IDOS German Institute of Development and Sustainability

IDOS DISCUSSION PAPER 1/2026

What Do the 2015 SDG Negotiations Teach Us for a Beyond-2030 Framework?

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Bonn 2026

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The German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) is institutionally financed by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), based on a resolution of the German Bundestag, and the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) as a member of the Johannes-Rau-Forschungsgemeinschaft (JRF).

Suggested citation:
von Haaren, P., & Berger, A. (2026). *What do the 2015 SDG negotiations teach us for a beyond-2030 framework?* (IDOS Discussion Paper 1/2026). IDOS. https://doi.org/10.23661/idp1.2026

IDOS Discussion Paper / German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) gGmbH
ISSN 2751-4439 (Print)
ISSN 2751-4447 (Online)
ISBN 978-3-96021-285-0 (Print)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.23661/idp1.2026

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Email: publications@idos-research.de
https://www.idos-research.de

Printed on eco-friendly, certified paper.

Abstract

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – the global framework establishing 17 universal and interconnected goals to guide sustainable development efforts – was adopted in 2015 following a uniquely participative and ambitious process. A decade on, it is increasingly evident that most of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are unlikely to be achieved by 2030 as originally envisioned. Discussions about a follow-up framework beyond 2030 are gaining momentum ahead of the SDG Summit in September 2027. This paper evaluates the process design, inclusiveness, negotiating strategies, fora and fault lines in 2015 and discusses to what extent the lessons learned can be applied to negotiations for a potential follow-up framework. We find that several process design elements and negotiation strategies, as well as actor composition, fostered trust and ownership, reduced polarisation and enabled agreements on ambitious targets. In particular, the process benefited from the inclusion of diverse, non-hierarchical actor communities, a long, science-based stocktaking phase, the breaking up of traditional negotiating blocks, transparency, and emphasis on common interests. We also identify several recurring fault lines that are overwhelmingly still relevant today. Apart from the above best practices of the process leading to the adoption of the SDGs in 2015, we identify several shortcomings that should be addressed in the beyond-2030 negotiations: inefficiencies due to competing tracks for the development of the goals; top-down agenda-setting processes leading to less ambitious outcomes; barriers to participation of and accountability towards some marginalised and informal actors; and the watering down of goals and indicators – including non-tangible targets and unresolved inconsistencies and trade-offs within the agenda. Finally, the paper argues that the beyond-2030 negotiations will take place in a context that is similar to the process that led to the SDGs but is nevertheless in many ways more challenging than in 2015, amidst intensifying crises, political shifts and loss of trust.

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Abbreviations

AI	artificial intelligence
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
BRICS+	Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, plus Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, United Arab Emirates
CBDR	common but differentiated responsibilities
FfD	Financing for Development
HLP	High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda
HLPF	High-Level Political Forum
IAEG	Inter-Agency and Expert Group
IGN	intergovernmental negotiations
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LDCs	least developed countries
LMICs	low- and middle-income countries
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MoI	means of implementation
MGoS	major groups and other stakeholders
NGO	nongovernmental organisation
OWG	Open Working Group
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SDSN	Sustainable Development Solutions Network
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
TFM	Technology Facilitation Mechanism
UN	United Nations
UNDG	United Nations Development Group
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
WEOG	Western European and Others Group

1 Introduction

After a uniquely participative process, the Member States of the United Nations (UN) signed, in September 2015, “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (henceforth the 2030 Agenda), a global framework that laid down 17 universal, interlinked goals to direct efforts to advance sustainable development. Now, ten years later, it becomes clear that most of the Agenda’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) won’t be reached as envisioned by 2030 (Sachs et al., 2025), while challenges such as climate change and violent conflict grow.

With the Agenda deadline approaching in 2030, three scenarios seem possible: first, the Agenda ends without a joint follow-up framework, leaving us with no or several competing frameworks. Second, the timeframe for reaching the goals will be prolonged. Third, a new or adapted framework will be negotiated by the (majority) of United Nation (UN) Member States. The format and scope of the beyond-2030 process will likely be determined at the gathering of world leaders during the SDG Summit in 2027.[1] This paper, focusing on processes rather than the content of a future agenda, aims to support preparations for the second and third scenario, which involves re-negotiation of some kind. More specifically, it investigates what lessons can be drawn from the pre-2015 process for the beyond-2030 process.

Taking a close look at the SDG negotiations that led up to 2015 can yield insights for the beyond-2030 process in several areas: in the case of re-negotiation in some form, it can teach us how best to prepare these negotiations and the negotiation process. It may shed light on which fora and actors were influential, which barriers for participation actors faced, which process design elements and negotiation strategies worked well and which did not. It also allows us to identify controversial topics, and demonstrates how debated issues can be successfully solved. While efforts to achieve progress towards the SDGs by 2030 should not be discouraged – in fact a successful implementation of the current Agenda increases the likelihood of a follow-up agenda – it is important to start thinking about the beyond-2030 process. First, we are now at a crucial tipping point where common interests can still be re-invoked and the detrimental dynamic of conflict replacing cooperation can be de-escalated before it becomes too entrenched (ODI Global, 2024). Second, preparing new negotiations takes time. From the definition of the negotiation format at the Rio+20 conference in 2012 until the approval of the 2030 Agenda three years passed. Easing the ground for a consensus to support the SDGs in Rio took another one and a half years prior to 2012. Third, finding solutions for the “wicked problems” that the 2030 Agenda aims to solve calls for an iterative approach, in which solutions and agreements are tested in several feedback loops. This also applies to developing research agendas, scientific cooperation structures and science-to-policy interfaces that support the beyond-2030 process. Good research takes time, and more so when developing the research agenda jointly with partner institutions and across disciplines and regions.

This paper analyses the 2015 negotiations and – as a novel contribution – considers them in relation to the beyond-2030 process. The analysis is based on a thorough literature review, supplemented by a limited number of semi-structured interviews with experts and high-ranking participants in the SDG negotiation process. Our analytical framework, used to structure our lessons from the SDG negotiations for the negotiation of a beyond-2030 framework – is based on five categories:

- *Process design* describes the format and rules under which the negotiations and their preparations are carried out.

1 In their Pact for the Future, UN Member States decided to “[i]nvite the high-level political forum, under the auspices of the General Assembly, to consider in September 2027 how we will advance sustainable development by 2030 and beyond, as a priority and at the centre of our work.” (UN, 2024)

- *Inclusion* examines which (groups of) actors influenced the negotiation and which were excluded or faced barriers to participation.
- *Fault lines*, or lines of conflict, denote controversial or disputed issues which may impede the reaching of agreements.
- *Fora* are specific events, working groups or other platforms for negotiation and lobbying. This paper distinguishes between formal fora (which are part of the official process) and informal fora (events organised by non-political actors or informal political discussions).
- *Negotiation strategies* are here broadly defined as strategies that political actors and stakeholder groups employ to influence negotiation outcomes.

The five overarching categories are permeable in some cases. For instance, the design of both the fora and the negotiation process influences the scope for participation of specific actors. Notwithstanding this, the categories provide useful lenses through which to analyse the 2015 negotiations and apply the insights to the beyond-2030 process. We evaluate the 2015 negotiations in terms of each category, based on three broad criteria: whether and how they (i) create ownership and trust, (ii) de-polarise discussions and (iii) foster transformative agreements. Based on the evaluation, we derive the lessons learned.

Our findings underscore the view that beyond-2030 negotiations will require inclusive, transparent, de-polarising processes that build trust and credibility. Identifying reasons for resistance, and strategic early engagement of key individuals and small groups of supporters, can ensure endorsement. Addressing persistent fault lines – such as human rights, systemic change, (financial) responsibilities, and monitoring – alongside new challenges such as artificial intelligence (AI) and shifting power dynamics will be essential. Further, efforts to mobilise commitment to an ambitious agenda must extend beyond formal negotiations.

Previous publications on the SDG genesis primarily describe specific fora, actors or perspectives rather than systematically distilling lessons for future negotiations. Fukuda-Parr (2023) and Fukuda-Parr and Muchhala (2020) explore Latin American, African and Asian countries' role in shaping the agenda's ideas, and link norms propagation to implementation. Caballero and Londoño (2022), who launched the initiative, assess the Agenda's roots in the Rio+20 forum from their perspective as Colombian norms creators and support-builders. The main negotiation process is detailed from co-chair, negotiator, and stakeholder perspectives by Dodds et al. (2017), Kamau et al. (2018) and Chasek et al. (2016). Sénit et al. (2017) evaluate the role of civil society, while Ashraf and Rashid (2024) focus on national processes in Bangladesh. Finally, Fukuda-Parr and McNeill (2019) highlight obstacles in the SDG indicator selection process. Among these works, only Kamau et al. and Chasek et al. explicitly extract lessons from the negotiation process. However, given their date of publication, neither extrapolate these to the current context or beyond-2030 negotiations.

