

Policy pointers

The political factors that affect progress on sustainable development are important but often overlooked; a political economy lens can reveal them.

Sustainable development thinking is widely influencing national planning, but resilient inter-ministerial platforms and high-level oversight mechanisms are still needed to embed it in institutions of governance.

Decision makers need compelling evidence to be convinced that sustainable development is more efficient and effective at achieving development objectives than alternative approaches.

More important than their individual goals, the SDGs offer a tool for rational debate on development choices at a time of political division and uncertainty in much of the world.

Reconceiving the SDGs as a political force for change

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) attract much international attention. They are presented as a powerful instrument for leveraging transformative change in the way governments make development decisions and how economies function. Yet in adopting the SDGs, countries did not commit to pursuing them. For that to happen, policy leaders will need to see how the goals align with – or usefully challenge – national objectives, and also be convinced that the SDGs can help them make good decisions. This requires reconceiving the SDGs as a political force for change in specific contexts, rather than as a broadly accepted framework of aspirational goals and associated technocratic challenges. Drawing on insights from diverse national experiences in achieving sustainable development, this briefing uses a political economy lens to examine how that can happen.

In an era of political upheaval, what hope for the SDGs?

Following the recent bruising presidential campaign in the United States, Barack Obama sought to bring the country together by reminding people that progress is never linear. “We zig and zag, and sometimes we move in ways that some people think is forward and others think is moving back.”¹ Those who have worked in the field of sustainable development over many years have seen progress wax and wane as an infinite number of factors reshape the priorities of governments and people. This shaping and reshaping is essentially politics writ large, which we define as the processes and principles through which people, governments, communities and organisations make policies and rules to live by. The 2030 Agenda, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), evolved out of decades of zig and zag. It has landed during a period of great global upheaval, as contesting worldviews and development visions collide in the

face of rapid environmental, technological, economic and social change.

The transformative and unifying vision of the SDGs could have some value at a time such as this. Yet this will transpire only if the goals can find their way into the diverse arenas of discourse that lead to policy change. These arenas include: civil society in all its guises, business big and small, and the different branches of government, as well as orthodox party politics. Sustainable development initiatives that have focused on state-led action have often failed because they have not acknowledged the multiple sources of power that drive change.

By taking a political economy view of how sustainable development has progressed in different countries and contexts over time, IIED is seeking insights into how the SDGs, and other instruments for international cooperation on development such as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, can be deployed as political forces for change in three concentric spheres of

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influence: the institutions of governance, the political leadership that shapes those institutions, and the social and economic dynamics that shape the political context. This analysis draws primarily on discussions with diverse individuals closely involved in sustainable development efforts in various parts of the world.

Finding a foothold in the institutions of governance

Our discussions with informants substantiated documented evidence that key elements of the sustainable development approach have become embedded in some structures and institutions of governance. It underpins long-term national development visions and medium-term plans in countries as diverse as Botswana, Colombia, Indonesia and Jamaica. There is evidence of sustainable development becoming more broadly and deeply influential as uptake and leadership has expanded from ministries of environment and scattered individual champions to many national planning agencies, as in Zambia and Uganda. The SDGs could well contribute to further progress: there seems to be a special sense of ownership of the SDGs, and a strong mandate for technocrats, in countries such as Bangladesh² and Uganda,³ which negotiated hard for the SDGs to combine the Millennium Development Goals' unfinished business with accelerated progress on climate and sustainability.

But these signs of progress tell only part of the story. Despite rising acceptance that sustainable development can provide solutions to some enduring national challenges, we heard that actual uptake often remains at the level of general intention and some planning checks and balances. The sophisticated and cross-agency understanding that is needed to make real use of the SDGs is not widespread within national government institutions. Critically, there is limited capacity to draw on the principles of sustainable development to address politically volatile issues: in OECD, middle-income and low-income countries alike, attention to sustainable development goes out of the window when an economic or social crisis comes through the door.

