



BEWARE THE POLITICS: LEVERAGING FOREIGN POLICY FOR SDG IMPLEMENTATION

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BY DARIA IVLEVA (ADELPHI), ALEXANDER MÜLLER (TMG THINK TANK FOR SUSTAINABILITY) AND BENJAMIN POHL (ADELPHI)

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda in 2015 marked a high point for international multilateral cooperation. With its 17 goals and 169 targets, the implementation process for the SDGs may appear an essentially technocratic exercise. Yet in view of the social transformation that it seeks to bring about across key dimensions of human civilisation, SDG implementation remains a profoundly political process. Because of the intense political implications, in-depth analysis, political foresight and strategic guidance are needed. As the consequences of SDG implementation cross and transcend borders and impact international relations, foreign policy has a critical role to play.

The endorsement of the Agenda 2030 in September 2015 after long and complex negotiations was an important success of the multilateral system. Whereas the UN is regularly accused of a lack of efficiency and effectiveness, all of its 193 member states adopted 17 interlinked Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the UN General Assembly in New York – a clear indication of the international community's will to agree on an ambitious new global consensus. Moreover, this consensus was reached through the established processes within the multilateral system.

With its 169 targets, the implementation process for the SDGs may appear to be a largely technical exercise. To an extent, it is. But it is also far more. In view of the social transformation that it seeks to bring about across key dimensions of human civilisation, it is also a profoundly political process. This should be obvious from a first glance at the individual goals: whether it is ending hunger and extreme poverty, shifting towards sustainable production and consumption, reducing inequality, or ensconcing peace and justice, these objectives embody the standard definition of politics – a competition over who gets what, when and how. Resolving these questions cannot plausibly be left to technical experts on their own.

BEWARE THE POLITICS

The SDGs are profoundly political. Yet the politics do not stop with the selection of goals and attendant targets. Global-level endorsement of lofty objectives does not imply automatic implementation (see also essay #1). Governments may not be particularly interested in pushing for their realisation. In extreme cases, they may even pursue politics that actively undermine them, e.g. by using hunger as a political weapon against parts of society or neighbouring countries. A majority of governments is probably willing and interested in achieving progress on the SDGs, but faces not just trade-offs and limitations in capacity, but also societal constraints in addressing the structural inequities that underlie poverty, discrimination and lack of environmental sustainability. In a world of constrained resources, few governments will be able and willing to pay a high price for attaining all global goals. Rather, most will focus on those that align with their own political agenda.

The SDGs are aiming to overcome the status quo. Therefore, implementation might have an impact also on the geopolitical status quo. Political attention, analysis and guidance have to accompany the transformation.

As a consequence of these constraints and incentives, the patterns of SDG implementation will very much follow national and governmental interests. This not only concerns which (if any) SDGs and targets are prioritised, but also through which specific measures

and policies they are pursued. Moreover, there are many synergies, but also trade-offs between individual SDGs and targets. As essay #4 of this series illustrates, implementing one SDG can reverse development gains in other SDG targets, redistributing costs and benefits with new winners and losers.

These complexities at the national level have transnational and international implications. Two consequences stand out. First, any envisaged transformation in an individual country will be impacted by geopolitical trends such as shifts in resource availability and demand and shifting balances of power. Second, the effects of transformations will reverberate internationally, potentially shifting resource demands, trade routes and investments. Implementing the 2030 Agenda will bring about major shifts in economic structures in countries around the world and, as a consequence, impact their international relations, positions of power and interdependencies.



In 2013, the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) holds a thematic discussion on its contribution to the elaboration of the post-2015 development agenda.

The envisaged transformation is not only an opportunity for many societies to improve their welfare across social, economic and environmental dimensions, but can also provide significant peace dividends. However, change also implies risks, and system change implies system risks. The SDGs are aiming to overcome the *status quo*, but without proactive transition governance, this development could undermine geopolitical stability. Consequently, it needs political attention, analysis and guidance. Providing politically informed monitoring and guidance at the interface between the national and international domains is one of the key traditional functions of diplomacy, as is its responsibility for maintaining and extending the zone of peace and stability. Hence, diplomacy needs to seriously analyse and engage with the SDGs.