This paper contributes to the existing literature by connecting insights from different sources and perspectives on the 2015 process. Most importantly, it extrapolates the lessons learned to the current context. The paper does not provide a detailed evaluation of the SDGs themselves and the extent to which they have been reached. Similarly, discussing the concrete content of a future sustainable development framework is beyond the scope of this paper. These points will have to be the subject of future research.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 describes the intentions behind the SDGs and how the SDGs connect to and differ from previous processes and agreements. It then describes the genesis and negotiation process for the SDGs in detail, and closes by drawing lessons learned from these processes. Section 3 compares the present-day context to the background in 2015 and evaluates whether and how lessons learned in 2015 can be applied to the beyond-2030 process. Finally, it outlines the need for further research on the beyond-2030 process. Section 4 concludes.

2 Lessons learned from the SDGs genesis

2.1 Continuity with previous processes and novelties in the SDGs

The UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio 1992 laid the foundation for many SDG principles. Its outcome document, the Agenda 21, set out principles of sustainability and promoted a model of three sustainable development dimensions – economic, environmental and social. Most importantly, it agreed to further develop international law that addresses the interconnectedness of development and environment (Chasek et al., 2016). It also institutionalised the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) in efforts to reach sustainable development (Chasek et al., 2016). These principles were later included in the 2030 Agenda. Moreover, Rio 1992 established the Commission on Sustainable Development, to review the Agenda 21, the blueprint for the SDG's follow-up and review forum, the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development, which was established in 2013.

Another milestone was the UN Millennium Summit in 2000. Its outcome document, the Millennium Declaration, included a list of values and objectives to combat multidimensional poverty (e.g. economic development, environment, peace, human rights). One year later, an expert group from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) drew up the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These were meant to set concrete goals, targets and indicators for implementing the Millennium Declaration. The goals approach sought to improve coordination between donors, and set incentives to increase resources for development, accountability and impact-orientation (Loewe & Rippin, 2015). The SDGs adopted the goals approach of the MDGs (Chasek et al., 2016) and aimed to "finish the job" of the MDGs once these ended. While the MDGs achieved some progress, for example in financing, education and mortality, they were criticised for the top-down process in which they were formulated by a few experts from international organisations. This led to low ownership of many countries, resulting in delayed implementation (Chasek et al., 2016; Pogge & Rippin, 2013). The MDGs were also criticised for ignoring many aspects of the Millennium Declaration (Rippin, 2013) and addressing the symptoms instead of the causes of poverty (Chasek et al., 2016; Dodds et al., 2017). Finally, the goals had to be reached only by low- and middle-income countries, which cemented the traditional donor-recipient relationship (Chasek et al., 2016).

The SDGs aimed to overcome the gaps and deficits in the MDGs by making the goals universal, indivisible, adding goals and targets, and allowing for a participative process for the creation of the goals. The SDGs follow the CBDR principle: on the one hand, a major novelty is the goals' *universality*, meaning that they apply to both high- and low-income countries. On the other hand, the SDGs allow for different local priorities and indicators that accommodate countries' diverse needs and abilities. A second novelty of the SDGs is the *indivisibility* of goals, recognising that goals are interconnected – characterised by trade-offs as well as synergies – and must be achieved together. Third, the SDGs aim to address the *causes of poverty* by adding, in addition to social aspects, new dimensions that strengthen *environmental and economic sustainability*. For instance, while MDG 7 was to ''ensure environmental sustainability'', three of its four targets were not quantified, and two were only vaguely related to environmental sustainability. The SDGs set out more diverse and quantified environmental targets and added a goal on climate (Dodds et al., 2017). They also expand the social dimension by addressing social protection, peace and governance, and inequalities beyond gender (Chasek et al., 2016; Dodds et al., 2017). For the first time, economic growth was included as a sustainability goal (Chasek et al., 2016). While economic activities were seen as the main causes of environmental and social problems, this had to be balanced against the perceived "right to development" of low- and middle-income countries and the use of growth as a means to reach other goals (Dodds et al.,

2017). The goal-setting process was also groundbreaking – inclusive, participatory and initiated by a country from the Global South (Caballero & Londoño, 2022).

Other novelties in the agenda included greater ambition compared to the MDGs, such as through inclusion of goals that were difficult to reach in the short term, tackling conflicts of interest, setting targets based on the desired outcome instead of past trends, and a science-based goal selection process (Caballero & Londoño, 2022). Lastly, the SDGs established a participative follow-up and review process (Dodds et al., 2017), while the MDGs mandated country reports but lacked a regular, participative review process.[2]

2.2 The 2030 Agenda process

The MDGs were set to end in 2015. This led to two competing processes to determine the framework to succeed them: the UN-initiated *post-2015 development* track and the *SDG* track, initiated by Global South Member States. Within the SDG-track, the goals were mainly developed at the Rio+20 conference and in the Open Working Group (OWG) following the conference. The final agenda was negotiated and adopted in an intergovernmental negotiations (IGN) process. The timing of all processes is depicted in Figure 1.

2.2.1 The post-2015 development track

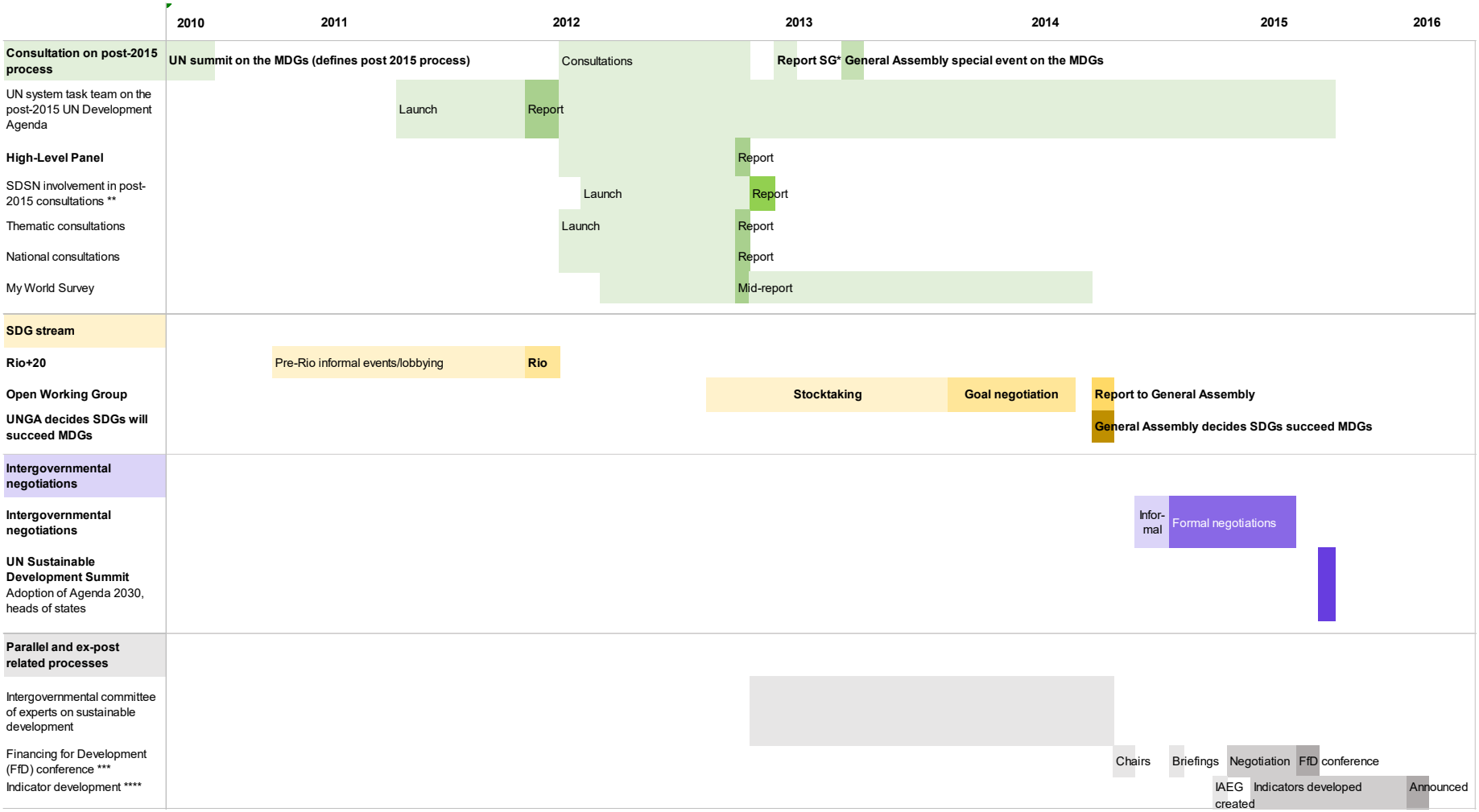
In 2010, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) set out a process to discuss a post-2015 development agenda. The process culminated in a report by the Secretary-General which synthesised the outputs of six parallel work teams. The first three teams were dominated by the development community. They were led by the UN Systems Task Team established to support post-2015 preparations – a group of experts from the UN and international organisations that was chaired by the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the UN Development Program (UNDP), a High-Level Panel (HLP) comprised of eminent persons, and the UN Development Group (UNDG) – a coordinating body of representatives from development-related UN entities. Scientific, corporate and civil society stakeholders were integrated through the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), UN Global Compact and consultations by the UNDG. The six work streams are described in detail in Rippin (2013) and Dodds et al. (2017). The UNGA was to review the synthesis report in 2013 and make a decision about the future of the MDGs.

