



# Global goals and international agreements

## Lessons for the design of the Sustainable Development Goals

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### Abstract

After years of debate and dialogue at the international level, it's possible that Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)-fatigue will lead to settling for practical, achievable goals and targets over ambitious principles that strengthen norms and give national groups a further point of leverage. Exhaustion from international processes, and short deadlines for national targets, could truncate the needed dialogue at the national level in favour of a technocratic process to determine national targets. Drawing evidence from over 150 pieces of literature on international agreements, this paper proposes lessons for the design of the SDGs. The key message is that we should not let practicality blunt our ambition, but instead take time to make sure that global goals can be used for real problem solving around the world. It suggests we may need to look at the SDGs as closer analogues to international human rights and environmental agreements than international programmes or, even, than their predecessors, the Millennium Development Goals.

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## Executive Summary

As we come ever closer to the final negotiation and agreement of a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is likely that there will be many calls to make sure they are practical, reasonable and measurable. This report suggests that we may need to look at the SDGs in a different light: as closer analogues to international human rights and environmental agreements than international programmes or, even, than their predecessors, the Millennium Development Goals.

The report examines evidence from international agreements and other international initiatives to derive lessons for the design of the SDGs. Examining over 150 pieces of literature, this report has four key messages:

- **“Practicality” should not blunt ambition in the final stages of the SDG negotiations:** the high ambition and non-binding nature of SDGs could increase, rather than diminish, their overall and long-term impact. In a variety of cases, higher ambition, lower enforcement agreements have allowed domestic groups to use international norms and frameworks for leverage to generate change (Shaffer and Ginsburg, 2012; Hafner-Burton et al, 2012). Equally, in cases of uncertainty where states may be willing to act but uncertain what they can achieve, non-binding agreements have led to greater change in behaviour than stronger enforcement but lower ambition agreements (Marcoux et al, 2012). The potential for strong normative influence and social mobilisation at a domestic level is increased if the SDGs can articulate principles that can be effectively adapted into political systems and debates. In the final stages of negotiation, groups will need to pay attention to the level of ambition of the goals and the internal normative coherence between the goals.
  - **National platforms need to include diverse stakeholders and have time for genuine dialogue:** The effects of international agreements are “highly contingent” on the dynamics of domestic social mobilisation and existing institutions (Simmons, 2009). As such, it is better that both goals and targets are not overly prescriptive as to *how* they should be achieved. Successful national problem-solving requires intensive debate and dialogue amongst diverse stakeholders to create a platform for experimentation not just “implementation” (Andrews et al, 2012). The national processes will need time and should be built into the timeframe for “implementation” and “results”.
  - **Knowledge and monitoring can *drive* progress, not just measure it:** At the national level, dialogue by diverse stakeholders that creates a more consensual definition of the problem can create a platform for successful problem solving (Andrews, Pritchard and Woolcock, 2012). At the international level, programs of knowledge generation have reduced uncertainty, changed political positions, and ultimately strengthened the effectiveness of environmental regimes (Miles et al, 2002, Breitmeier et al, 2011, Perrin, 2012). There is already significant movement towards improving available statistics through the data revolution. Beyond this, investment in qualitative assessment and the careful design of national and international platforms and networks for dialogue, information sharing and debate are crucial.
  - **SDGs reinforce existing international norms, and can strengthen their existing monitoring platforms:** In the Open Working Group draft, the majority of goals are underpinned by international human rights and environmental law (Norton et al, 2014). To contribute further to strengthening those norms, the SDGs should explicitly indicate the harder law basis of the goals. Beyond an SDG platform for measurement, the SDGs could be used to strengthen the monitoring, verification, and reporting processes in human rights and environmental regimes. Creating stronger ties and potentially drawing greater attention to these can strengthen their work as platforms. In the environmental and sustainability area this can contribute to the programmatic creation of knowledge as a key part of the pathways to success (Breitmeier et al, 2011). In the human rights area this can strengthen the attention given to evidence provided by diverse domestic actors and the potential for social enforcement against human rights violators or laggards (Cole, 2012).
- After years of debate and dialogue at the international level, it’s possible that SDG-fatigue will lead to settling

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for practical, achievable goals and targets over ambitious principles that strengthen norms and give national groups a further point of lever. Exhausted by international processes, and short deadlines for national targets could also truncate the needed dialogue at the national level in favour of a technocratic process to determine national

targets. However, if we take heed of past experience – not just of the MDGs but of international agreement and initiatives – we won't let practicality blunt our ambition, and we'll take the time to make sure that global goals can be used for real problem solving around the world.

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# Introduction

The post-2015 debate has distinct but interrelated facets: the substance of which priority areas should be reflected in goals, how to *design* the goals to make them most effective, and, of course, the *politics* of the goals. Over the past two years the process has focused most significantly on the substance of the goals. Now, the focus has shifted to the detail of how they can best be designed, monitored, and governed.

This report does not analyse the *substance* of which priority areas should be addressed (as so many have), or the *politics* of the current process (on which Evans, 2013 and Green, Hale and Lockwood, 2012 have recently contributed), although the analysis speaks to the politics of global goals and their effects. This report aims to engage the bureaucrats, activists and researchers now thinking through the detailed design of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by reflecting on the experience of previous international processes and agreements and their lessons for the *design* of the SDGs.

The post-2015 debate has been characterised by concern about the inadequate evidence base to inform the design of the SDGs. This arises, in large part, from the temporal, methodological, and practical challenges of assessing the impact of the Millennium Development Goals. This report contributes along with other such efforts (see Green, Hale and Lockwood, 2012 and O'Brien and Gowan, 2012) to widening the scope of evidence to inform the design of the SDGs. In particular, it draws on evidence from research

into international law, regulatory cooperation, and multi-stakeholder initiatives to assess what we can expect from international agreements, and under which conditions they are most likely to have effect.

From over 150 pieces of literature, this report analyses three main areas of effect: political commitment and policy change, normative development, and diffusion of approaches. Within each there are two to four significant conditions for effectiveness that are supported within the literature. Across these, the most significant conditions that emerge are related to social mobilisation and domestic traction, the role of knowledge in shifting political conditions, the spread of norms and specific regulatory approaches through networks of states and other actors, and the difficult balance to be struck between autonomy of development actors, and appropriate levels of direction and measurement. All of these have implications for the next steps of ensuring that the Sustainable Development Goals are designed in a way that generates the most significant and positive effect possible.