In order to underpin this argument, the next sections analyse three examples on food, water and energy that connect to many individual SDGs as well as illustrate the political dimensions and interdependencies that underlie SDG implementation. The subsequent section seeks to tease out how foreign policy-makers can help to manage risks and trade-offs, enhance synergies, and overcome political barriers related to global SDG implementation processes through strengthening foresight and guidance.

Food, agriculture and ecosystems

Our first example looks at efforts to improve food security (SDG 2). Whereas few would question the moral imperative of ending hunger and malnutrition, unidimensional efforts can produce negative (geo)political impacts.

The objective of reducing hunger has historically been sought via increased agricultural production and lower prices for food. In low-income, resource-poor countries, agricultural productivity growth can be a powerful lever to reduce poverty levels, meaning that investing in agriculture can have a significant development impact.¹ In Africa, where about 60 per cent of the population and a majority of the poor live in rural areas and where agriculture employs 60 per cent of the labour force,^{2,3} between 30 and 80 cents of additional income are generated for every extra dollar of agricultural income.⁴

However, whereas greater production capacity and lower costs have benefits, they also carry a price. Current industrial food production patterns put unsustainable pressure on natural resources including water, soil and biodiversity and have an enormous negative climate impact.⁵ Moreover, lower agricultural prices often undermine the livelihoods of smallholders who are essential for global food security. In Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, smallholders produce 80 per cent of the food consumed.⁶ Globally, very small farms under 2ha produce 30–34 per cent of food supply on 24 per cent of gross agricultural area, i.e. they are more efficient in terms of using limited land resources.⁷

From a foreign policy perspective, there are hence clear incentives for taking smallholders' interests as well as the natural resource base into account. An emphasis merely on increasing productivity per worker

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or unit of land without taking social stability into account will likely enhance, above all, the profits of landowners or multinational companies who provide agricultural inputs. Incentives for cash crops can undermine national food security (if and when global markets stall, as they are periodically wont to), endanger rural employment and thereby increase pressures for speedy urbanisation and migration, and add to resource pressures through increased land use and water abstraction for water-intensive crops. All three developments can fuel socio-political tensions and contribute to increased migration, primarily internally but potentially also across borders.

Comprehensive sustainable development solutions are available, ranging from landscape restoration^{8,9,10} to climate-smart and smallholder-centred agriculture. These are often already on the agenda of development cooperation. However, a



Current industrial food production patterns put unsustainable pressure on natural resources including water, soil and biodiversity and have an enormous climate impact. They also endanger smallholder farming.

transformation to sustainable agriculture that serves the SDGs at scale is a much broader process with a multitude of political barriers. Improving productivity and market access for small-scale farmers interacts with international food trade dynamics and the complex international political economy of food, land and agricultural inputs. Agricultural models that improve human security face the vested interest of political elites, international corporations and financial market incentives. Shifting incentives to make them more compatible with and supportive of the SDGs requires political attention that follows an enlightened and international understanding of the public good – i.e. the shared interest in smallholder-supporting, food security-enhancing, conflict-sensitive and sustainability-promoting patterns of agricultural production – rather than the domestic producer interests that, all too often, win out due to the relative strength of their interests.

Foreign policy can and needs to help overcome these political barriers by publicly emphasising and explaining that a functioning and fair international food system is a matter of global public interest, by facilitating inclusive, transparent dialogue processes that pay greater attention to environmental and distributional implications, and by insisting on fairness and sustainability in domestic policy-shaping. The opportunities and benefits of socially and environmentally sustainable resource management need to gain visibility across the different sectors that impact food security at home and abroad – from trade and investment to development cooperation and crisis prevention and management. This diplomatic responsibility extends not only to international negotiations, but also to the domestic debates informing national preference formation.