This section puts most weight on the HLP and only briefly reflects on the influence of the remaining five work streams. The focus lies on the HLP because it is the forum that most strongly represents opposition to the SDGs in the sense that its recommendations supported a more traditional development framework. Furthermore, its mandate and high-level nature make it most comparable to the SDG's open working group (OWG) process. This facilitates conclusions on why its recommendations were ultimately not taken up, as we will describe further below – in contrast to that of the OWG.

The High-Level Panel (HLP) on the Post-2015 Development Agenda was established in 2012 by the UN Secretary-General. The HLP consisted of 27 state and non-state actors, most coming from the development community. It was co-chaired by the heads of state of Indonesia, Liberia and the UK. The panel had access to the outputs from all other post-2015 development streams, except the national consultations (described below). The Secretary-General asked the HLP to develop "a vision for development" beyond 2015 (Rippin, 2013) and to consider both outcomes

2 There was a one-time follow-up special event in 2013 which was supposed to evaluate the process.

Figure 1: Timeline of the Agenda 2030 process



Notes: * SG indicates Secretary General; ** The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) continues to exist and give policy advice and knowledge transfer on SDG topics till today; *** FfD: Co-chairs appointed in Sept 2014, briefings of regions groups in January 2015, zero draft May 2015, Addis Ababa Action Agenda (outcome document) 15. July 2015, FfD conference in August 2015; *** Indicators developed by Inter-Agency and Expert Group (IAEG) on SDGs

Source: Authors

from the Millennium Declaration and Rio+20 (Dodds et al., 2017), thus linking it to the parallel SDG process. However, one objective was to evaluate the MDGs (Dodds et al., 2017), which put the focus on development rather than sustainability. In addition, Fukuda-Parr (2023) argues that donor countries in the HLP supported a traditional development agenda because a focus on poverty promised greater support at home. Accordingly, the HLP's recommendations (UN, 2013) embraced a slight expansion of the MDGs to more goals but remained overwhelmingly poverty-focused.

The UNDG initiated a series of *stakeholder consultations*: 11 thematic sessions, 100 national consultations and one stakeholder survey (the *My World Survey*). The thematic consultations, hosted mainly by high-income countries, were organised in consultation with a theme-related UN agency (Dodds et al., 2017). National consultations surveyed state and non-state stakeholders in each country. The My World Survey was open to anyone. Due to time overlap, thematic and national consultations did not feed into each other (Dodds et al., 2017). While the outputs of the thematic consultations fed as briefs into the HLP and the OWG, national consultation outputs were not communicated to these fora, nor taken up in the intergovernmental negotiations that decided on the final successor framework (Dodds et al.). The My World Survey had broad participation but provided limited input as respondents could merely select from predefined development priorities. Although its results were shared with the UN task team, they were rarely used for lobbying by stakeholders (Dodds et al., 2017). The Sustainable Development Solutions Network report (SDSN, 2013) helped balance the HLP recommendations with a greater focus on environmental sustainability. The input by *Global Compact* was largely ignored (Rippin, 2013). The *UN Task Team* created input for both the post-2015 development and the SDG track via briefs that influenced the OWG process, and a report to the Secretary-General that advocated early on a shift from development to sustainable development.

2.2.2 The SDG track

2.2.2.1 The birth of the SDGs and rallying of support

In parallel to the post-2015 development agenda process, a second, bottom-up track emerged that proposed new, universal goals to foster sustainability. This alternative process was a response to a lack of sustainability in the MDGs and their top-down creation process in the MDGs (Rippin, 2013). The idea was first proposed by Paula Caballero, director for environmental, economic, and social affairs to her superior, the Colombian Minister of Foreign Affairs in January 2011. One month later, they gained the support of then-president Santos (Fukuda-Parr, 2023). Following this, Caballero and deputy-minister Patti Londoño convinced Guatemala and Colombia to write the first draft of the SDGs.

While the initiation by Latin-American countries facilitated engagement of other Global South countries (Fukuda-Parr, 2023), the initiative encountered resistance for several reasons: first, low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) feared losing development financing if the MDGs were to end and countries failed to reach the ambitious SDGs (Chasek & Wagner, 2016). Moreover, they were afraid that the SDGs would deviate attention from the core MDG priorities which were perceived as the most important development concerns (Chasek & Wagner, 2016). The development community shared these concerns (Pogge & Rippin, 2013) and was reluctant to give up its previous investments to align its work to the MDGs. In contrast, the environmental community overwhelmingly supported the SDGs, which led to divided opinions even within delegations (Caballero & Londoño, 2022; Fukuda-Parr, 2023). Some Latin American countries (especially the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America) viewed an inclusion of the Green Economy concept, promoted by Western Europe, as an attempt to capitalise nature. Meanwhile, the BRICS countries, Eastern European and Arab nations feared the SDGs would damage their fossil-fuel-based economies (Kamau et al. 2018). For these reasons, resistance emerged as the SDGs challenged the concurrent post-2015 process (Fukuda-Parr, 2023).

Caballero built support through several strategies ahead of the Rio+20 conference*:* she refrained from suggesting that the SDGs should replace the MDGs and avoided the impression that Colombia was siding with one of the traditional political blocks (Fukuda-Parr, 2023). Finally, she brought on board individual norm entrepreneurs (Fukuda-Parr, 2023), in particular key actors who were able to reach wider groups, such as the coordinator of the G77 or the host of the Rio+20 conference. In addition, the support of two other actors was crucial to convince other states: a group of states called the Friends of SDGs, and the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). UNEP was the first to advocate for replacing the MDGs. Achim Steiner, at the time executive director of UNEP, was an important supporter, but UNEP's aspirations to become an autonomous agency may also have played a role in its promotion of the SDGs (Caballero & Londoño, 2022).

Lobbying mostly took place in informal fora: consultations and meetings hosted by Colombia, but also preparatory meetings for the Rio+20 conference. The aim was to motivate delegates to have their delegation submit the idea for inclusion of the SDGs in the zero draft for the Rio+20 outcome document, *The future we want*. At first, Caballero strove for the adoption of the SDGs at Rio+20, but once she realised that this would not be feasible, she settled for using Rio to kick off and define the SDG negotiation process. The conference in June 2012 assembled a diverse set of state- and non-state actors, in particular from the environmental community. *The future we want* agrees to create the SDGs in line with the CBDR principle and sets out several processes to create, implement and monitor the SDGs (Dodds et al., 2017):

- a format for developing the SDGs (the Open Working Group (OWG));
- a format to agree on a technology facilitation mechanism (TFM), for sharing technology for implementation of the goals between stakeholders;
- the creation of an Intergovernmental Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development to advise the Addis Ababa Financing for Development (FfD) Conference on how to finance the SDGs;
- a participatory format through which the negotiated SDGs should be monitored (the HLPF).

The design of the OWG process was the subject of debate: some wanted an open-ended working group with traditional UN negotiation protocol that included all states to ensure transparency (Caballero & Londoño, 2022) and maximum ownership. Opponents of this format argued that the vast number of decision-makers would paralyse the process (Chasek & Wagner, 2016). They preferred a closed group of a few government representatives appointed by the UN Secretary-General. The final compromise allowed only a few states to participate in the OWG, but enabled other states and stakeholders to follow the negotiations through streaming.

2.2.2.2 The Open Working Group (OWG)

Between March 2013 and June 2014, the OWG developed the SDGs over 13 meetings. The process started with a stocktaking phase that lasted a year. It focused on assessing lessons learned from the MDGs, the current status and challenges of sustainable development, and included input from different invited experts. It was followed by a three-month consensus-building phase, during which the specific goals and targets were negotiated. The final SDGs were presented in a report to the UNGA in July 2014.

At Rio+20, it had been agreed that the OWG should consist of a group of 30 representatives, nominated by UN Member States from five regional groups. However, as more states expressed a desire to participate, participation was eventually expanded to 70 states. These states formed "troikas", in most cases groups of three states that shared the 30 seats. The troikas were determined by regional groups. As the process evolved, even non-members were allowed to contribute to the OWG discussions. The speaking order gave priority to troikas, followed by high-

ranking ministers and then other participants. A key innovation in the format was the high involvement of non-state stakeholders (Chasek et al., 2016). Unlike previous negotiations, where discussions were often held behind closed doors, UN major groups, which represented among others corporate and civil society interests, were present during public discussions. Additionally, they had the opportunity to provide feedback to the co-chairs for one hour each morning (Chasek et al., 2016).

The two co-chairs were chosen so as to represent one high-income country (Hungary) and one low- or middle-income country (Kenya). This decision aimed for adequate representation of, and trust by, African countries, which were particularly concerned that the transition from the MDGs to the SDGs might result in reduced Official Development Assistance (ODA). Other potential chairs were ineligible because they shared a seat with other countries. The OWG process was given technical support by the UN task team, which also filtered attempts of other UN entities to lobby OWG delegations (Kamau et al., 2018).