This is not simply a problem of inadequate attention to awareness and capacity building; there are powerful but often hidden structural barriers to broadening the use of sustainable development in planning and policymaking. Our research, along with years of observation and discussion, suggests that sustainable development has made its most demonstrable inroads in the institutions, procedures and norms governing national development planning. It has had much less influence on those governing national macroeconomic policy, government expenditure and business investment decisions. This results in an apparent disconnect between formal national development and spatial plans on the one hand (which may take a strong sustainable development orientation) and the policy priorities that guide immediate high-level decision making (which are likely to prioritise macroeconomic objectives). Partly this reflects different theories of development held by economists who believe that macroeconomic stability and fiscal discipline form the essential foundation for development and therefore must be secured for other objectives to be achieved; and by development planners who see sustainable growth, equitable opportunity and a strong social safety net as the prerequisites for achieving desired macroeconomic fundamentals. In many developing countries, it also reflects the competing theories of development presented by development partners, with international financial institutions tending to prioritise macro-economic concerns and some UN agencies promoting the 'planning' view.

There are also barriers to the sectoral and policy integration on which sustainable development is based. Inter-ministerial politics and power relations lead to silos, making policy integration difficult, often short-cutting or ignoring environmental and social planning safeguards or forestalling the search for potential environment–development synergies within government. Although the 'indivisibility' of the SDGs suggests a potential for

The meaning of sustainable development as reflected in the SDGs

There has been no definitive updating of the standard definition of sustainable development since the 1987 Brundtland Report's: "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." However, the concept has evolved considerably since then. While the 2030 Agenda does not spell out a new definition, the meaning reflected in the Goals may be summarised as follows:

Sustainable development is a universally applicable approach to development based on the indivisibility of economic prosperity, environmental sustainability, social progress, and effective democratic governance:

- Its overarching aim is to improve people's lives and opportunities now and in the future
- Its benefits and costs are equitably shared and it "leaves no one behind"
- It works towards the reduction of social and economic inequality
- It operates within ecological limits and maintains the integrity of natural systems
- It bases international relations on cooperation and respect for national sovereignty rather than competition.

forging institutional integration, the 17 separate goals contain little to guard against their division among these silos. For example, India is one of many countries approaching the SDGs by dividing up responsibility for individual goals among ministries.⁴ Similarly, in some countries internal politics end up splitting related sustainable development initiatives, such as the Paris Agreement and the SDGs, onto separate tracks. The danger comes from making policy choices on individual tracks that undermine the core objectives pursued on the other tracks. One example is the danger of European donor countries, heavily committed to the Paris Agreement, funding climate mitigation activities in developing countries that could impinge on broader development objectives, eg allocation of food-producing land for wind farms or biofuels.

A political football

Sustainable development has endured as an influential development model for over 30 years, with a number of high-level champions who have pushed structural and institutional change during their tenure. When political support is strong, consistent and long-term, it can create an enabling policy base that is embedded deeply enough to withstand crises and changes of government. In Costa Rica, consistent support for sustainable development over several decades has been fed by the sustained success of nature tourism and international financial incentives for forest conservation, as well as the political benefits accruing from the country's reputation as an international leader in environmental protection. In Finland, high-level leadership and concerned stakeholder engagement since the early 1990s has made commitment to sustainable development part of the social contract. Finland's national commission on sustainable development, led by the prime minister, is now translating its existing strategy into an implementation plan for the SDGs.⁵ In the Philippines, on the other hand, the political culture offers each new administration a clean policy slate, so progress on sustainable development has largely depended on the vision and development priorities of each successive president.

Broader forces at work

A vast range of interacting factors shape the positions, attitudes and decisions of political leaders. When it comes to sustainable development, public opinion, markets and geopolitical dynamics are among the most prominent of these factors.