The report starts by considering implications to be drawn from the MDGs themselves, before examining the three areas of effect of international agreements and conditions under which they are effective. The report concludes with overarching lessons for the finalisation and implementation of the SDGs.

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# Millennium Development Goals: assessments and implications

A logical first port of call for insight into the design of the SDGs may seem to be their predecessors: the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). There has been a range of efforts to assess the effects of the MDGs including quantitative assessments across all countries and in depth studies of their effects in particular countries and sectors.

The ability to properly assess the ultimate effects of the MDGs (in terms of the achievement of the goals) has been hampered by inadequate data collection at the national level, inadequate investment into rigorous qualitative assessment of their impact (Green, Hale and Rockwood, 2012), the timeframe to see effects (Kenny and Sumner argue that we won't know until 2017-2019 the effects of many of the MDGs), and the correlation of all progress as an impact of MDG commitments (Watkins, 2014).

Due to the difficulties of assessments, many of the studies focus not so much on “ultimate effects” (ie the achievement of the goals themselves and the contribution of the MDGs to those achievements), and rather on the “discursive effect” of the MDGs as they influenced the language, development agendas and policy pronouncements of governments, civil society and donors.

## Ultimate effects

There are goals where real progress has been achieved. However, even in areas of success aligned with the goals – such as reductions in poverty aligned with MDG 1 – the specific contribution of the MDGs – as goal or process – remains difficult to discern. Statistical analysis of areas of progress do not unequivocally support an interpretation that the MDGs have been a key driver of change. The majority of progress under MDG 1 is based solely on progress achieved in East Asia, China in particular, where “the MDGs have had little or no traction” in a discursive sense (Watkins, 2014). In looking at accelerations in progress against the goals, Friedman found that accelerations “tended to occur before the MDG Declaration” (Friedman, 2012). Kenny and Sumner’s analysis of the adoption of MDG priority areas into development commitments found that while there was considerable adoption, there was equal or higher adoption of priorities that weren’t in the MDGs, although they were in the Millennium Declaration (Kenny and Sumner, 2011, 6).

## Discursive effects

The discursive force of the MDGs are, by far, their most commonly agreed strength, arising from their parsimony, “the declaratory power of time-bound, outcome-based and monitorable commitments” (Langford, 2012, 3). The MDGs placed “broad-based poverty reduction at the centre of the development agenda at least in international discussions and policy discourse” (Kenny and Sumner, 2011, 1). They generated discussion and focused attention (Clemens et al, 2007, at 746-7), and encouraged political consensus and provided a focus for advocacy (Lancet Commission, 2010, 991-2). They became the subject of “donor reports and poverty strategies” (Kenny and Sumner, 2011,1). The Lancet Commission found that the MDGs helped particular development agendas that already had strong support behind them by providing additional leverage to campaigns to reduce poverty (MDG 1), and infectious diseases (MDG 6). In other cases, the Commission found that the MDGs revived campaigns on “relatively neglected agendas” including child survival (MDG 4) and gender (MDG 3) (Lancet Commission, 2010, 995).

## Common Critiques

The MDGs have faced consistent areas of criticism. Firstly, the goals were established through a bureaucratic and technocratic process, and therefore contained a series of judgments and assumptions that were not able to be tested through broader input. Secondly, the design of the goals has been criticised from varied perspectives: for its focus on getting children into school rather than learning outcomes, for paying insufficient attention to inequality and inadequately incorporating gender equity throughout the goals (Kabeer, 2011). Thirdly, the goals, targets and indicators reflect a focus on areas that were considered measurable and data that was believed to exist. In some cases, the assumption the data existed was wrong, as it turned out to be at least partially absent and incomplete. In many others, the focus on what was assumed to be measurable or already measured excluded a focus on critical issues or differentiators, such as gender. Lastly, the lack of universality and accountability for donor countries reflected in the lack of targets and indicators for Goal 8 meant that the MDGs reinforced the notion that development occurs primarily through a transfer of resources from north to south (Watkins, 2014, Kenny and Sumner, 2011, Lancet Commission, 2010).

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## Implications for the design of the SDGs

It is many of these failings that the current post-2015 process seeks to remedy – for example, in the wide engagement of stakeholders in their development, the detailed discussions of appropriate substance, the focus on a “data revolution” to change the evidence base for future assessment, and in the adoption of a universal approach.

In responding to these potential failings of the MDGs, the SDGs start to look more like analogies for international human rights and environmental law – aspirational and universalist declarations. As a result, this report considers the kinds of effects that can be achieved through international agreements, and the conditions under which those effects seem to occur.

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# Global goals and international agreements

The SDGs will provide a new set of global goals. They are not a negotiated treaty and therefore will be, at best, a form of soft law. The SDGs look likely to be far wider, more ambitious, and more far-reaching than the MDGs. They have moved far from the managerialist approach that underpinned the MDGs.

At this stage, based on the zero draft, the SDGs will likely focus on universal action by governments without clear and effective enforcement mechanisms – in a way that is analogous to a human rights treaty (Gauri, 2012). The target of the SDGs will be changes in government behaviour around the world, largely at a domestic level, rather than regulating the relationships between states, as in most human rights treaties (Simmons, 2009, 126). In addition to similarities in form, human rights and environmental law have the benefit of incorporating much of the underlying international law basis for the ambitious within the SDGs and therefore align in content.

A second area to draw on in thinking about the potential impact and design of the SDGs are the effects of international regulatory networks, soft law standards

and a range of approaches to development programming, particularly those driven through international partnerships and multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs). The SDGs envisage drawing on multi-stakeholder initiatives to support their governance and implementation.<sup>1</sup> The emergence and operation of a wide range of MSIs in multiple sectors over the past two decades may provide some insights for the design of SDG related MSIs.

From the rapid evidence review conducted for this paper, three main effects of international agreements and initiatives emerged:

- Political commitment, compliance and policy change;
- Normative effects; and
- Diffusion of approaches.

The report examines each of these in turn presenting the kinds of effects that have been documented as a result of international agreements, networks, programs and MSIs, and the conditions under which they are most effective.

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<sup>1</sup> “The multi-stakeholder partnership model has emerged as a promising way to share burdens, catalyse action and bring all relevant actors to bear in addressing specific problems. We need to mobilize more action to deliver on commitments and exploit the full potential of the partnership approach.” (UNGA (2013), par.53; this was also a recommendation of the High-Level Panel: United Nations (2013), 22-3).