Transboundary waters

The second example focuses on water (SDG 6), and transboundary water in particular. It illustrates how foreign policy can play a role in overcoming zero-sum mentalities and boost SDG implementation by leveraging and harnessing benefits across several sectors.

Transboundary water cooperation offers significant opportunities across an entire basin. Hydropower dams in upstream countries, for example, can simultaneously help control downstream floods, improve downstream navigation, and increase the potential for downstream hydropower by stabilising water flows – and may also offer downstream countries cheap electricity import options. These benefits are obvious to professional water managers, yet political conditions prevent many basins from realising them. Instead, dam

Transboundary water cooperation offers opportunities across an entire basin.

construction in upstream countries often leads to conflict with downstream neighbours. Although such conflicts are unlikely to escalate into international wars, they fuel tensions and hamper economic development as well as sustainable and equitable water use. Conversely, achieving transboundary water cooperation can promote overall cooperation and even offer an entry point for dialogue in otherwise conflictive settings.

Central Asia offers a prominent example of how political factors can make the search for win-win solutions difficult, and how foreign policy can help advance such efforts. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Aral Sea basin has witnessed significant conflict over water. Upstream countries inherited big Soviet reservoirs that had primarily been built to boost downstream irrigation in summer for cotton production. However, as upstream countries' energy costs rose post-independence, they started releasing more water for hydropower generation in winter. Uzbekistan, whose economy has



Accompanied by Uzbek Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev (second from left), Ban Ki-moon, former UN Secretary-General (left), takes in the rusted, abandoned ships of Muynak, Uzbekistan, a former port city whose population has declined precipitously with the rapid recession of the Aral Sea.

traditionally been particularly dependent on irrigation, reacted angrily and vehemently opposed the construction of additional upstream dams, going as far as to threaten military action. The resulting limitations in cooperation cost all Central Asian countries dearly.¹¹ Yet, a recent change in Uzbekistan's leadership led to a new foreign policy doctrine focusing on regional cooperation, transcending competition over resources and unlocking opportunities for mutually beneficial partnerships.

How did this come about? The new Uzbek president articulated a new foreign policy focusing above all on good relations with Central Asian countries.¹² Such improved relations were clearly incompatible with strong opposition to upstream countries' plans for dams, given the political capital and prestige that the latter had invested into these plans. The Uzbek administration likely calculated that the risk lay less in the impacts of these dams than in the political tensions. After all, models showed that, if operated in a cooperative setting, Uzbekistan could actually benefit from the Rogun dam.¹³ Hence, it took a deliberate political decision to accept the risks of upsetting established narratives and positions.

Transboundary collaboration often depends on the perceived political risks of water cooperation, rather than the lack of economic incentives. Diplomats can and should try to help shift such perceptions to enable cooperation.

More generally, transboundary collaboration often depends on the perceived political risks of water cooperation, rather than the lack of economic incentives.¹⁴ Diplomats can and should try to help shape political thinking over national and regional development perspectives with an aim of shifting such perceptions, drawing on their access to political decision-makers and critical stakeholders, their mandate, and their skills of persuasion. For third parties seeking to foster cooperation, this means embracing water management as a foreign policy issue.¹⁵ A broad toolbox – from facilitating private discussions between decision-shapers to reducing risks by offering guarantees or joint assessments – has been developed,¹⁶ but it often needs the political impetus and diplomatic skillset that foreign policy can provide. In Central Asia, several third parties helped prepare the recent progress in water cooperation. The Berlin Process, for example, sought to foster closer water cooperation and build trust over this critical resource, repeatedly bringing Central Asian government officials together and facilitating their agreement on joint declarations.¹⁷

As developments in Central Asia illustrate, foreign policy can play a critical role in overcoming zero-sum competition over water and enabling beneficial cooperation. However, realising this potential for water diplomacy needs more constructive political engagement that will help embed technical transboundary cooperation into attractive regional development narratives and pathways. Since achieving water security is an essential element of international security, diplomats should embrace water diplomacy and help build the agreements that underpin better water management.