Several key fault lines emerged during the discussions:

- Some academics and states, in particular the UK, argued that the SDGs were too *complex* to implement (Fukuda-Parr, 2023).
- LMICs opposed purely *universal* SDGs, advocating instead for the principle of CBDR (Fukuda-Parr, 2023). While this principle had been agreed upon at Rio+20, interpretations of CBDR differed, especially whether it should apply only to specific (e.g. environmental) goals.
- Targets on reproductive rights and *gender*-based violence and reproductive rights were opposed by conservative, religious states, but a compromise was eventually reached (Ashraf & Rashid, 2024).
- Inclusion of a *climate goal*: some argued that climate was covered by the ongoing UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations leading up to the Paris Agreement in 2015 and thus did not need to be an SDG. Despite these concerns, support from Least Developed Countries (LDCs), UN major groups, and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) helped secure an agreement on the climate goal (albeit without a temperature target).
- Goal 16 for *peace, justice and strong institutions*: the permanent Security Council members feared inclusion of the peace goal would be used as an entry point to reform the council. The Guatemala and Colombia “troika”, the US, the UK and France supported inclusion of rule of law, while the G77+China and BRICS group of countries argued that including it would decrease national sovereignty. A compromise was reached by removing a reference to the rule of law in the title (but leaving another one in the text) and mentioning foreign occupation only in the preamble.
- The *means of implementation (MoI)* were also divisive, with the G77 and China pushing for goal-specific means that included concrete financial commitments and a reform of global governance, in particular with regard to trade and financial architectures, while the Western European and Others Group (WEOG) preferred a more generalised approach (Ashraf & Rashid, 2024; Dodds et al., 2017; Fukuda-Parr & Muchhala, 2020). Some high-income countries did not want to include financing and trade in the SDG MOI at all, arguing that they were the subject of parallel or upcoming negotiations in other fora such as the UNFCCC (climate finance), FfD Conference (aid) or the World Trade Organization (trade) (Kamau et al., 2018). A compromise was reached through some targets on reforms, plus a stand-alone MoI section, though some MoI remained vague.

- The idea of *transboundary water management*, propagated by "downstream" countries such as Pakistan, was not taken up because of resistance by "upstream" countries such as India, China and Egypt (Ashraf & Rashid, 2024) who also did not ratify the UN water convention.
- A stand-alone goal on *inequality* that embraced both extreme inequality between the top and bottom of the distribution and inequality between countries, was heavily contested. Opponents – donor countries and organisations – saw the importance of inequality merely in its influence on poverty, for example in access to resources. The goal was finally (re-) included after pressure from LMICs (in particular Latin American countries), and civil society groups (Fukuda-Parr & Muchhala, 2020).

2.2.3 Merging of the MDG+ and SDG tracks

The UN Secretary-General and the president of the UN General Assembly saw development as the UN's main mandate and were initially sceptical that the OWG would reach its ambitious goals. To avoid an outcome without a global development agenda, they kept the two parallel tracks (Kamau et al., 2018). The post-2015 development track process stipulated an UNGA meeting on the future of the MDGs in 2013. However, since it was clear that OWG outcomes would not be available until then, the Secretary-General requested a report that consolidated inputs from the different actors involved in the post-2015 process. The report advocated for a universal, single agenda which incorporated sustainability (UN Secretary-General, 2013). However, at the UNGA meeting, the decision was made to wait for the OWG outcome, and to subsequently launch the intergovernmental negotiations (IGN) process. By September 2014, with the completion of the OWG's work, the UNGA determined that the OWG's SDG framework would be the *primary* input to the IGN process. Though other inputs from the post-2015 development process were to be considered, this meant that the SDGs would succeed the MDGs (Dodds et al., 2017).

This decision was driven by two factors. The high-level and inclusive nature of the OWG process gave significant weight to its outcome. Moreover, while the WEOG preferred integrating the Secretary-General's report into the final agenda, China and the G77 favoured adhering to the SDGs as developed by the OWG (Dodds et al., 2017). One reason for this was a concern that re-opening discussions, particularly on sensitive issues such as SDG 16 on peace and justice, might result in further concessions on their part. Moreover, some Member States were of the opinion that the HLP had been a top-down, donor-dominated process (Fukuda-Parr & Muchhala, 2020). The OWG outcome was also supported through lobbying by other stakeholders. After the HLP, the Friends of SDGs and the Beyond 2015 coalition (a coalition of NGOs) lobbied for the adoption of SDGs rather than of the HLP's proposed agenda (Fukuda-Parr, 2023). The two groups argued that the SDGs' stronger sustainability perspective was needed to address upcoming challenges such as climate change (Rippin, 2013).

2.2.3.1 Wider intergovernmental negotiations for a post-2015 agenda

The final negotiations of the 2030 Agenda involved all 193 UN member countries. It was co-chaired by David Donoghue (Ireland) and Macharia Kamau (Kenya). Continuity with the OWG was established by Donoghue's role as a diplomat in the OWG and Kamau's role as OWG-co-chair.

In contrast to the OWG, the IGN process was not open to the public. However, during the first six sessions, there was a three-hour dialogue each week between selected high-ranking state representatives and non-state representatives (Chasek et al., 2016; Dodds et al., 2017). The sessions were facilitated by the co-chairs, which also incorporated selected discussion points into their draft. The group of non-state representatives included major groups and other stakeholders (MGoS) and was thus even more diverse than the OWG (Dodds et al., 2017). In

the final days, stakeholders were allowed to be in the negotiation room, interacting with state representatives.

The set-up of the IGN favoured traditional North–South alliances, with the speaking order allowing coalition groups such as the G77+ China and the European Union (EU) to speak before individual Member States. Negotiations initially focused on joint discussions of different draft versions. The co-chairs used ambiguities in the text to foster compromises. In the final days, bilateral negotiations also took place, both inside and outside the official negotiation forum, with co-chairs threatening to present a "take it or leave it" version if no consensus was reached (Dodds et al., 2017). The 2030 Agenda, the outcome of the negotiations, was finalised on 2 August 2015.

During the IGN process, several fault lines emerged (Dodds et al., 2017):

- One point of contention was the monitoring and accountability process. The G77 and China favoured a less stringent "*follow-up and review*" approach for the goals than for the MoI. One reason was that while LMICs benefitted from technical and financial cooperation described in the MoI, some countries feared being unable to reach the goals (interview 4). Others saw strict "monitoring" of the goals as restricting their policy-making autonomy (Caballero & Londoño, 2022).

- *Human and gender rights* also proved divisive: G77 and China, along with African and some Arab states, opposed strong language or even any mention of such rights, with the whole of SDG 16 hanging in the balance, while the WEOG pushed for their inclusion. A compromise resulted in a dilution of the references to human rights and the deletion of a reference to democracy.

- *Foreign occupation* remained a disputed issue, with some members of the WEOG such as Israel and the US on one side and occupied countries such as Palestine on the other. A compromise formulation was found at the last minute.

- The *quantification of targets* was disputed, with the G77 strongly opposing changes to the "X values" (placeholders) of targets that had not yet been quantified in the OWG. A compromise was reached by inserting the term "substantially increase" in place of precise numbers.

- The disputed *right to development*, a priority for the G77, was accepted by the US in exchange for the G77's agreement on target revisions.

- On *migration*, the G77 insisted that it should not be portrayed as a threat, a concern that was addressed through rewording.

- The IGN process had been timed to ensure that states could also participate in the *Financing for Development* (FfD) conference in Addis Ababa. However, states disagreed over how to integrate outcomes from the FfD negotiations into the SDGs. In particular, the G77 wanted to keep options open in case they were not satisfied with the FfD outcome. Although the final FfD outcome was criticised for not providing new resources, a last-minute agreement on its incorporation into the SDGs was reached through bilateral agreements by the US with South Africa and G77 (Dodds et al., 2017).

- On *technology sharing*, the WEOG countries were evasive, Japan and the US were sceptical, while the G77 pushed for naming of concrete technologies.

- *Financing under the climate goal* was also contentious, with SIDS arguing for more climate financing (as agreed in the OWG), while LDCs felt they were more deserving. A bilateral agreement to mention both in target 13.b was reached by the two groups.

2.2.3.2 The Inter-Agency and Expert Group (IAEG) sets the SDG indicators

In 2015, the UN Statistical Commission (UNSC) established the *Inter-Agency and Expert Group (IAEG)* on SDGs to develop measurable global indicators for the SDGs. Although the group of national statisticians was supposed to work out only the technical details, it considered inputs by UN agencies, Member States and MGoS. Overall, the indicator process was more politicised than the OWG process and subject to influence of vested interests (Caballero, 2019; Dodds et al., 2017; Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2019; Nhamo et al., 2020).

2.2.4 Informal fora

Dodds et al. (2017) stress the importance of several informal fora (conferences and retreats) that fostered interaction of diverse stakeholders and thus allowed science and civil society to lobby states for the inclusion and integration of specific goals by providing spaces for open and informal discussion and trust-creation.