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# Political commitment, compliance and policy change

In the past twenty years of scholarship of international law and its effect, the debate has moved past the questions of whether or not international law is law, and whether or not states comply, to investigating the variety of possible effects of different forms of international law, and its relationship to domestic politics (Howse and Teitel, 2010, 127). This broadened view is represented in an increasing range of empirical work within international relations and international law disciplines (see Ginsburg and Shaffer, 2010 and Hafner-Burton, 2012 for overviews of the literature).

International declarations, agreements, and MSIs have varied applications into policy and practice from high adherence to blatant violation and disregard. There are significant questions of causality involved in analysing the impact of international agreements on domestic politics, however there is significant evidence both in the environmental and human rights area that regimes have a significant effect in producing impact but that these vary considerably on a range of factors particularly the type of problem, design of the regime, knowledge production, and the international and domestic context (on the impact of environmental regimes see Breitmeier et al, 2011 and on human rights see Simmons, 2009 and Hafner-Burton, 2012).

This section examines conditions for effectiveness for international agreements including domestic traction, regime design and knowledge.

## Conditions for effectiveness in generating political momentum and leveraging policy change

### Domestic traction

Changes in policy and practice often occur through dynamic interactions between domestic political debate, international agreement, and other forms of international influence. International agreements produce a form of political opportunity structure that can both enable and constrain social movements (Simmons, 2009, 144). Social mobilisation is a critical factor in the implementation of international agreements (Simmons, 2009, Neumayer, 2005). The effects of international agreements are uneven, and depend not just on the extent of social mobilisation but the context for mobilisation. Beth Simmons' extensive quantitative and qualitative work on the impact of international human rights treaties found that the biggest impact in civil and political rights was found not in stable extremes of democracy and autocracy but in the "mass of nations with institutions in flux, where citizens potentially have both the motive and the means to succeed in demanding their rights". Simmons argues that in general external enforcement mechanisms – both material

and reputational – are likely to be "undersupplied and quite weak". Instead, human rights treaties are causally meaningful "to the extent that they empower individuals, groups, or parts of the state with different rights preferences that were not empowered to the same extent in the absence of the treaties" (Simmons, 2009, 125-6). The critical conditions for human rights treaties to be implemented in the set of "middle countries" that Simmons focuses on are: domestic mobilisation and domestic judicial enforcement (Simmons, 2009). Her final conclusion is "Human rights outcomes are **highly** contingent on the nature of domestic demands, institutions and capacities" (Simmons, 2009, 373).

Underlying political and institutional context affects the likelihood of adherence to human rights commitments as well as the impact of soft law standards. Judicial independence has been positively correlated with human rights protection around the world (Keith cited in Shaffer and Ginsburg, 2010, 22), as has democratic institutions more broadly (Neumayer, 2005). Judicial independence, along with the political security of authorities both affect the likelihood of social mobilisation in countries that ratify human rights treaties (Ritter and Conrad, 2012). The regulatory context at a national level affects the impact of soft law standards, including those produced through multi-stakeholder initiatives (Vogel, 2009). A study using a dataset of 31,915 audits of adherence to labour codes of conduct in 14,922 establishments in 43 countries, found that the codes are most effective when they are embedded in "states that have made binding domestic and international legal commitments to protect workers' rights and that have high levels of press freedom and nongovernmental organisation activity" (Toffel et al, 2012).

International agreements can strengthen the position of domestic groups by providing legitimacy, new framing of issues, expanded coalitions of support nationally and internationally, and a government pre-commitment to advocate around (Tsutsui et al, 2012; Simmons, 2009; Dai, 2010). The institutional frameworks around international agreements – such as monitoring and review meetings, conferences, and reports can provide focal points for mobilisation, avenues for both accessing and providing information and knowledge (Dai, 2010, 628-30). Processes of domestic social mobilisation that lead to reform often involve dynamic interaction between outside mobilisation and reform within state structures; mobilisation can create political space for state-based reformers to drive change within formal structures, and political opportunities can allow change to be driven from without (McGee and Gaventa, 2010 and Citizenship DRC, 2011, 14).

Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui found that quantitatively, the larger the number of international NGOs operating in a country, the higher the protection of human rights,

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holding other factors constant. However, this again raises the question of the direction of causality: countries with a commitment to improving human rights may be more likely to allow international human rights actors to register (Ginsburg and Shaffer, 2010, 16). In contrast to the focus on international NGOs, Htun and Weldon developed an original dataset of social movement and VAW policies in 70 countries over four decades and found that “feminist mobilisation in civil society – not intra-legislative political phenomena such as leftist parties or women in government or economic factors like national wealth – accounts for variation in policy development” (Htun and Weldon, 2012, 548). In their research, the autonomy of the feminist groups was the crucial factor in the extent of change in VAW policies, countering the focus on international NGOs as making a significant difference. At times, INGOs may act in response to this reality – consciously or unconsciously: a study of environmental INGO shaming of countries by over 2,000 organisations found that INGOs are more likely to target states where domestic activism is repressed, as a form of strategic substitution, rather than target states with active domestic groups (Murdie and Urpelainen, forthcoming). This is not strong evidence of causality but may reflect an understanding of the critical role of domestic groups in creating the conditions for change, and resulting decisions to target the international level work of outsiders to countries where it doesn’t exist.

Domestic and international normative pressure can interact in creating legal changes. For example, Hill found that CEDAW had a positive, statistically significant impact on women’s political rights in states that ratified the convention (Hill, 2010, 1171). In depth qualitative case studies of CEDAW ratification in both Turkey and Japan found that leaders were concerned with demonstrating their belonging to the international polity – supporting theories of norm cascade and the logic of appropriateness, rather than the logic of consequences (Mello et al, 2011, 356-7). A key difference were that questions of domestic legitimacy were more salient and present in the debate in Japan – potentially reflecting differences in levels of democracy and civil society action (Ibid). Quantitative evidence from cross-national event history analysis and qualitative evidence from the case of Afghanistan was used by Bush to argue that gender quotas – as a specific approach to women’s political rights – are adopted principally because of international rather than domestic pressures – through direct influence in post-conflict societies and indirect inducements through aid, investment and reputation (Bush, 2011, 131).