Energy transition

Our third example, energy transition (SDG 7), shows why SDG implementation needs, and can benefit from, a closer connection between domestic and international politics. At a time when challenges are increasingly global, there is huge potential in seeking to consciously leverage domestic policies for positive spill-over effects that propel the necessary global transformation.

Through the SDGs, all governments embraced the necessity of a global energy revolution. In its absence, neither the energy and climate objectives nor, given the many interlinkages between goals, many of the other SDGs are attainable. While few countries are fully and consistently living up to this ambition, some have been pursuing ambitious goals in shifting towards the use of renewable energies. The German energy transition policies – the *Energiewende* – offer a good example in this regard.

While the cost-benefit balance of the Energiewende is contested in Germany, its support for renewables arguably played a catalytic role in promoting a global energy revolution for development and climate neutrality.

While the cost-benefit balance of the *Energiewende* is contested¹⁸ in Germany, its support for renewables arguably played a catalytic role in promoting a global energy revolution. Its direct impact on emissions was blunted by the lack of ambition of the EU emissions trading system and the absence of effective alternative carbon price mechanisms which some other EU member states introduced. Moreover, the subsidies

in Germany were inefficient, according to classical economic theory, insofar as they primarily supported renewable energy installation in less than ideal circumstances: foregoing geographically better placed alternatives as well as the economies of scale that would derive from application beyond national boundaries, and focusing on incremental development of existing technologies rather than incentivising the next generation of technology.¹⁹ That these pioneering policies nonetheless were so successful is a pointer to the potential of transition policies consciously designed to promote global rather than just national decarbonisation.

Several mechanisms enabled the *Energiewende* to play a catalytic role. Demonstrating the viability of such a transition in one of Europe's most industrialised countries with a lot of energy-hungry manufacturing was in itself an important signal. Moreover, the *Energiewende* was accompanied by investment in capacity building, the transfer of technology and exchanging experiences with other countries.²⁰ Yet, its most important impact derived from the influence it had on the competitiveness of renewable energy deployment.

In recent decades, the costs of renewable energy have plummeted around the globe, consistently and significantly surpassing the projections of the International Energy Agency.^{21,22} For instance, the costs of solar photovoltaic (PV) modules in



A different energy future is possible, but it will require a new vision to make a major contribution to development, peace, and security.

2018 were, globally, less than 20 per cent of what they had been in 2009, while the cost of solar PV electricity declined by almost 75 per cent over the last decade.²³ The technological advancement, decreasing capital costs and increasing project experience that made this possible owe a lot to the investment and policy frameworks in countries such as Germany, Spain and Denmark. The combination of decreasing costs and (bilateral) cooperation on overcoming context-specific barriers in terms of capacity, financial or legal requirements then helped other countries develop their energy sector. In Chile, for instance, international support has played an important role in building the knowledge, financial and legal basis that allowed the country to harness the momentum provided by decreasing technology cost. Renewable electricity became competitive in less than a decade, with no government subsidies. Globally, technologies for renewable energy are now available at competitive costs.

Legal and financial mechanisms supporting the energy transition in Germany had a world-wide impact. Thanks to this “globalisation” of technologies, renewable sources now power sustainable development.

The remarkable characteristic of this development is the fact that the legal and financial mechanisms supporting the energy transition in Germany had a worldwide impact. Thanks to this “globalisation” of technologies, renewable sources now

power sustainable development. Such spill-overs are not easy to plan for in policy-making, yet it is important to acknowledge how effective these mechanisms can be in advancing progress on sustainable transformation internationally. Early action to trigger cascading international dynamics can emanate from just a small group of countries, as seen in solar, wind, and battery technologies. The results can then ease global cooperation and negotiation processes.

