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) whose role involves connecting the process at the Summit and the operations at the ASEAN Secretariat led by each ASEAN Community Council.

In relations with other actors, ASEAN appointed Thailand as the ASEAN Coordinator for Sustainable Development Cooperation. The role of Thailand is to lead the agenda-setting and the mobilization of resources to promote SDGs in the region. The above-mentioned Complementarity Initiative is the result of Thailand's initiative to work with the UNESCAP. Thailand also initiated Special Lunch on Sustainable Development attended by MS, dialogue partners, and the IMF to advance the SDGs in the region (ASEAN-Thailand Secretariat, 2019). With Thailand as the focal point, it is clear whom to contact when it comes to the SDGs in ASEAN and it strengthens the role of ASEAN as a coherent regional organization.

With regard to vertical coordination, ASEAN coordinates with the UN within the framework of ASEAN-UN comprehensive partnership guided by the ASEAN-UN five-year Plan of Action, led by the ASEAN-UN Summit, operationalized by the Secretariat-to-Secretariat cooperation, and supported by the UN representative to ASEAN and the ASEAN participation as an observer in the UN. A hybrid form of vertical coordination between ASEAN and the UN could be seen in the annual HLBD since 2017. Different from the ASEAN-UN Summit, the HLBD focuses on safeguarding the implementation of the Complementarity Initiative, meaning that it acts as a follow-up of ASEAN's translating role of the 2030 Agenda. It is hybrid in that it also invites UN regional commission and agencies and other key partners at the regional and international levels. As for ASEAN vertical coordination with MS, it is conducted through the ASEAN Forum on SDGs with National Development Planning Agencies. The forum is important as it connects the coordinating institution in individual MS as the forefront in the implementation of SDGs in the region. This forum could help national agencies have a regional view in looking at their achievement on the SDGs, coordinate efforts, and learn from other implementing bodies from other countries. As a recent initiative, this forum has been only conducted once in 2019 with plans to have the second forum in 2020.

ASEAN and the monitoring role

Finally, ASEAN played a more limited role in the area of monitoring. ASEAN MS seem to prefer reporting directly to HLPF at the global level to monitor their progress annually. All ASEAN MS are part of the HLPF, except Myanmar which will only join in 2021. At the regional level, the UNESCAP as the UN ECOSOC subsidiary body for Asia and the Pacific actually offers a venue for the reporting mechanism at the regional level through the Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD). However, not all Southeast Asian countries use this regional mechanism to report progress. Only Indonesia and Thailand consistently participate

in this forum. There is also a sub-regional mechanism in Southeast Asia as the preparatory meeting for the APFSD but it could also be a venue for reporting progress in each Southeast Asian country named as the Southeast Asia Multi-Stakeholder Forum on Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. In 2020, Brunei Darussalam, Lao PDR, Thailand, Myanmar, and Malaysia reported their SDGs implementation progress to this forum.

ASEAN itself does not have a specific mechanism of reporting progress. However, its ASEAN Forum on SDGs with National Development Planning Agencies also serves the function of reporting progress in individual MS, although for the purpose of brainstorming rather than forcing compliance (ASEC, 2020). The ASEAN-China-UNDP symposium also serves a similar function on a broader scale as it also involves non-state actors. As for the top-down monitoring mechanism, ASEAN is still developing indicators and tools to track changes quantitatively and is limited to economic indicators only. For this reason, ASEAN relies on data from ESCAP for the quantitative monitoring. ASEAN, however, conducts various qualitative monitoring. Each division monitors the progress on the SDGs relevant to their issue areas. For gender issues, for example, ASEAN has the ASEAN Gender Outlook. It also has internal mechanisms to monitor the implementation of declarations and other non-binding instruments issued by ASEAN (ASEC, 2020).

Discussion

The analysis shows that regional organizations do play different roles in the implementation of the SDGs. For each role, we found evidence of activities and initiatives developed by regional organizations. We also observe that some of the roles are not crystalized and display a degree of trial and error in developing regional responses with regard to the implementation of the SDGs. Table 2 compares the EU and ASEAN on the four different roles and shows that both regional organizations have put in place several institutional mechanisms with regard to the SDGs.