The ways in which international agreements translate is the basis of domestic contestation. A growing body of evidence on successful problem solving and institutional development describes iterative processes that are

underpinned by trust building, communication and experimentation (Andrews et al, 2012; Adler, Sage and Woolcock, 2009; Ostrom, 2008). Some MSIs have reflected the need for national level problem solving or adaptation in their subsidiary structures, for example the Indonesia Freedom of Association Protocol, or the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. There are signs that the Indonesian example is leading to greater impact for workers than international MSIs that operate in Indonesia due to the relationship building and negotiation between national level stakeholders (Connor et al, forthcoming).

### Problem types and incentives

There are critical differences between the kinds of problems that international agreements seek to address. Global cooperation problems – for example, action on climate change – are the most difficult. Coordination problems – “rules of the road” such as aviation standards – are easier in that they do not require full cooperation for success and there are clear incentives to conform.<sup>2</sup> Lastly, there are agreements that provide a platform for action on common problems at the national level, potentially enhanced by international cooperation or financing.

Scott Barrett argues that by providing appropriate incentives, a cooperation game can be turned into a coordination game if the underlying asymmetries are addressed. However, this can require significant investments from those with more power and resources (Barrett, 2003, 254). Barrett’s analysis of environmental regimes found that a new institution needed to do four things to be effective:

- Create an aggregate gain compared to the current situation (either through legal certainty and/or side payments so that parties are willing to bargain)
- Distribute this gain such that all parties would prefer that the agreement succeeds (distributed through boundaries and multilateral fund access)
- Ensure that each country would lose by not participating, given that all the others agreed to participate (potential for conflict over boundaries, lack of access to multilateral fund)
- Provide incentives for the parties to comply with the treaty (multilateral fund, trade sanctions, choke points)

The two agreements held up as the most successful international environmental regimes are the North Pacific Fur Seal Treaty (1911) and the Montreal Protocol on Substances That Deplete the Ozone Layer (1987). Both treaties effectively addressed issues of incentives and turned cooperation games liable to defection into coordination games.

The Fur Seal Treaty was built around side payments so that signatories would receive a percentage of the harvest

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2 In the case of aviation standards, there are commercial incentives for standardisation due to the inherently international nature of the market: Barrett, 2003, 94.

of others, and these were bigger and more sustainable than what the critical actors were otherwise able to get. This also worked due to a choke point: access to the central London market for fur seal and the reduced value of products if they didn't go through London. This contrasts with the case of fisheries where there is no choke point and so free rider problems are more significant, and relevant side payments are harder to define.

Equally, the Montreal Protocol provided both strong cash and technology transfer benefits, with trade sanctions as an enforcement mechanism. This largely worked due to the political role of the US and incentive to have a strong agreement to prevent free-riding on US action.

Side payments in cooperation contexts help when the underlying game is asymmetric, especially when costs fall particularly asymmetrically. However, they may help ensure everyone gains without actually preventing free riding on the actions of others (Barrett, 2003, 79-80).

### Binding nature and enforcement

Treaty ratification is conditioned by the likelihood of enforcement – both domestic and international – not always in expected ways.

In cases of international co-operation problems with strong incentives for defection or free-riding, binding agreements with strong enforcement may be the best means to ensure that commitments are seen as credible and to prevent defection (Abbott and Snidal, 2000). Such agreements are difficult to negotiate, are liable to stall or collapse (Young, 2010) and can lead to a lowest common denominator level of ambition – or low levels of ratification. An in-depth study of eight environmental areas by Victor, Raustiala and Skolnikoff found high compliance with legally binding agreements, but also that states often agree to modest commitments with which they can easily comply.

States are less likely to ratify if there is likely to be domestic legal enforcement of that treaties' terms (Hathaway, 2007). States with poorer human rights records are much less likely to commit to the International Criminal Court Rome Statute, when those same states are willing to ratify human rights treaties with weak enforcement mechanisms (Dutton, 2012).

In fact, under certain circumstances, non-binding agreements can generate higher ambition and have a greater effect on changing behaviour (Victor, Raustiala and Skolnikoff cited in Shaffer and Ginsburg, 2012, 40; Hafner-Burton et al, 2012, 74). Non-binding agreements can be more effective in circumstances where “states are committed to cooperation but not sure exactly what they can deliver” (Hafner-Burton et al, 2012, 73). For example, weak regulatory capacity is a powerful predictor of ratification of the Basel Convention, which focuses on regulatory enhancement rather than banning hazardous waste while those same states have shown little support for treaties that ban hazardous waste trade altogether (Marcoux et al, 2012, 399).

### Membership and decision-rules

International cooperation and coordination regimes can occur through a variety of fora – inter-governmental, hybrid-private, networks of regulators, and clubs of countries. The approach and membership of a regime can have significant impacts.

A central insight from environmental regimes is that there are potential trade-offs. Wide membership can provide the benefits of broader application of rules, but also produce greater uncertainty and potentially shallower agreement based on a lowest common denominator of agreement. For example the UNFCCC and Kyoto Protocol reflect a low level of ambition. In some cases, starting with small memberships to work on complex problems can develop stronger regimes that can then expand membership. This occurred in the case of the Montreal Protocol. The initial negotiations included the majority of relevant actors, and they created a regime that then contained both incentives to join (through cash and technology transfer) and appropriate enforcement provisions for defection (Benedick, 1998; Barrett, 2003).

Decision-rules also have an effect on ultimate outcomes: majority voting provides greater scope for problem solving than consensus rules (Breitmeier et al, 2011, 594). Along with decision-rules, the distribution of power matters – if it is in favour of those pushing for an agreement – such as the US in the case of the Montreal Protocol – it is likely to contribute to a strong agreement (Benedick, 1998; Breitmeier, at 594). However, if the power balance is in favour of laggards this is likely to undermine the potential for effectiveness, particularly where combined with high uncertainty, malignancy of the problem, and a demanding decision rule, such as consensus (Breitmeier et al, 2011, 594).

Another approach to organising common action is clubs, which generate benefits in the form of social and environmental externalities, private benefits, and branding benefits (Prakash and Potoski, 2010). In exchange for benefits, members are required to report data, adopt regulatory policies, contribute to the costs of developing a new standard, or submit to external verification (Stewart, Oppenheimer, and Rudyk, 2014). Clubs may suffer from free-riding, or club sponsors may dilute the standards over time. Current examples of clubs involved in international action include groups of countries and companies working together to develop new technologies that have climate co-benefits as well as primary economic benefits. Clubs can also be a fruitful way of thinking about accelerating change or sharing technology in areas where certain countries demonstrate higher commitment within the SDGs.