Foreign policy can play a role catalysing this cooperation. Obviously, it cannot do so on its own as diplomats cannot bring about (nor necessarily foresee) technological progress. Yet they can impart on domestic policy-making the importance of taking a global perspective and the global opportunities that arise from such transitions. Promoting the *Energiewende* internationally is good; echoing its global impact back into domestic debates would be even better. Awareness-raising on the positive global impact of the energy transition will also support the necessary next steps in developing high-tech solutions for all.

Beyond the need to inform domestic political debates, diplomats could also help make it more effective. If states agree to share the costs of technology research and development, this not only reduces risks of free-riding, but can harness scale effects and potentially help enhance cooperation on other issues as well. By focusing on shared challenges and shared solutions, jointly transitioning to cheaper and more sustainable renewable energy can showcase the true potential and added value of multilateral approaches. A broad international coalition around a re-powered *Energiewende* can and should become a centrepiece of international cooperation global sustainable development.

WHAT FOREIGN POLICY NEEDS TO DO

1 Provide foresight

Foreign policy needs to understand how SDG implementation is a highly significant piece of the puzzle that is international politics, and that there is a need to think strategically about its implications. Whereas we advocate for active support for the SDGs, we acknowledge it is not certain that SDG progress will necessarily produce positive outcomes only. The logic behind much development cooperation so far has been that the strengthening of societal coherence will lead to more successful state-building in the developing world, resulting in more capable governments that will ultimately use their capacity to respond to the universal needs of societies for greater welfare, equity and sustainability. As states and societies become more alike and saturated, international relations become more harmonious – or so the assumption goes.



Mia Mottley, the Prime Minister of Barbados during a high-level UN panel discussion on financing the 2030 Agenda.

There is, however, also the possibility that reduced internal grievances and stronger, internally more legitimate states could unleash greater interstate competition. China's development over in recent decades, and the fact that China alone accounts for much of the progress on the SDG's predecessors, the Millennium Development Goals, might be a good reason for questioning liberal assumptions about likely socio-political effects of development gains. Yet such doubts about the ultimate results of SDG implementation only reinforce our key message: the need for foreign policy foresight and political guidance in SDG implementation.

Understand the connections between the goals and governance levels: As this essay and the entire series make clear, the politics and policies surrounding the SDGs and their implementation are complex. This implies a need for foresight and analysis that is derived from an enlightened, supra-sectoral perspective – one that

does not miss the wood for the trees (see also essay #1). The international community needs a better understanding of the complex multi-level political changes that accompany SDG implementation, including recognition of the pitfalls and opportunities that arise from the interaction between different goals (see also essay #4). Beyond this cross-sectoral understanding, SDG implementation also needs a better appreciation of the connections between the internal and external policy dimensions, e.g. with a view towards understanding and leveraging systemic mechanisms such as international technology spill-overs. Foreign policy practitioners are well-positioned to provide such a perspective.

Integrate SDGs into geopolitical analysis and foreign policy planning: Foreign policy strategies, whether for global issues, specific regions or bilateral relations, need to consider the implications of the 2030 Agenda for international politics. In

Environmental change and natural resource needs are part of the geopolitics of the 21st century. The 2030 Agenda offers a framework to analyse these changes – and ultimately to shape them, too.

other words, foreign policy planners should ask how a region or institution would develop under different scenarios of SDG implementation and devise their strategies against this backdrop. Integrating the SDG perspective into these strategies will provide a more comprehensive view on what factors shape geopolitics and how its dynamics unfold. Environmental change, natural resource needs, and social, economic and technological mega-trends are part and parcel of the

geopolitics game of the 21st century. The 2030 Agenda offers a framework to analyse these changes – and ultimately to shape them, too, as our second point emphasises.