Concerning the translating role, we observe that there is no unified strategy towards the SDGs in the EU. This is partially a result of the complex institutional design of the EU in which the Commission, Council and Parliament are involved in developing such a strategy and do not hold similar positions vis-à-vis the SDG agenda. The Council's and the Parliament's positions on the SDGs are generally similar and more ambitious than the Commission's, especially the previous Juncker Commission which argued that the SDGs are already integrated in current EU priorities, policies and financial instruments. Concretely, the previous Commission did not reframe its policies or instruments in SDG terms, even in areas in which the EU has exclusive competences such as fisheries and the governance of marine resources (SDG 15). In contrast to the EU, ASEAN has developed a specific mechanism to facilitate the translation of the SDGs at the regional level. ASEAN has focused on identifying the complementarity between the ASEAN Vision 2025 and the 2030 Agenda in order to help MS achieve both agendas simultaneously. ASEAN thereby positions itself as an intermediary in translating the SDGs to the regional context, a position which is shaped by its growing partnership with the UN in the past two

Table 2 Roles of the EU and ASEAN in goal-setting model for the SDGs. Source: authors

Role	European Union	ASEAN
Translating role	- No explicit SDG strategy	- Complementarity Initiative linking ASEAN Vision 2025 and 2030 Agenda

Supporting role	- Former MSP on the SDGs
	- Calls to integrate SDGs in Multi-Annual Financial Framework
	- Indirect financing through EU budget
		- Financial support:
		  - ASEAN Integration Fund (AIF)
		  - Indirect (ASEAN-brokered) financial and technical assistance from dialogue partners
		- Policy support:policy recommendation (ex. Bangkok Declaration); policy dialogue: ASEAN-China-UNDP Symposium

Coordinating role		
- Vertical coordination	- MS' references to EU cooperation in VNRs - Open Method of Coordination - European Semester as potential coordination mechanism	- The High-Level Brainstorming Dialogue - ASEAN Forum on SDGs with National Development Planning Agencies
- Horizontal coordination within the regional organization	- Inter Service Group on the SDGs - Council Working Party on 2030 Agenda - Commission's First Vice-President as lead coordinator on sustainable development - Sustainable Development Project Team - Inclusion of SDGs in Commissioners' work	- Poverty Eradication and Gender Division as SDGs coordinator - Joint Consultative Meetings of ASEAN Coordination Council
Monitoring role	- MS national statistical agencies - Eurostat - European Semester - VNRs at HLPF	- MS national statistical agencies - Development of an ASEAN monitoring mechanism and indicators (in progress) - UN ESCAP - VNRs and HLPF (preferred to APFSD) - Qualitative reviews from ASEAN divisions on progress on their pertaining SDGs

decades and its comparative advantage as a regional organization with operational and bridging capacities as well as expertise in the region.

The supporting role remains minimal in the EU and ASEAN. The EU used the MSP on the SDGs as an intermediary to help on their implementation, yet this platform does not exist anymore. Besides, there have been repeated calls to reorient the EU Multi-Annual Financial Framework towards the SDGs, but the implementation of the SDGs in the EU remains indirectly financed through different EU programs. ASEAN's supporting role is very much shaped by its institutional design as an intergovernmental organization with limited transfer of power from the MS. As a result, ASEAN's role is more apparent in its norm-setting strategy and is very limited in financial supports. ASEAN has introduced various policy recommendations and guidelines to help MS in implementing the SDGs. However, in terms of financial and technical support, ASEAN positions itself more as a broker that helps connect MS with potential sources of financing and expertise, as is the case with the ASEAN-China-UNDP symposium aimed to bring experts from China to support SDGs localization in Southeast Asia.