### Knowledge and Monitoring

Knowledge production and effective institutional platforms for monitoring and learning can contribute to the effectiveness of environmental and human rights regimes.

In Breitmeier et al's analysis of the two major datasets on international environmental agreements, they converge

on a finding that a solid knowledge base is an important aspect in most successful international regimes. A solid knowledge base is common to all but one of the pathways leading to high effectiveness, and a weak knowledge base occurs in six of the nine weak pathways (ibid). Moreover, knowledge was crucial to success in the case of both malignant and non-malignant problem types (Ibid). The research further found that malignancy of problem was not critical by itself in determining effectiveness, but if combined with uncertainty, had a “sharply negative effect in term both of the behavioural change and of movement in the direction of the collective optimum” (Breitmeier et al, 2011, 584) for example in cases such as the Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR), Mediterranean Action Plan, International Whaling Commission, and climate negotiations (Miles et al, 2002; Breitmeier et al 2011, 588). Similarly, Oran Young’s analysis of case studies of environmental regimes found that knowledge played a significant role as an exogenous factor for the success of a regime – if aligned with endogenous factors such as a balance of adaptability and stability (Young, 2010).

Breitmeier et al find “a considerable amount of evidence indicating that programmatic activities (such as building a base of consensual knowledge and joint management of functions like monitoring and assessment) ... can become important tools for enhancing regime effectiveness over time” (Breitmeier et al, 2011, 598). This aligns with evidence from national reform efforts that clear problem identification – arrived at, in part, through dialogue – is required as a platform for experimentation and adaptation (Andrews et al, 2012, 15). At the international level, the Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollution, the Montreal Protocol and the Mediterranean Action Plan are all cases where “new knowledge led to a change in actor perceptions of the political structure of the problem, by and large in the direction of a more benign interpretation” (Miles et al, 2002, location 5844 in Kindle version).

In the case of the LRTAP, Perrin found that “an intensive exposure to usable knowledge [including on the health risks of air pollution] in the institutional bodies of a regime has a positive impact on the international environmental commitment behaviour of countries with respect to transboundary air pollution” (Perrin, 2012, 67). For knowledge to be useable it needed to both align with Haas’ criteria of credibility, legitimacy, and saliency and to be transmitted through direct exposure to negotiators, as well as reinforced by networks of experts and civil society (Perrin, 2012). Miles et al found that the existence of an epistemic community can enhance the potential for chairs, secretariats, and delegate leaders to exercise leadership and promote “functional effectiveness” within an environmental regime (Miles et al, 2002, location 5917 in Kindle).

Membership in institutionalised human rights regimes that incorporate complaints and monitoring correlate with better human rights practice than membership in

less institutionalised regimes. For example ratification of the Convention Against Torture, and the First Optional Protocol of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which allows for individual complaints to be heard, correspond with greater adherence compared to other human rights regimes with less robust complaints and monitoring institutions (Cole, 2012, 1152). In a study of monitoring, Pallas et al found that states obtain a dual benefit from NGO participation: increased legitimacy of their commitment (although with the risk that if they fail, NGOs will expose this), and that “NGO scrutiny helps states credibly commit to higher cooperation levels vis-a-vis each other” (Pallas et al, 2012, at 1). Pallas et al found that NGO monitoring is most useful for states when the co-operation cost is fairly low and extremely difficult when the cost is high (Ibid). If agreed and adopted, civil society uses monitoring platforms to their advantage domestically – to access information, present their case, and engage the public, broader movements and governments (Dai, 2010, 628-30).

## Possible Implications for the SDGs

### *Domestic traction*

In most areas, the SDGs provide a statement of commitment and aspiration to take domestic action. The reality that the SDGs are a non-binding instrument, lacking in strong enforcement may contribute to a higher level of ambition and aspiration in the goals. This, in turn, could contribute to their normative force and uptake by groups that can mobilise at a domestic level. The “practicality” of achieving goals should not stand in the way of high levels of ambition for the SDGs as this level of ambition and articulation of principle, may be used more forcefully in domestic contexts and have more effect than the direct impact of the goals themselves.

It is possible that the SDGs will have greater traction in countries with independent judiciaries, and strong civil society. As preconditions for other areas of progress, these areas could feature more prominently in the content of the goals, just as civil registration is in the zero draft as a proxy for governance. The significance of civil society mobilisation supports a focus on freedom of association, for example.

The SDGs, or parts thereof, may end up having greater traction in countries in some state of flux – rather than in the positive and negative outlier states in terms of both human rights and development progress (following the findings from Simmons’ work on human rights, 2009). If the SDGs demonstrate some likelihood of strengthening capacity in areas that a state considers crucial, that may increase the likelihood to engage and act. However, this may depend on the extent to which the SDGs provide resourcing or support groups for action on certain areas.

Domestic mobilisation and political processes will determine progress under the SDGs. The Open Working Group’s proposals have a strong focus on subsidiarity by allowing for (some of the) targets to be generated at the

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national level. Ongoing and iterative communication and collaboration can build trust between actors and lay the basis for successful problem solving. Building state capacity for implementation requires participation of multiple and diverse actors. Andrews et al argue that “change primarily takes root when it involves broad sets of agents engaged together in designing and implementing locally relevant solutions to locally perceived problems” (Andrews et al, 2012, 15-6). Therefore attention to how the national processes operate is crucial, particularly if they are to provide a real platform for making the targets – and goals – real at a national level and allowing for adaptation and experimentation.

### ***Problem types and regime design***

The SDGs do not aim to solve cooperation problems, although some global co-operation problems are incorporated into them. In the case of climate change, there is an expectation that the UNFCCC is the critical forum in which the cooperation problem will be resolved, and that the SDGs will support commitment, resource mobilisation, and alignment towards the decisions made in that forum. It is possible, although not likely, that the SDGs could have an effect on negotiations within the UNFCCC by shifting incentives to cooperate. This is most likely if resource mobilisation through the SDGs is in some way linked to level of ambition and action within the UNFCCC context. A softer pathway may simply be the reinforcement of the norm of action on climate change through the vehicle of the SDGs. Either way, there will be no simple way of determining the contribution made to global process in reducing GHG emissions.

In this context, financial incentives to commit are not necessarily important, but side payments or resource mobilisation will likely be critical to action – and will clearly need to draw on both domestic and international resource mobilisation, and potentially new sources of financing.

