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Common But Differentiated Governance: Making the SDGs Work

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

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SDGs: Between universality and diversity

This article takes up the unique challenge of governing universal goals. With governance covering the institutions, instruments, processes and roles of actors in the implementation of goals, we argue that any one governance style would fall short at national level and that differentiated governance approaches are needed for implementation. There also is some convergence among scholars towards a more comprehensive approach, called metagovernance: combining the most appropriate of different governance styles.

The importance of governance for SD is uncontested, after over 20 years of research on the issue. But the forthcoming Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are posing particular challenges on the governance aspects of their implementation. The key challenge is that, for the first time in history, there will be universally applicable goals and targets for all aspects of sustainable development (SD) (in contrast to the sectoral goals and targets under global conventions such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)).

While the SDGs as proposed in 2014 by the Open Working Group (OWG) are qualitative expressions, and their sub-goals (or “targets” as usually referred to) are predominantly qualitative, all have a desired direction, which mostly comes with a target year or timeline (2020 or 2030). Some sub-goals/targets are quantified. As the debate has shown, and is even clearer when it comes to the indicators for measuring progress, which are currently under development, the more an agenda becomes concrete, the greater the challenge between universally applicable goals and targets, and the need for diversification at the national or other levels of implementation, including different quantified targets.

CBDR: First attempt to capture both, but ...

This challenge was already identified in 1992, and enshrined as Principle 7 “Common but Differentiated Responsibility (CBDR)” in the Rio Declaration. However, this Principle has been increasingly used with a focus on financing for development only, also in the debate on Means of Implementation for the post-2015 development agenda, and is in general stagnating in a North-South dichotomy. Indeed, the world is different than in 1992, be it only the evolution of “emerging economies” and their rising middle classes.

An overall proxy for CBDR has been suggested in the context of sustainable production and consumption (SCP) as “contraction and convergence,” which also points to the responsibility of developed countries beyond providing financial means, namely working in their own realm on their ecological footprint. On the flip side, the issue of population growth cannot be neglected; nor can the fact that some middle-income countries (MICs) have a higher total footprint or greenhouse gas (GHG) emission levels than high-income countries, though not (yet) per capita. The aim is to achieve a higher point on the Human Development Index (HDI), for example, while only modestly increasing the environmental footprint. Differentiated development trajectories would mean that all countries aim to reach “sustainable human development,” as the UN Development Programme (UNDP) illustrates in its

Human Development Report 2013. Paragraph 247 of the Rio+20 Outcome document touches upon the concept of CBDR, but it does not follow the North-South divide, and with that enables a finer differentiation between countries, namely according to their capacities.

The principle of ‘Common But Differentiated Governance’ (CBDG): Using metagovernance

In order to implement the SDGs and targets, each government will not only need to define specified targets and (sub-)timelines reflecting its national circumstances, but also need to design corresponding processes for implementation. We need “mindful approaches” and means to get from A to B, whether it is called a plan, strategy, roadmap, action plan or transition pathway.

As originally identified in Agenda 21 and confirmed ever since, SD policies are necessarily developed and implemented in a multi-sector, multi-level and multi-actor setting, due to the holistic character of sustainability. Other key elements to take into account are the knowledge dimension, including to improve the science-policy interface and reflexivity (continuous reflection on decisions), and the time dimension, including intergenerational justice, and in particular bringing the long-term perspective into predominantly short-term mechanisms of politics and economy. All these are dimensions of governance that will need to be considered and tackled in future “mindful approaches” for implementing the SDGs.

While every country has a different “starting point” due to constitutional settings, traditions, culture and political practice, empirical research on governance for SD suggests that countries (or entities at other levels) tend to achieve only limited progress with a single approach or governance style, and eventually take up additional “modes” of governance. This points to the governance approach for implementing the SDGs we are proposing: metagovernance or the art of designing and managing diversified combinations of governance styles, also denoted as “the governance of governance.”

Metagovernance is not a governance style, but an approach aiming at finding smart combinations of hierarchical, network and market governance. It is a way to combine bottom-up and top-down; it makes network governance, market governance and hierarchical governance work together in a particular way for a particular situation and allows for different governance at different levels. The metagovernance approach suggests to abstain from selecting one main governance style a priori, but to develop instead tailor-made combinations of styles which are determined after having analyzed the ‘governance environment.’ It can be used for analyzing an existing situation and for designing and managing new governance approaches.

Taking this into account, we are suggesting introducing a CBDG principle: Common But Differentiated Governance. In seeking to define “common,” the OWG agreed to have both stand-alone goals on governance as well as governance-related goals and targets as part of the thematic goals. Those will have to be translated in a “differentiated” way when implementing the thematic goals.

Conclusions and recommendations

With our proposed introduction of a CBDG principle we seek to dissolve the dichotomy between developed and developing countries that has come to connote CBDR. We want to bring it back to the core of the Principle as stated in the Rio Declaration: “States have common but differentiated responsibilities.” Applying “common but differentiated” to governance touches less upon the issue of greater historical and/or recent burden (on the environment) and related responsibility, but focuses on implementation (of whatever specific level of targets). It points directly to the countries and other levels where the work of implementation will need to take place. Governance is hence a good example where rather doubtlessly Paragraph 247 of the Rio+20 Outcome document is demonstrated.

A metagovernance approach to SDG implementation would explicitly take into account “different national realities and capacities” (and respect national policies and priorities). The point of metagovernance is threefold: a) the recognition of the strength and weaknesses of each style as “normal” and b) taking this into account from the outset when c) mindfully combining ideas and arrangements from different approaches. It is grounded in existing cultures and traditions, but has a transformative agenda: Countries have a certain starting point in (combinations of) governance styles, but are advised in adding others to the cake. Standardized recipes (“best practices”) should be dealt with carefully, while learning from peer nations (considering “good practices”) should be a priority.

To support transitions towards SD, governance principles need to be applied such as reflexivity, flexibility and long-term thinking, and multi-sector, -level and -actor governance. On each relevant administrative or geographical level, governance design should begin with stock-taking of the governance environment, taking into account the specificities of each nation/region/city, i.e. analysing the existing governance arrangements including what has worked historically and where are the gaps and obstacles. For example, trying to force a “purist” form of network SDG governance might miss cases where the hierarchical segment of the governance system is willing to constructively engage on an issue. Governments need to work on improving horizontal coordination (between government departments) and vertical coordination (the linkages between vertical levels), as well as on improving communication with citizens and invigorating understanding, ownership and engagement.

It is advisable to establish support bodies/networks that help in design, review and evaluation of specific governance approaches for SDG implementation. Sustainable Development Commissions mirroring the multi-sector, -level and –actor situation have been successful supporters of transitions and watchdogs of such processes in a number of countries. Governments could also team up with others and set up peer review processes on SDG implementation. This might take the form of expert-type of peer reviews, as practised between OECD countries, or more stakeholder-based peer reviews, as some countries with a functioning SD strategy have performed.

This article concentrates on the governance for implementing the SDGs on national and other sub-global levels, and therefore rather on the ‘differentiated’ than on the ‘common’ part of the governance framework. However, SDG (meta)governance should be developed, managed and maintained at all levels of administration, in order to fulfil the ambition of implementing the SDGs within this generation.

Opinions in this piece reflect the personal views of the authors.

An extended Briefing Note version of this article can be downloaded [here](#). A full paper is forthcoming.

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