Public opinion. Progress on sustainable development can only rarely be attributed to societal demand. The ways in which sustainable

Drawing on collective expertise from around the world

To learn about how political factors have affected the progress of sustainable development around the world, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a selected set of people known to IIED with deep understanding and diverse experience of national sustainable development processes. They included politicians and others with experience in high levels of government (including bilateral aid agencies), intergovernmental organisations, influential national and international NGOs and major international development programmes, as well as respected development scholars. The interviews, which were conducted on the basis of non-attribution, were rich and candid. The names of our 14 interviewees are included in the acknowledgements below.

development tends to be presented are too abstract to resonate with most people's realities. But when sustainable development issues are 'downscaled' to the level of local concerns, demand can materialise quickly. For example, the realities of climate change are mobilising the public and civil society in many parts of the world, with demonstrable policy impact.⁶ Likewise there is now abundant empirical evidence that inequality and its economic and social repercussions are driving public demand for policy change, although there is not always a clear vision of what exactly needs to happen. For example, the concept of a fair economy appears likely to attract more public interest and excitement than that of a green economy.⁷

Markets. Until now, sustainable development initiatives have generally been led by governments, if often pushed by NGOs and civil society. Yet there are market opportunities inherent in sustainable development transformations, ranging from solar mobile phone chargers for those without access to electricity, to green tourism and major infrastructural investments such as wind farms. Such opportunities are attracting private sector investment, creating demand from business for policies that enable both stable markets and progress on sustainable development.^{8,9,10}

Geopolitical dynamics. There is a case to be made that the established international development architecture, dominated by UN agencies, the Bretton Woods institutions and OECD donors, has failed to accelerate progress on sustainable development, despite numerous international events and agreements over several decades. But now the geopolitical landscape is shifting, offering the possibility of building a new architecture around emerging institutions whose worldviews, policy orientations and ways of working are not yet firmly set. With developing countries now leading the world in renewable energy investment, for example, there are signs that environment and natural capital are becoming central to the aims of the powerful new finance and infrastructure institutions emerging in China, the Arab states and elsewhere. It is possible that these new institutions, without the 'baggage' of the

traditional institutions, seem more credible to many governments, especially those in the global South, and could more effectively function as drivers of sustainable development.

In assessing the current geopolitical environment, it is impossible to ignore the divisive populist upheavals occurring in some countries. The politics in these contexts are clearly not conducive to the textbook processes suggested by the 2030 Agenda. Such processes assume the ability to build trust and create consensus among stakeholders, the freedom to explore significant alternatives, the willingness to base policy on a much wider basis of evidence and the possibility of major reforms that disrupt the balance of winners and losers. On the other hand, backlash against these trends may generate an appetite for new ways of governing countries and economies.

Some tentative directions

While this brief overview is too provisional to generate definitive 'lessons', our discussions with committed sustainable development actors suggest a few promising political opportunities for driving forward the principles and vision embodied in the SDGs.

First, the institutional framework for sustainable development would be far stronger with incentives for genuine inter-ministerial cooperation rather than the lazy allocation of SDGs to silos. Influential and politically resilient platforms, such as ministries of sustainable development led by prime ministers or other senior politicians, have shown promise in some countries. These platforms could be accompanied by an oversight mechanism with political accountability and the authority to direct and promote policy integration, for example a high-level cabinet committee on sustainable development or the SDGs, or a head of government-led council as is the case in Finland.

Second, powerful political actors need to believe that sustainable development is more than 'sloganeering', that it is equipped with tools for achieving mainstream development objectives (eg economic growth, job creation, poverty reduction) that are more efficient than the tools they now use. On a conceptual level, the integration of SDGs

across sectors and the multi-stakeholder nature of sustainable development makes sense – but the necessary analytical, debating and planning tools needed to resolve concrete problems are rarely understood and in place. High-quality, well-organised empirical evidence of how sustainable development approaches have evolved, how they work, and how they have enabled nationally and politically important outcomes, could help convince decision makers.

However, the vision of sustainable development will not be achieved through a step-wise technical process of analysis and coordination that 'implements' 17 goals and countless targets in every country. Instead it will entail a mix of state-led, market-led, technology-led and citizen-led processes that together aspire to sustainable development, and together achieve wholesale transformation on many fronts. Many forces are driving change around the world today, some potentially dangerous (eg xenophobia, populism, ethnic nationalism), and some whose ramifications are not yet clear (eg new geopolitical alignments, rise of social media). While these changes could well create an unfavourable environment for sustainable development, if the SDGs are framed as a tool for rational debate and reform of national pathways, their greatest contribution could be to help guide and inspire countries as they navigate through the challenges of the coming years.

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Notes

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