On the coordinating role, the EU is increasingly involved in vertical coordination with EU MS and in horizontal coordination at EU level. As of vertical coordination, EU MS make references to cooperation with the EU for the implementation of the SDGs, although to various degrees, and the European Commission is integrating the SDGs in the European Semester. As of horizontal coordination within the EU, several mechanisms exist to coordinate on issue areas related to the SDGs including through the Inter Service Group on the SDGs, the Council's Working Party on the 2030 Agenda, the coordinating role of the Commission's First Vice President, the Sustainable Development Project Team, and the inclusion of the SDGs in Commissioners' mandates. Future developments remain to be analyzed, but the new Commission seems more proactive than the previous one in integrating the SDGs into the Commission's work. ASEAN capitalizes on its bridging capacity as a regional organization/hub to conduct coordination horizontally with other actors at the regional level and vertically with the UN and MS. International coordination within the ASEAN secretariat is led by the Poverty and Gender Eradication Division (PEGD), meanwhile external coordination with other actors in the region is led by Thailand as ASEAN Coordination for Sustainable Development Cooperation. Vertical coordination with the UN is conducted annually through the High-Level Brainstorming Dialogue (HLBD), meanwhile vertical coordination with MS is conducted annually through the ASEAN Forum on SDGs with National Development Planning Agencies.

Lastly, on the monitoring role, the EU is more involved, especially as it has used the Eurostat as a means to govern through indicators, which also serve as inputs for the SDG reviews in the European Semester Country Reports. Yet, EU MS still play an important role in monitoring the SDGs through national statistical agencies and their VNRs at HLPF. ASEAN's monitoring role is shaped by state's preference to report directly to HLPF rather than utilizing regional mechanisms as a medium that leads to global reporting. ASEAN so far prefers to act as a supporting organization by partnering with the UNESCAP which has more expertise and a well-established monitoring system.

In sum, both regional organizations develop each role to different degrees. Further research needs to focus on what explains this variation. One obvious explanation would focus on the level of development or institutionalization of regional organizations. However, our research does not point in that direction. EU and ASEAN score differently on the degree to which they are institutionalized, however, as pointed out above, ASEAN has developed certain roles more than the EU while, purely based on the degree of institutionalization, one would expect the EU to have developed each role more prominently than ASEAN. Even in areas in which the EU holds exclusive competence, such as fisheries, it does not develop the four roles further. A possible explanation lies in the fact that the SDGs might present opportunities for less operationalized regional organizations to further develop competences and institutionalize, while for very institutionalized regional organizations such as the EU, they may rather constitute a challenge, since the SDGs touch on many different policy areas for which competences are already fixed between the regional organizations and the member states. In other words, the complexity of the SDGs might offer certain less institutionalized regional organizations freedom to further develop and explore regional cooperation through the four roles identified.

Conclusion

What role do regional organizations play in global governance through goal-setting in general and in the implementation of the SDGs more specifically? To answer this question, we constructed a conceptual model to analyze the role of regional organizations in the implementation of the SDGs. We distinguish four potential roles that regional organizations can play: the translating role, supporting role, coordinating role and monitoring role. For each role, we conducted two in-depth case studies based on a document analysis of primary and secondary sources, voluntary national reviews and interviews. The comparative case design allows us to explore how and to what degree regional organizations play a role in the implementation of the SDGs. Both the EU and ASEAN are involved in the governance of the SDGs, yet they fulfil and operationalize their four roles in different ways. Both the EU and ASEAN are currently exploring and experimenting with different institutional mechanisms to contribute to the implementation of the SDGs. This experimenting results in the establishment of new institutional mechanisms and initiatives. In our paper, we identify more than 10 new instruments and institutional mechanisms for each regional organization. How effective these new instruments and institutional mechanisms are needs to be seen. Future research should concentrate on analyzing some of the mechanisms in-depth and focus on explaining variation between regional organizations' roles. The study of international organizations has identified the importance of institutional design in understanding the roles of an international or regional organization. Yet, with the complexity of global governance, especially on the SDGs, institutional design in the form of the level of institutionalization of regional organizations alone does not explain variation of their implementation of the SDGs. The EU, as the most institutionalized regional organization, does not approach each role in a more in-depth way than ASEAN. Other factors, such as regional organizations'

relations with international organizations, with their member states, and with other actors, are also important in shaping their role in global governance, especially on the SDGs.

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Conflict of interest The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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