### ***International clubs and partnerships***

A broad inter-governmental membership in the development of the SDGs is assured, but it is possible for groups that govern or facilitate partnership and action around particular goals to be defined more narrowly – or to be established as clubs. This may make it possible to facilitate learning or deeper action based on a group of

states with higher ambition. Alternately, partnerships may be developed around goals with governments, the private sector, philanthropists and civil society groups. To be effective, these should have a clear purpose and relevant rules for participation.

### ***Knowledge and Monitoring***

Knowledge and monitoring not only allow for measurement of progress, but, as seen above can *drive* progress by changing the understanding of the issues (reducing uncertainty), building consensual knowledge over time and changing the political positions of actors.

As such, the role of knowledge creation in the SDGs needs to move beyond overall global measures of progress to invest more substantially in a) national statistical capacity building so that the data being generated is nationally owned and likely to be more robust (as envisaged in the work being undertaken by the UN Panel on the Data Revolution; b) research that illuminates the underlying issues in particular contexts and provides a platform for experimentation; and c) evaluative work that qualitatively assesses the process of change.

In so far as overall global monitoring and ranking is useful, it needs to be parsimonious and relevant – by being based on indicators that align with the intention of the SDGs, and be used as a platform for building capacity in national statistical offices and the ecosystems that surround them – such as intermediaries who can interrogate and use the survey data. Alkire and Sumner’s proposal for MPI 2.0 has some merit in reflecting the multi-dimensional nature of poverty and providing a global picture of progress based on national results. Moreover, indicators should align with the normative focus of the SDGs on inequality in the form of equity targets linked to goals, such as Kevin Watkin’s proposal for stepping stone equity targets (Watkins, 2014).

Monitoring platforms can allow scrutiny that can contribute to social (reputational) penalties, and can provide a platform for civil society or domestic reformers to mobilise around. As the SDGs are based on many existing international agreements, they could explicitly strengthen the monitoring platforms that already exist – such as through period reporting in the human rights system, and reporting on actions taken in the UNFCCC.

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# Normative effects

While international agreements, declarations, and multi-stakeholder initiatives may lead to commitment or concrete action under the conditions raised above, in the shorter term their effects may be more normative than practical and discernible. Normative effects can occur through increasing social acceptance of ideas and changes in what is considered acceptable or appropriate behaviour (Simmons, 2009; Goodman and Jinks, 2013). Instead of legal enforcement, those who act against norms may face social or economic penalties, particularly reputational damage (Vogel, 2009). Of course, as we saw above, normative effects are one of the aspects that can, then, contribute to changes in policy and practice over the longer term as states act on a “logic of appropriateness” as opposed to a “logic of consequences”. As many of the proposed SDGs already reflect international agreements, they can be seen as potentially bolstering the effects of existing norms.<sup>3</sup>

One example of changing global norms and concomitant changes in many countries’ legislative frameworks is in the area of violence against women and women’s political participation where there have been significant changes in legislation over a 20 year period (Htun and Weldon, 2013; Hill, 2010; Bush, 2011; Mello et al, 2011). Another example is the significant shift to a norm of universal primary education across the globe (Kim and Boyle, 2012). An example of reputational damage for acting against prevailing global norms is the targeting of Japan for ongoing whaling activity.

## Conditions for effectiveness in influencing normative frameworks

### Mobilisation and adaptation

The ultimate impact of normative effects depends to large extent on domestic mobilisation and adaptation of norms within a national context (Simmons, 2009). The relationship between international and domestic politics is highly dynamic. Civil society can contribute to the creation of agendas and norms at an international level. International norms can reinforce the position of civil society groups at a national level and give them access to new platforms, partners, and strategies (Tsutsui et al, 2012, 386; Dai, 2010, 628-30). International norms can also influence new agendas at the national level, and create new kinds of identities for citizens and citizen-groups, although these may not always be (Cassidy and Leach, 2010, 35).

Ethnographic research led Sally Engle Merry to talk about the process of vernacularisation as the process by which “human rights ideas and practices developed in one locality are being adopted or imposed translationally in a variety of ways” (Merry, 2006, 38). Zwingel in her work on women’s rights describes the process of norm translation as global norms are incorporated into local debates and their meaning and application are locally negotiated (Zwingel, 2012, 126). In processes of vernacularisation or norm translation, intermediaries or translators play a key role in negotiating meaning between different levels (Merry, 2006, 39). Within international civil society, such mediators can open up spaces for participation or produce new forms of exclusion and patronage (Citizenship DRC, 2011, 27).

The formation of new issues or the use of international norms can also provide a point of resistance domestically, if they are not effectively politically and socially constructed over time to gain traction (Andrews et al, 2012, 9). Ten years of research on citizen led change through the Citizenship Development Research Centre found cases where international law solidified the position of citizens’ groups but also raised causes for concern for civil society reflexively appealing to international law. Such appeals can trigger rejection based on “outside interference”, undermining the power of local civil society voices (Citizenship DRC, 2011, 28).

Mobilisation can also shift the balance of power and eventual outcome in cases where norms conflict. A study of conflicting human rights and neoliberal development norms over a twenty-year period in 70 low-income and middle-income developing countries finds that human rights norm of universal primary education won out, in significant part through the operation of transnational NGOs that harnessed the legitimacy of the norms (Kim and Boyle, 2012). The wide scope and coverage of the SDGs raises questions about the normative coherence of the goals as a whole and how normative incoherence may affect the translation and adaptation of norms into national contexts.

### Interactions and relationships

Normative effects are highly relational. States are affected by the actions of other states – particularly those with whom they have critical relationships, such as regional neighbours or trade and investment partners. The increasing interaction of a range of state officials through not only formal inter-governmental institutions but networks of

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3 ODI staff assessment of the Open Working Group Proposal was that “of the targets associated with Goals 1-16, Goals 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15 and 16 were deemed consistent with international agreements. Goal 14 (Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development) was thought to fall short of the standards outlined by the Durban Action Plan. For Goals 7 and 11, this question was not considered applicable”: Norton et al, 2014, 14.

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regulatory officials, judges, and interactions through multi-stakeholder initiatives – is argued to have an effect on the spread of norms (Slaughter, 2004; Jinks and Goodman, 2013). Norms are further solidified and developed through their adoption and adaptation by different actors – such as through private standards development by business or civil society, codification into national law (Dilling, 2012, 413). The process of norm formation and spread occurs in an interactive interplay between national and global, public and private institutions.