Groups of Friends served a similar function for informal state–state discussions. Some were set up to increase understanding of specific topics and interlinkages, others to increase trust and align strategies, usually to push the topic in different formal fora. For example, the Friends of SDGs lobbied for inclusion of the SDGs on the Rio+20 agenda and an ambitious outcome document. Other friends' groups supported the inclusion of specific topics in the agenda, for a sound financial base, or (together with the friends of SDGs) the inclusion of OWG outcomes in the IGN. Groups of Friends were not open to the public, but stakeholders could lobby to be invited.

2.3 Process evaluation and lessons learned

We evaluate the above-described processes and draw lessons learned based on the following questions. Which negotiation strategies, process design elements, fora and actor constellations contributed to the creation of ownership and trust and of de-polarisation, and fostered transformative agreements that enabled the 2030 Agenda – and which did not? Which were the relevant fault lines that could be resolved, and which could not (and why)? The key lessons learned are summarised at the end of this section in Box 1.

2.3.1 Negotiation strategies

Several strategies proved effective to rally support for, and ownership of, the 2030 Agenda process. *Building trust* proved crucial to overcoming initial resistance of some states. For example, the co-chairs of the OWG actively attempted to gain the trust of the countries they did not represent in order to eliminate North–South divides (Kamau et al., 2018). In this respect it was helpful that Ireland, as a former colony, was perceived as a neutral Global North country by the Global South (interview 4). Trust was further built by ensuring Member States that they would drive the agenda-development process, thus rebutting LMICs' fear of an MDG-like process in which UN technocrats would try to influence the results (Kamau et al., 2018). In cases where delegations lacked a unified opinion, a successful approach was to *convince individual delegates* that had the potential to become *norms entrepreneurs* (Caballero & Londoño, 2022). A fruitful strategy to increase ownership of the process and its outcomes across all fora was to *analyse actors' interests.* Understanding who profits from maintaining the status quo, but also where insecurity about the future fosters resistance from groups seemingly benefiting from the current system, helps to reduce such barriers and insecurities. In addition, ownership was built through co-creation and ensuring that all stakeholders felt their voices were heard and taken seriously (Dodds et al., 2017).

Polarisation was avoided, and controversial issues tackled in several ways. During the stock-taking sessions, co-chairs *discouraged actors from politicising* technical issues by creating a unifying narrative that emphasised global interests ("one Earth") and instilling a sense of relevance by linking topics to events in the news. Similarly, uncontroversial issues such as "unfinished MDGs" were treated *first*, in order to build trust before moving to disputed issues (Kamau et al., 2018). In this way, some fault lines could be avoided or mitigated from the start. Remaining fault lines were addressed by co-chairs dwelling on the *opportunities* that specific issues offered to the countries opposing them. *Mediation* efforts by both state and non-state actors helped move discussions forward. Bilateral negotiations were avoided as they reduced trust. They were only leveraged when specific parties blocked issues up to the end. As a last resort, it was sometimes necessary to accept *inconsistencies* within the agenda in order to reach an agreement.

Transformative results were fostered not only through the de-politicisation of issues through co-chairs, but also through *counter-coalitions* that stood up against "unholy alliances" (interview 5), and through stakeholders, who successfully kept attention on topics that were at risk of being dropped, and by supplying arguments for negotiations to politicians who were already aligned with their position (Ashraf & Rashid, 2024; Sénit, 2020). Their influence was most effective early on in the OWG process and through *long-term, repeated, informal interactions* (Dodds et al., 2017; Sénit, 2020). In the IGN, stakeholders focused on a *few key issues* and managed to position themselves as politically neutral *mediators* (Murphy et al., 2022). Moreover, it proved more successful to address *state groups* rather than individual states (Murphy et al., 2022).

However, some strategies did not work as well. For example, in the IGN, ambiguity of the language in the negotiation text was sometimes perceived as deceptive, particularly by the Global South (interview 4), thus contributing to trust erosion. Moreover, the analysis of fault lines below shows that use of ambiguity is a suboptimal strategy to solve contested issues, as it may inhibit transformative outcomes. For stakeholders, direct attempts to change the position of politicians had only limited success (Ashraf & Rashid, 2024; Sénit, 2020). Moreover, different stakeholder communities might have aligned their strategies more effectively. For instance, the Beyond 2015 coalition lobbied outside the UN MGoS, which led to frustration among some politicians (Dodds et al., 2017; Kamau et al., 2018).

2.3.2 Process design

Smart process designs created trust in the process and ownership in various ways: the *dual-chair system* ensured balanced Global North and South representation, and maintained continuity between processes by choosing IGN chairs from the OWG delegates. Moreover, inclusive and transparent designs played a key role to increase trust. In the case of the OWG, this was brought about by allowing all interested states to participate, and by live-streaming negotiations to non-participating states and stakeholders. In the case of the IGN, regular meetings outside the negotiation room and open negotiations on the last day maintained accountability towards civil society. Trust was also created through the OWG's *long-term format,* with repeated monthly interactions over the course of one year. In contrast, top-down, exclusive initiation (as in the MDGs) and negotiation formats (HLP, and to some extent IGN) resulted in more conservative outcomes, and reduced a sense of ownership among left-out actors.

Several important design elements contributed to de-polarisation. While the organisation of states in *traditional North–South blocks* in the IGN polarised debates (Chasek et al., 2016), the OWG's *troikas* broke such fronts (Caballero & Londoño, 2022) – although like-minded countries often grouped together (interview 4). Troikas also allowed the incorporation of more actors. A potential disadvantage was that regional commitments, for example of the EU, might oblige members of a region to speak with one voice – requiring harmonisation across troikas. *Settling the negotiation format in advance* avoided polarisation over procedural disputes during

negotiations and saved time (Caballero & Londoño, 2022). In addition, o*ne concise negotiation text*, drafted by the facilitators, avoided actors from clutching onto their initial proposal, and gave the impression that no side had won or lost (Chasek et al., 2016). Both de-polarisation and transformative outcomes were supported through formats such as the *knowledge-building, science-based format* of the OWG. The format applied design thinking to solve complex or "wicked" problems (von Thienen et al, 2014; Weber & Khademian, 2008)[3]. In this way, the stocktaking phase helped identify areas where action was needed, to expose and counter narrow political interests, and to establish a shared definition of development and knowledge base (Caballero, 2024). The OWG's strict *deadlines* may have both fostered and prevented more concrete, transformative outcomes. On the one hand, they left insufficient time to specify all measurable targets, which then became impossible to re-negotiate later in the IGN (interview 4). On the other hand, a timely end of the OWG prevented the re-opening of contested issues, which would have led to less progressive outcomes (interview 5).

2.3.3 Inclusion

The inclusion of a diverse range of actors in Rio+20 and the OWG fostered broad ownership and accountability for later implementation of the goals (Fukuda-Parr, 2022). Ownership also benefitted from attracting *relevant decision makers*, for example through a speaking order that favoured high-level politicians in the OWG. Involving political representatives from non-development sectors such as the *less hierarchical environmental community*, broke traditional donor/recipient country blocks (Fukuda-Parr, 2023), thus reducing polarisation.

In addition, a greater diversity of actors contributes to transformative results if actors add new perspectives and expertise, or lobby for neglected topics. For instance, the Global South brought in new ideas and its experience of development policies and challenges (Fukuda-Parr & Muchhala, 2020). Similarly, involving scientists was crucial to establishing a common knowledge base. Some states advocated for more transformative outcomes than others: Kamau et al. (2018) group states in the OWG process into *progressives* (France, Germany, Switzerland troika, Colombia and Guatemala), who supported universal, integrated and interlinked goals and finishing the "unfinished business of the MDGs"; *conservatives* on specific issues (e.g. Brazil, China, India, some African countries, LDCs, Australia, Canada, Israel, Republic of Korea, the UK and US, the Denmark, Ireland, Norway troika); and *ultra-conservatives* such as Malta, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and South Africa, who tried to suppress certain topics – mostly linked to fossil fuels, climate change and gender rights – from the agenda.

Engaging and informing informal actors was important to keep progressive topics from being dropped, to provide progressive politicians with arguments, to hold politicians accountable and thus increase ambition of decisions (Fukuda-Parr, 2023). Influential non-political actors were part of the MGoS, which represented several non-state stakeholders within the UN system. Another important actor was the *Beyond 2015 coalition*, which streamlined efforts by several NGOs but operated outside the UN stakeholder group system. It attempted to bring grassroot voices into the discussion.

However, lobbying by non-state actors may also lead to less transformative outcomes. For example, some criticise the influence of UN technocrats, such as that of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), and corporate interests on SDG 12 on consumption (Kamau et al., 2018; Nhamo et al., 2020), or of UN agencies who tried to secure continuation of their field of work (interview 5).

3 Design thinking starts with understanding the problem and building a common knowledge base. Then, information is broken down into topics and interconnections. The collaborative process involves synthesising different viewpoints, finding solutions, gathering stakeholder feedback, and refining drafts iteratively.