2 Provide guidance

Use SDG implementation to strengthen multilateral cooperation: If the international community is able to create and maintain strong multilateral structures (global, regional, and other coalitions) to support and guide SDG implementation, this will have several benefits. First, it will facilitate harnessing international synergies such as knowledge spill-overs and technology cost reductions, resulting in more efficient solutions than if countries act on their own. Secondly, it will strengthen joint international governance of SDG implementation and help mitigate possible conflict due to power shifts and conflicts of interest emerging in the wake of transformation. Finally, it is likely to strengthen multilateralism as such. The UNFCCC negotiation process, and its involvement of non-governmental actors in particular, can arguably serve as a role model. Foreign policy has a critical role to play in making the multilateral system fit for purpose (see also essay #1). Conversely, the implementation of the Paris Agreement and the SDGs will have a critical impact on the future of the multilateral system.

Help overcome genuinely political barriers: Securing synergies and progress across multiple SDGs cannot be left to technical implementation that almost by definition starts from a sectoral perspective. Implementation that accounts for the complexity inherent in the interlinked 17 goals (if not each of them individually) implies a need for political guidance (see also essay #4). Even more importantly, integrated approaches that live up to the challenge of the 2030 Agenda will require deep changes to the status quo. This is bound to result in political barriers and to require difficult negotiations and political investment. Given the international interlinkages, foreign policy has a critical role to play. It can help overcome barriers by leveraging political access and by facilitating the dialogue processes that can negotiate peaceful change.

Connect domestic debates to international politics: In order to advance the 2030 Agenda, foreign policy-makers can and should connect domestic and international politics. Domestically, they can contribute their perspectives on domestic policies in the light of international challenges, geopolitical trends and interconnectedness. This can make domestic policies more comprehensive and resilient as well as help to leverage the benefits of domestic transformations for foreign policy and global development objectives.

In order to advance the 2030 Agenda, foreign policy-makers can and should connect domestic and international politics.

Foreign policy can also use international developments to seek to inform a consistent framework for domestic action, e.g. through the recurring Agenda 2030 review process. As observers of international trends and risks, foreign policy-makers can and should make sure that developments like decarbonisation or the destabilising regional effects of environmental change are accounted for domestically. This can help support arguments against unsustainable energy or food policies.

Finally, effective domestic policies are needed to increase international credibility and soft power. International efforts at persuasion are more plausible and influence in negotiations greater if domestic politics are clearly aligned with a country's international positions. Embracing an ambition of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius cannot indefinitely be combined with Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) that collectively put us on the road to 3 degrees of global warming. Domestic and international politics are intimately interwoven, and nowhere more so than in the case of the SDGs.

A PLEA FOR POLITICS AND PRIORITISATION

The implementation of the SDGs is a deeply political process. Therefore, its positive potential cannot be harnessed and possible downsides cannot be attenuated without serious political investment. For foreign policy-makers, we argue, this means strengthening foresight and guidance.

The SDGs offer a comprehensive and legitimate global vision for a more prosperous and resilient world. That vision is not without internal contradictions, but is undoubtedly a historic success of multilateralism. As such, SDGs have impressive convening power. Yet they need to be prioritised across the board instead of being a mere add-on to other policies. The spirit of the SDGs does not mesh well with business-as-usual; it requires continuous bold transformational action that does not shy away from political struggles and applies a good deal of strategising in “multilateral games”.

Therefore, SDG implementation needs to become a guiding principle of foreign policy action. The nature of the 2030 Agenda – as the global transformational agenda that legitimately sketches out what the world should look like in 2030 – calls for a innovative foreign policy: one that seeks to understand complex dynamic interactions of development and geopolitical trends, connects international and domestic action, and frames a range of tasks perceived as technical in strategic, foreign policy terms.

If the SDGs remain only a side note to multiple other imperatives of foreign affairs, this would imply significant risks and huge foregone opportunities. Foreign policy will only be sustainable if it embraces and pursues sustainability. Implementing the 2030 Agenda cannot be done without foreign policy, and foreign policy should not be done without a focus on the SDGs.

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