A recent study of the transmission of norms relating to women's rights and LGBT rights by Brian Greenhill focused on analysing the relationship between changes in national legislation and membership of international organisations. His study found that the legalisation of the international norm is not so important for IGO-mediated norm transmission but the “norm's degree of coherence with the “meta-norms” of world culture is” – these meta-norms include individualism, for example (Greenhill, 2010, 196-7). Greenhill's research aligns with the argument that states act in accordance with a logic of appropriateness rather than a logic of consequences when deciding on aspects of their fellow IGO members' behaviour to imitate (Greenhill, 2010, 197). Similarly, the behaviour of neighbouring countries, or trade and investment partners has been found to have a statistically significant effect on ratification of environmental agreements (Bernauer et al, 2010; Sauquet, 2011).

### **Possible Implications for the SDGs**

The SDGs are designed, in part, as a declaration of ambition and a normative statement about what constitutes sustainable development. As a non-binding agreement, its force will in part be normative and its impact dependent on the conditions described above.

#### ***Ambition and normative effect***

The analysis and evidence above support the continued development of a high ambition for the SDGs. By expressing goals at the level of principles or aspirations, the SDGs can bolster domestic political processes in support of such principles. The domestic traction of the norms can be spurred by explicit processes for their adaptation into national goals and targets with a commitment to multi-stakeholder processes at all levels.

The SDGs are an amalgam of many existing norms with legal bases in human rights and environmental law. A way of using the SDGs as an accelerant and a further platform may be to make the underlying normative basis explicit, where it exists. The SDGs can also articulate new norms – such as a focus on inequality rather than (or as well as) absolute poverty. After a long process involving many stakeholders, states will need to consider the internal coherence of the SDGs so that the norms it articulates are not in conflict with each other. If equity is important – is it demonstrated throughout the goals?

The level of ambition of the goals in the zero draft bodes well for a potentially strong normative force – as they reflect a level of aspiration that national groups can leverage if they align with their own agendas. The final articulation of the SDGs may depend on the continued advocacy of various groups to ensure that their realities are made visible and reflected in the goals. This, again, is more reminiscent of social mobilisation around major human rights processes in the 1990s (Beijing, Rio, Cairo), than the development of the MDGs that had a stronger technocratic and diplomatic focus.

#### ***Mobilisation and relationships***

The SDGs sit within the General Assembly and general interaction of states and accredited civil society, and private sector groups within the UN. The scope to further influence norms may exist in its relationship to other fora – the human rights and environmental institutions that develop and oversees the “hard law” treaties which sit behind much of the likely content of the SDGs (e.g. UNFCCC, Human Rights Council) and interactions through multi-stakeholder groups that are likely to coalesce around particular goals. The SDGs could contribute additional rhetorical force to negotiators in other fora and, to the extent that they may influence particular governments to act – may have flow on effects through completely unrelated fora in which government officials relate to each other.

Moreover, as seen in both sections so far, the SDGs will be reliant upon social mobilisation, nationally and internationally, to succeed. As such, it will be crucial that the social mobilisation that has been focused on their generation is maintained through their implementation into national targets and potential programs.

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# Diffusion of approaches

A separate but related pathway to normative change is diffusion or modelling of regulatory approaches. A crucial distinction is what is travelling – an actual practice as opposed to a norm. Diffusion occurs when a country adopts a similar regulatory approach without coercion (e.g. not based on aid or loan-based conditionality) and separate to direct cooperative arrangements (countries may have made a commitment to act in an area but not defined how they would act). Diffusion is “the process whereby information on the creation of new institutions is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system in an uncoordinated manner, and prior adoptions of an innovation affect the probability of adoption for some of the remaining non-adopters in the population” (Levi-Faur et al, 2011, 1347). This is a relevant consideration for the design of the SDGs in thinking through how regulatory approaches are communicated and exchanged within the broad context of the goals.

Diffusion is an increasingly common influence of institutional change and domestic policy design. In Braithwaite and Drahos’ examination of changes in 13 areas of business regulation (including intellectual property, telecommunications, labour standards, drugs, food, transport and environment), they find that “modelling” is “the most consistently important mechanism” driving changes in national practice; more important than enforcement or coercion. In the environmental area, similarities in the structure of policy problems have been found to lead countries to mimic an existing solution that appears effective in another jurisdiction (Ovodenko and Keohane, 2012, 526). Levi-Faur et al, find significant diffusion of the model of the autonomous regulatory agency between 1966 and 2007 across 48 countries in Latin America and OECD, and across 15 sectors including financial and social sectors. They find this diffusion occurs both through diffusion across countries and across sectors, and they point to the importance of weak ties through networks in access to new information (Levi-Faur et al, 2011).

## Conditions for effectiveness in diffusion of approaches

### Relationships and Networks

Diffusion relies on relationships and networks that provide access to new information or observation. Ideas are intermediated by a range of actors: international organizations using their organizational platforms to promote certain norms (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998), relationships amongst transnational networks of public and private officials, (Slaughter, 2004), intermediary international institutions that convene multiple actors (Braithwaite and Drahos, 2000), private actors seeking

to influence governance of a particular sector (Avant, Finnemore and Sell, 2010) or establishing private standards and positioning them for later government adoption (Green, 2010; Bernstein et al, 2010; Meidinger, 2008), civil society actors or movements acting as norm entrepreneurs, (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998), consultants playing key roles in the global mechanisms or advising governments, and social networks of professionals in epistemic communities. (Levi-Faur et al, 2011).

Relationships do not need to be strong to facilitate diffusion. Frequently it is through networks with weak ties – where individuals may access new information or observe novel practices – that approaches diffuse (Levi-Faur et al, 2011).

### Incentives

There are some key areas of motivation for countries to potentially adopt and adapt approaches from elsewhere. These include (Giladi, Elkins and Simmons, Levi-Faur et al):

- The normative construction of policies as appropriate and legitimate (which occurs in circumstances discussed in the section on normative effects immediately above);
- Changing conditions of economic competition based on the adoption of a policy; and
- Creation of support groups or resources for a particular approach.

These factors can interact to diffuse an approach – for example, the uptake of carbon markets. The development of carbon markets as a mechanism for control of emissions was influenced by the increasing normative environment of support for using market mechanisms to address environmental harm. This was influenced by the example of the US sulphur dioxide trading program to address acid rain, and then strengthened through the EU adoption of its Emissions Trading System despite scepticism about market mechanisms within UNFCCC negotiations (Ovodenko and Keohane, 2012). The Kyoto Protocol created international market mechanisms, contributing to the normative development.