The process design enabled a broad participation of stakeholders through public negotiations, and opportunities to interact and ask questions. However, some actors faced barriers to participation in the most influential fora. Less organised actors, in particular, were under-represented and lacked the resources for repeated interactions and quick reaction to new proposals (Sénit, 2020; Sénit et al., 2017). In addition, some actors faced language barriers, as there was no simultaneous interpretation of OWG meetings (Sénit et al., 2017). In-person and digital surveys such as national consultations and the My World Survey, were in theory most easily accessible to vulnerable population groups, but were not transparent about how their results fed into the final decision-making process (Sénit et al., 2017). Moreover, some national consultations excluded some civil society actors whose opinions diverged from that of their national government (Ashraf & Rashid, 2024).

2.3.4 Fora

Formal fora such as Rio+20, the OWG and IGN had the largest influence on shaping the 2030 Agenda. Within these, the science-based, inclusive format of the OWG forged more transformative solutions and compromises, compared to the more traditional, polarised, less transparent format of the IGN and HLP. Informal events by non-state stakeholders and friend groups allowed for open discussion and establishment of trust, and thus eased the way for agreement and transformative outcomes in the formal fora.

However, while informal fora – such as surveys and national consultations – managed to involve grassroots stakeholders, they were less effective in incorporating their demands into final agreements. Moreover, the multitude of fora in the 2015 process meant that civil society actors had to split resources between the post-MDG and the SDG tracks, and invest in additional lobbying efforts to ensure the inclusion of SDGs as the main input in the IGN (Dodds et al., 2017). For a more efficient use of resources, future negotiations should reduce the number of fora, focusing on the most ambitious processes, and increase the accountability of informal fora by making it clear how their results are fed into the formal negotiations.

2.3.5 Fault lines

Solving fault lines requires, on the one hand, seeking compromises and a convergence of positions with the aim of de-polarisation. On the other hand, this must be balanced with the aim of achieving transformative agreements. In the course of the negotiations, several fault lines emerged (Table 1). A number of these were successfully resolved (i.e. yielding outcomes that were facts- and needs-based as well as ambitious – the latter here conceptualised as surpassing previous agreements or at least being close to the original sustainable development objective of the agenda). Notable successes included the inclusion of *reproductive rights*, stand-alone goals on *climate*, *inequality*, and *peace, justice and strong institutions*, and the inclusion of the "leaving no one behind" clause in the preamble, which implicitly strengthened the *inequality* and *poverty* goals. Major successes were also the establishment of the *Technology Facilitation Mechanism (TFM)*, and the explicit inclusion of (albeit vague) other *means of implementation*, as well as a *follow-up and review process*. Nevertheless, it was unclear at the time whether the review process would work, as it was voluntary, lacked sanctions and concrete evaluation criteria (interview 4), partially because states could not agree on the *quantification* of some targets (Biermann et al., 2023).

Table 1: Major fault lines, supporters and opponents

Fault line	Supporter	Opponents
(Large) number of goals, integration	E.g. Colombia, Guatemala; Denmark, Ireland, Norway troika; France, Germany, Switzerland troika	Pursue poverty focus: UK, Australia, Netherlands Too complicated: academics
Gender rights	Nordics, many Western European countries	Religious, conservative states: e.g. Malta, Honduras, Indonesia, Iran, the Holy See), some African states (particularly Chad, Nigeria, Sudan, Zimbabwe), some Arab states (particularly Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia), and further members of the Group of Friends of the Family[4]
Human rights	WEOG	G77 and China, plus states above
Rule of law	Guatemala, Colombia, US, UK, France, Group of Friends for the Rule of Law	China, India, Brazil
Peace goal	• Separate goals for peace and rule of law: many high-income countries • Pro-peace goal: African countries and those with recent conflicts (e.g. Timor-Leste)	• China and permanent Security Council members • Many LMICs (e.g. Brazil, India, Nicaragua troika) who feel it "distracts" from, or should be considered an outcome of, economic development
Foreign occupation	Arab states, Palestine	Israel, US
Inequality goal	Stand-alone goal: Low-income countries (later G77+China), particularly Latin America, civil society	Against goal on reducing inequality between countries: donors, particularly the US
Right to development	LMICs, particularly China	Europe, US
Responsible consumption and production	Low-income countries	Acknowledge limits to growth but hesitant to adjust own production and consumption: Europe, US
Climate	• Separate goal: LDCs, SIDS, major groups • Reduce emissions and invest in green energy technology: SIDS • Shift to renewable energy: SIDS, EU, US (later: China, Iran) • Phase out fossil fuel subsidies: some Western Europe and North American countries, non-oil producing African countries (e.g. Ghana, Kenya, South Africa)	• No stand-alone goal, no shift to renewable energy: Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia, China, South Africa, US • Against removing fossil fuel subsidies: many low-income countries, China, Iran

4 The Group of Friends of the Family encompassed Bangladesh, Belarus, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Malaysia, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uganda, Yemen, and Zimbabwe (new members since 2015: Comoros, Kyrgyzstan).

Fault line	Supporter	Opponents
Water management	Downstream countries (e.g. Pakistan)	Upstream countries (e.g. China, Egypt, India)
Universality	• Universality: Colombia, France, Germany, Guatemala, Switzerland • CBDR only in environmental SDGs: other Western countries	• Pro CBDR: low-income countries, Brazil, China, India • Universality adjusted to context: Canada, US; Israel, Republic of Korea troika; Denmark, Ireland, Norway troika • Goals for LMICs only: supported by Italy, Spain, Turkey troika; Australia, Netherlands, UK troika
Concrete, goal-specific MoI and global governance reform	• G77, China, India • Use MOI to create synergies with other ongoing processes (e.g. FfD): Peru	• Non-committing: WEOG • Strongly opposed: Japan • Sceptical on technology sharing: France, Germany, US
Include FfD outcome	US, other high-income	G77 and China
Climate finance for SIDS	SIDS	LDCs
Strict monitoring process and target quantification	EU, US	G77 and China

Several other points of conflict remained unsolved or only poorly solved**.** To start with, states could not agree on a coherent *joint motivation* of the agenda. Instead, the agenda includes several motivating elements that stand in tension with each other (Chasek et al., 2016): for example, how should the needs of present vs. future generations be weighted? How can planetary boundaries be reconciled with inequality and poverty eradication? And which concrete responsibilities does the CBDR principle entail and for whom? While a mix of motivations might broaden ownership, the tensions between them give rise to interpretation and implementation problems. Moreover, these tensions in the motivation resurface in the remaining agenda: the environmental community criticised the fact that the goals do not challenge traditional power and economic systems, which stands in contrast to the indivisibility of the goals. For example, they argued that the established Western economic model *prioritises growth over social and environmental goals* and targets (Masaki, 2024). Moreover, *planetary boundaries* are not well accounted for in the agenda, for example, through targets related to absolute resource use and environmental damage (Masaki, 2024). Similarly, traditional social systems are maintained through the unambitious indicator for economic *inequality* (Masaki, 2024). In a similar vein, the unresolved concretisation of responsibilities arising from *CBDR* (Chasek et al., 2016) and the vagueness of financial commitments in the MoI reflect another unsolved issue: how to *finance* SDG implementation.

The negotiations on the Technology Facilitation Mechanism (TFM) show in an exemplary manner how ambitious outcomes can be reached even on disputed issues. First, the process for agreeing on the TFM had been pre-defined at Rio+20, pre-empting some points of conflict.

Second, the TFM and its inclusive format were supported through lobbying by civil society (particularly the Beyond 2015 coalition). A final agreement was made possible by informal mediation and compromise proposals by other countries, and through fusing inputs from IGN and FfD in the final draft through co-chairs from both fora (Dodds et al., 2017).

More often, however, debated issues were poorly solved by removing references to these issues from the goals (e.g. *democracy*, *foreign occupation*) or *watering down* the formulations of certain goals, targets and indicators (*human/gender rights,* inequality). In addition, targets were affected by economic and political interests (Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2019). The concretisation of target values was hampered by emerging countries' fear of binding commitments, and time constraints in the OWG (interview 4). Indicators were further influenced by the economic interests of scientists' origin countries, scientists' limited research focus, and lack of data (Caballero, 2019). A key take-away is that goal formulation shapes target formulation, which, in turn, influences indicator formulation. Each dilution further removes the targets and indicators from the original meaning of sustainable development (Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2019; Masaki, 2024). For example, the goal "sustainable agriculture" was reinterpreted in the target to "*productive* and sustainable agriculture". This in turn gave leeway for US statisticians – whose research focus lay in boosting agricultural productivity – to set non-sustainable indicators (Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2019). Some actors played out their power over existing databases to influence indicator selection. In this way, the inequality indicator was watered down to match the World Bank's pre-existing concept of "shared prosperity", in order to avoid adapting their policy to the SDGs (van Driel et al., 2023). Thus, an important lesson here is to remove political and corporate interests from the indicator selection process and to choose technical experts with a broad expertise in sustainability.

In sum, the analysis of fault lines on the one hand shows which issues are most likely to be debated in upcoming beyond-2030 negotiations, it also shows that unresolved issues in the motivation led to inconsistencies in the agenda related to prioritisation of growth vs. environmental and social goals, and division of – particularly financial – responsibilities. Moreover, poorly resolved issues decreased the ambitiousness of the agenda. In this respect, we identify several channels for the watering down of goals, targets and indicators on issues such as inequality, values and human rights, and growth–environment trade-offs: low availability of data for indicators, fear of binding commitments, lobbying on behalf of vested interests which was presumably supported by the closed format of IGN and IAEG, inflexible deadlines, and lack of expertise on sustainability among statisticians. In line with our observations, we formulate five best practices for solving fault lines while maintaining a sense of ambition: defining the agreement process early on, enabling lobbying by civil society and informal mediation by countries, cooperation between IGN and FfD chairs, and addressing the causes for the watering down of goals, targets and indicators.

Box 1: Lessons learned from the processes leading to Agenda 2030

Process design

- Agree early on an inclusive format supported by the Global South that is transparent, trust-building, de-polarising and informed by science.

Inclusion

- Involve diverse, high-level actors across sectors (including environmental).
- Reduce participation barriers and ensure informal fora are accountable.

Fora

- Use fora suitable for process design, stocktaking and formal negotiation.
- Keep fora horizontal and inclusive to strengthen ownership.

Fault lines

- Expect disputes on human rights, rule of law, finance/responsibilities, inequality, growth–environment tensions, armed conflict and monitoring.

Negotiation strategies

- Build early support through key actors and map sources of resistance.
- Create ownership via co-creation and shared evidence.
- Tackle easy issues first; use mediators to bridge divides.
- Protect ambition: avoid ambiguity and counter regressive alliances.
- Civil society: coordinate, provide arguments and keep attention on topics.

3 Incorporating the lessons learned into the beyond-2030 negotiations

3.1 Comparing the context towards the end of the MDGs with the current context

A first step in determining whether the lessons learned in 2015 are still applicable today, is to compare the context of the SDG genesis to the current context (Table 2). Interestingly, many of the structural crises that shape today's international relations were already emerging as trends during the years when the SDGs were being negotiated. The genesis of the SDGs unfolded against the backdrop of multiple crises: the financial crisis (2007–2009) roused concerns about adverse economic and social effects of an unsustainable economic sector (Dodds et al., 2017). Youth unemployment, rising inequality, and political civil society protests cumulated in the Arab spring in 2010 and the Occupy Wallstreet movement in 2011 (Dodds et al., 2017). The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the failure of the Copenhagen climate negotiations in 2009 decreased trust in the UN's ability to secure peace and achieve transformative agreements (Kamau et al., 2018). The 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea raised concerns about peace and security in Europe. Simultaneously, nationalist movements gained strength. In 2015, this led the UK Prime Minister David Cameron to promise to hold the Brexit referendum, which can certainly be understood as a harbinger of today's polarising and nationalist policymaking.

Table 2: Juxtaposition of the context of the 2015 negotiations and the current context shaping potential future negotiations

Context	2015 and prior	Current context shaping potential future negotiations
Economic	• Financial crisis (2007–2009) • Trend: rising indebtedness of LMICs, but exceptional decrease in 2015 • Rising inequality	• Economic crises due to COVID-19 pandemic • High indebtedness of LMICs, with jump due to COVID • Increasing economic protectionism • High inequality
Climate and environmental crisis	• Broad acknowledgement of climate crisis	• Climate and biodiversity crises worsening, effects palpable
Conflict and security	• Russian annexation of Crimea (2014) • Syrian civil war (2011–2024) • Israel tightens Gaza blockade (2007) • US invasion of Iraq (2003)	• Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine (since 2022) • Hamas attack and Israel's ensuing attack on Gaza strip (2023), subsequent military conflicts in Lebanon, Syria and Iran. • Failed Afghanistan state • Increasing number of conflicts worldwide
Global political landscape	• Liberal, internationally-oriented US government • Demand for more participation of Global South countries • Diverging interests within Global South lead to smaller coalitions • High democratisation • Brexit referendum (2016) in preparation • Political support of SDGs weak in 2011 but peaks in 2015 • Formation of the G20 at heads of state and government level • China and India become non-negligible development cooperation providers	• America-first US policy-making • US–China confrontation • Crisis of multilateralism • Multiple, topic-dependent alliances • Autocratisation & right-wing shift • Decreased political ownership of SDGs/alternative development plans • "Southern" development banks emerge.
Social movements and public opinion	• Demand for democracy and equality (Arab Spring 2010, Occupy Wallstreet 2011) • Stakeholder groups mostly embedded in (multi)national institutions • High public ownership of MDGs	• End of Syrian civil war (2024) • Traditional stakeholder groups focus on SDG implementation. New youth activist groups bring in broader demands in late 2010s, but scope for activism is decreasing • Critique of development cooperation • Large scientific and subnational political ownership of SDGs
Technological developments	• Internet access, social media	• Deep and machine learning (AI)

At the same time, positive windows of opportunity opened up: the new, democratic US government supported several previously undebatable issues, for example birth control (interview 2). There was also the hope of China becoming a responsible stakeholder. And despite a concerning long-term trend towards greater indebtedness of LMICs, the year 2015 saw an exceptional decrease compared to the previous year (World Bank, 2024). In addition, long-term positive trends showed that, for many years, the global number of liberal democracies had been rising (Nord et al., 2024) and digitalisation was expanding in the form of internet and social media.

As with the SDG backdrop, the current context is marked by the consequences of several recent and ongoing crises: the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising violent conflicts worldwide (UNDP, 2024), worsening climate change and biodiversity loss (Dyvik, 2024; National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI), 2023). Inequality within countries has continued to increase in the last 25 years (Chancel et al., 2022) and inequality between countries has been rising again since the pandemic.

Moreover, a large number of LMICs are facing rising levels of debt that restricts their fiscal space to finance sustainable development. These crises hinder the achievement of the SDGs by destroying assets and infrastructure, binding resources, and causing irreversible changes in climate and natural resources. In addition, the 2030 Agenda has only partially been institutionalised, as the IMF and World Bank have not sufficiently adapted their mandate and structure to the 2030 Agenda (Beisheim, 2024; Rickels et al., 2024). In contrast, the UN has attempted to make its institutions more cross-sectoral and integrated, and created some new institutions and fora specifically for the SDGs, such as the High-level Political Forum. The multiple crises deepen North–South divides and reduce trust, for example through lack of solidarity in COVID-19 vaccine provision and the perception that international agreements and sanctions are invoked only when in line with Northern countries' agenda. Trust erosion and increased economic competition have led to "*de-risking*" of international relations through diversification and protectionism (Bunde et al., 2023).

Some power constellations within and between countries, and the nature of alliances, have changed. Right-wing populism has further increased since 2015 (Scheiring et al., 2024), particularly in Europe, Latin America and the US. Traditional world powers like France, the UK and the US are less involved (Beisheim & Brozus, 2024), and even traditionally internationally-oriented countries such as the Netherlands and even some Nordics are scaling back their support. Some major countries, such as Russia, denounced their support to the Pact for the Future (Novoselova, 2025), or, like the US, even for the 2030 Agenda (Heartney, 2025). The Global South has gained agency and options to forge multiple alliances (Ishmael, 2024). While the traditional blocks in the UN remain – with the G77 plus China exhibiting strong unity in voting behaviour – major countries such as Brazil, India and South Africa favour a multipolar international power distribution (Beisheim & Brozus, 2024). It remains to be seen whether this development continues or whether economic rivalry between the US and China might force countries into a new two-block world order (Geißelmann et al., 2024).

Multilateral institutions continue to be questioned, but in slightly different ways: some states, most prominently Argentina, Russia, and the current US government, not only oppose multilateral governance bodies' interference in national affairs but even question their legitimacy and benefits. Geißelmann et al. (2024) outline a scenario in which this, in conjunction with increasing inter-state conflicts, could paralyse these institutions or result in a withdrawal of some states, such as the US, from the UN. However, as in 2015, a majority of UN Member States push for more representative and inclusive multinational political, financial and trade institutions (Beisheim & Brozus, 2024).

Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, public and scientific awareness and support for the SDGs has grown, with increasing sub-national engagement (Biermann et al., 2022) and

continued backing by most Global South countries (interview 4). However, ownership has declined in some states and population groups due to right-wing shifts, autocratisation (Gottenhuber & Mulholland, 2020; Hammerschmidt et al., 2022; Nord et al., 2024), and practical trade-off considerations. A number of states propagate alternative development models – overwhelmingly "nationalist, patriarchal, hierarchical and (except for China's green growth agenda) environmentally destructive" (Munro, 2023) – which are sometimes exported via development cooperation. Accordingly, while conservative actors lobbied in 2015 for a continuation of the established agenda (then the MDGs), they now lobby against it (now the SDGs). At UN-level, this includes groups such as the recently formed *Group of Friends in Defense of the Charter of the United Nations* (consisting of mostly repressive and authoritarian states), a similar Like-Minded Group led by Pakistan,[5] which has tried to include revisions of the 2030 Agenda in the negotiations of the Pact for the Future. Beyond political changes, digitalisation is expanding and evolves through deep and machine learning and, in future, quantum computers. This holds the potential for new solutions to sustainability problems, but techno-over-optimism may also delay the development of other solutions (UNDP, 2023). Moreover, unregulated AI may exacerbate inequality, increase water and energy use, and pose security and dis-information risks.