Market-based mechanisms are frequently adopted for non-climate change reasons including to achieve industrial development, energy security, and local environmental benefits (Moarif and Rastogi, 2012). In addition, private sector constituencies can provide pressure and support for market-based mechanisms over regulatory approaches, although they can equally block action. Lastly, domestic policy choices are conditioned by the potential for successful international cooperation including the potential for first-mover advantages and the desire to avoid competitive disadvantages through unilateral action (Keohane and Victor, 2013). There are now significant support groups – such as the International Carbon Action

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Partnership and the World Bank's Partnership for Market Readiness that provide support for countries to establish market mechanisms as part of their response to climate change. Equivalent support mechanisms are not necessarily available if other paths – such as regulations and standards, or taxes and charges – are pursued. All of these factors have potentially contributed to the diffusion of similar models of carbon markets being developed at national and sub-national level around the world over the past 10 years.

### **Possible implications for the SDGs**

Diffusion is a key mechanism through which policy approaches and institutional designs move across sectors and jurisdictions. There is a potential tension between diffusion of approaches from elsewhere with a growing body of literature that emphasises the significance for effective local action of appropriate levels of local autonomy (Honig, 2014; Rasul, 2013), and forms of problem driven iterative adaptation or collective problem solving based on local interaction and trust (Ostrom, 2008; Andrews et al 2012, Adler, Sage and Woolcock, 2009, Ramalingam, 2014).

Diffusion can occur in negative results as well as positive ones, particularly when other elements needed for policy problem solving at the national level discussed in the

paragraph above are not met. At the same time, diffusion can allow for experimentation in different contexts to build off one another – contributing to the “bricolage” with relevant information and knowledge from elsewhere.

The SDGs can usefully contribute to this process through the mediating structures that allow for learning and observation to occur. This again supports the case for investment in evaluative research and exchange as well as statistical monitoring of overall progress. It highlights the potential for relationships between structures at the local and national level that allow for dialogue, experimentation and learning, to feed into global or regional structures that provide a platform for dialogue on progress and approaches and allow for genuine exchange between officials at different levels. Equally, clubs can be used to provide support to the testing of particular approaches being adopted across countries, similarly to the case of carbon markets discussed above. A note of caution is warranted regarding the creation of support groups for a specific approach in the absence of strong evidence that such an approach is effective across a range of contexts.

Of course, diffusion is not dependent on the structures created specifically by the SDGs and can and will likely occur through existing networks and institutions.

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## Conclusion: Lessons for the SDGs

While a lot of debate on the shape of the SDGs has used the MDGs as a jumping off point, international human rights and environmental agreements provide better analogues as they reflect similar features to the proposed SDGs: highly declaratory, universalist agreements. At the same time, the proposed shape of the SDGs incorporates aspects similar to multi-stakeholder initiatives and regulatory networks.

Evidence on the effects of international agreements and initiatives provides a different angle to inform the SDG negotiations. While the literature provides many points of insight relevant to the SDGs, there are four that stand out as particularly salient to the next phase of negotiation:

- **“Practicality” should not blunt ambition in the final stages of the SDG negotiations:** the high ambition and non-binding nature of SDGs could increase, rather than diminish, their overall and long-term impact. In a variety of cases, higher ambition, lower enforcement agreements have allowed domestic groups to use international norms and frameworks for leverage to generate change (Shaffer and Ginsburg, 2012; Hafner-Burton et al, 2012). Equally, in cases of uncertainty where states may be willing to act but uncertain what they can achieve, non-binding agreements have led to greater change in behaviour than stronger enforcement but lower ambition agreements (Marcoux et al, 2012). The potential for strong normative influence and social mobilisation at a domestic level is increased if the SDGs can articulate principles that can be effectively adapted into political systems and debates. In the final stages of negotiation, groups will need to pay attention to the level of ambition of the goals and the internal normative coherence between the goals.
- **National platforms need to include diverse stakeholders and have time for genuine dialogue:** The effects of international agreements are “highly contingent” on the dynamics of domestic social mobilisation and existing institutions (Simmons, 2009). As such, it is better that both goals and targets are not overly prescriptive as to *how* they should be achieved. Successful national problem-solving requires intensive debate and dialogue amongst diverse stakeholders to create a platform for experimentation not just “implementation” (Andrews et al, 2012). The national processes will need time and should be built into the timeframe for “implementation” and “results”.
- **Knowledge and monitoring can *drive* progress, not just measure it:** At the national level, dialogue by

diverse stakeholders that creates a more consensual definition of the problem can create a platform for successful problem solving (Andrews et al, 2012). At the international level, programs of knowledge generation have reduced uncertainty, changed political positions, and ultimately strengthened the effectiveness of environmental regimes (Miles et al, 2002, Breitmeier et al, 2011, Perrin, 2012). There is already significant movement towards improving available statistics through the data revolution. Beyond this, investment in qualitative assessment and the careful design of national and international platforms and networks for dialogue, information sharing and debate are crucial.

- **SDGs bolster international norms, and should strengthen their existing monitoring platforms:** In the Open Working Group draft, the majority of goals are underpinned by international human rights and environmental law (Norton et al, 2014). To contribute further to strengthening those norms, the SDGs should explicitly indicate the harder law basis of the goals. Beyond an SDG platform for measurement, the SDGs could be used to strengthen the monitoring, verification, and reporting processes in human rights and environmental regimes. Creating stronger ties and potentially drawing greater attention to these can strengthen their work as platforms. In the environmental and sustainability area this can contribute to the programmatic creation of knowledge as a key part of the pathways to success (Breitmeier et al, 2011). In the human rights area this can strengthen the attention given to evidence provided by diverse domestic actors and the potential for social enforcement against human rights violators or laggards (Cole, 2012).

After years of debate and dialogue at the international level, it’s possible that SDG-fatigue will lead to settling for practical, achievable goals and targets over ambitious principles that strengthen norms and give national groups a further point of lever. Exhausted by international processes, and short deadlines for national targets could also truncate the needed dialogue at the national level in favour of a technocratic process to determine national targets. However, if we take heed of past experience – not just of the MDGs but of international agreement and initiatives – we won’t let practicality blunt our ambition, and we’ll take the time to make sure that global goals can be used for real problem solving around the world.

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