In sum, the context in 2015 and the context today are similar in many ways: both suffer from multiple simultaneous social, environmental and economic crises, resulting in social unrest, trust deficits, rise of populism and lack of capacities to implement sustainable development measures. Many international institutions relevant to SDG implementation, such as the IMF and World Bank, are only slowly and insufficiently adapting their mandate and operations to the SDGs. Trends towards a fragmentation of political blocks, indebtedness and digitalisation continue. However, the observed crises differ from 2015 in their extent. They are more widespread and more urgent, as we approach environmental and social tipping points. Moreover, the support for and trust in multilateral cooperation and international organisations and fora is on the decline, while an increasing number of countries are falling back to inward-looking and polarised policy-making. These crises, trust deficits and the plummeting political ownership of the 2030 Agenda have jointly contributed to a visible talk-action gap.

3.2 Applying and adapting the insights gained from the SDG genesis process to the new context

Against the background of this new context, to what extent are lessons from 2015 still applicable in beyond-2030 negotiations and how should they be adapted to the new challenges and power constellations we face today? The following sub-sections show that the task of drawing up an ambitious framework has become more challenging in the current context. However, for this very reason, the SDG lessons on de-polarisation, building trust, and reaching ambitious consensus remain highly relevant – and may be even more necessary in today's polarised climate and declining political support for sustainability. Notwithstanding this, several key considerations have to be taken into account when applying the lessons learned to the current context: state positions on some fault lines have shifted or become more entrenched with the rise of conservative/autocratic governments. In addition, new fault lines need to be taken into account. Legitimacy and reform of international institutions, AI regulation, cross-border spill-overs, global taxation and global emergency response are new and emerging issues where state positions diverge.

5 Supporters of the group vary, but often include Algeria, Bolivia, China, Cuba, Eritrea, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Nicaragua, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Syria, Venezuela, Zimbabwe, and sometimes Egypt (Permanent Mission of Pakistan to the United Nations, 2024; Beisheim, 2024).

3.2.1 Process design: creating trust and fostering depolarisation

The lessons learned in Section 2.2.2 highlight the importance of who initiates the process and how it is structured. Early agreement on the negotiation format is key, and the initiation and the decision about the process design should be participative and inclusive – in particular of the Global South – to ensure strong ownership. These lessons can be easily adopted in today's context. The HLPF and the SDG Summits, which will likely kick off the beyond-2030 process in 2027, can take on a role similar to the Rio+20 process in laying out the negotiation format. They involve all Member States and the inclusive format of the HLPF allows stakeholders to voice their opinion. To maintain broad ownership, the Global South must actively co-devise the beyond-2030 format, avoiding the impression that the process and resulting agenda are driven by the Global North.

Section 2.2.2 highlights that inclusive and trust-building negotiation formats are essential for achieving ambitious outcomes and high ownership. Such formats have gained even greater importance in today's low-trust setting. Process designs that ensure transparency and accessibility of all stakeholders to negotiations are especially critical. However, the negotiations for the Pact of the Future revealed resistance from some states to open negotiations, which must be addressed. Moreover, the proliferation of conferences and formats can be used as an argument to omit an OWG-like stocktaking phase, leaving less time to build trustful relationships before negotiation starts. Lastly, while appointing North–South co-chairs is now common practice in the UN, the dilution of traditional North–South blocks can complicate the selection of trusted co-chairs.

The 2015 lessons suggest that breaking up traditional North–South blocks fosters cooperation and progressive outcomes. While the North–South divide is currently more pronounced, shifting alliances and the push for multilateralism have also created fluid, dynamic blocks. This indicates that a negotiation format that suspends traditional blocks is still relevant. Moreover, the current practice of multi-alignment offers the opportunity to form even more diverse troikas.

A science-based format and design thinking might reconcile the currently diverging understandings of (sustainable) development. However, without a stocktaking phase this opportunity would be lost. The negotiators in 2015 recommended a *concrete and progressive zero draft*, drafted by co-chairs that are trusted by the Global South. The negotiations for the Pact for the Future[6] indicate a change in tactic towards a vague zero draft that is then to be filled with suggestions by states. This may render negotiations more difficult (Beisheim, 2024).

In a nutshell, most lessons regarding the negotiation process are still applicable to the new context. However, special attention needs to be given to ensuring the inclusion of stakeholders and of a longer stocktaking phase in the process, and to considering a concrete, progressive zero draft.

3.2.2 Inclusion: ensuring participation of small states, civil society and decision-makers

The evaluation of the post-2015 process underscores the importance of involving a diverse set of actors, including the scientific and environmental communities and civil society, in order to de-polarise the policy process and to achieve high ownership and transformative results. Accordingly, barriers to participation identified in the post-2015 negotiations – such as time, financial, language and procedural constraints – must be minimised in the beyond-2030 process. Widespread digitalisation and technical innovations offer new opportunities to remove

6 The Pact for the Future, outcome document of the UN-led Summit of the Future, aims to strengthen commitment to, close gaps in and accelerate implementation of the SDGs.

some barriers to participation, such as live streaming negotiations and AI-supported simultaneous interpretation. Online surveys reach more people nowadays but must allow respondents to make transformative choices. For example, the current My World Survey's limited focus on prioritisation of respondents' concerns does not allow respondents to voice altruistic preferences or take the interconnectedness of SDGs into account. Moreover, interaction between civil society and policymakers should not be limited to the digital space.

Unfortunately, engagement and inclusion of civil society, smaller states and high-ranking decision makers has become more challenging in today's geopolitical landscape. Rising autocratisation in some countries hinders civil society engagement and increases resistance to stakeholder engagement and open negotiations (Nord et al., 2024; Novoselova, 2025). For instance, at the request of the Like-Minded Group, the Pact for the Future negotiations were closed to civil society, limiting their ability to provide feedback or to understand state positions. The number and density of discussions surrounding the Summit of the Future process made it difficult for small states to follow. At the same time, waning political support for the SDGs could make it harder to attract key decision-makers to negotiations. Process designs from 2015, such as arrangements for determining speaking order, should thus be complemented by efforts to build support for the new agenda, including the development of a common narrative and engagement of norm entrepreneurs able to influence state policy.[7] In contrast, corporate actors have disproportionally gained influence in formal sustainability fora since 2015 (Fukuda-Parr, 2023). This should be complemented by ensuring equal representation of science and civil society. An ally for the inclusion of civil society and increased transparency is the Small States Group led by Singapore (Baumann et al., 2024).

In sum, an *active* effort, which counteracts current challenges, is needed to ensure that all groups are included, heard, and have access to information and interaction, in both informal and formal fora that influence the beyond-2030 process, including the HLPF and SDG Summit.

3.2.3 Fora: ensuring inclusive formal and accountable informal fora

How suitable are existing formal and informal fora for shaping the beyond 2030 process? The lessons from 2015 indicate that outcomes from more transparent, inclusive and diverse fora are perceived as more legitimate. The HLPF and SDG Summit, but also "plurilateral" fora such as the G7 and G20, will be relevant and suitable to support and influence the beyond-2030 process, for example on the choice of negotiation format, on taking stock of the SDGs, and for rallying of support.

The HLPF and SDG Summit will likely define the beyond-2030 negotiation format (UN, 2024). The HLPF enjoys strong Global South trust, unlike newer fora such as the Summit of the Future, which initially raised concerns about sidelining the 2030 Agenda (interview 4). Trust is also established through inclusion and transparency: all UN Member States, specialised agencies, and diverse stakeholders can participate. Non-state stakeholders have access to official HLPF meetings and informal negotiations and can organise side events. Trust is also established through easy interaction and peer learning, for example, through Voluntary National Reviews, during meetings and side events. The HLPF is concluded by either a yearly minister-level meeting which results in non-binding declarations, or a quadrennial head-of state meeting ("SDG Summit") with binding negotiated agreements. Stakeholders can provide input to the zero draft of the ministerial declarations. The HLPF is well-suited to take on a central role in shaping the beyond-2030 process due to its trustful atmosphere, which is fostered by inclusivity, and due to its cross-sectoral nature, which connects various specialised SDG-related fora. Further, the inclusive and participative format of the HLPF makes the emergence of two parallel tracks less

7 Countries that drive the beyond-2030 process may include the supporters of the Summit of the Future such as Colombia, Costa Rica, Namibia, Singapore and Viet Nam (Baumann et al., 2024).

likely, thus increasing efficiency. Finally, its existing review mechanisms facilitate stocktaking, which can serve as a basis for choosing the type of agenda to pursue, and for potential negotiations about the agenda's content.

However, the HLPF would have to be adapted to be a truly suitable forum for stocktaking and goal negotiation; its eight-day annual schedule is too short for trust-building and meaningful dialogue needed to negotiate transformative binding agreements. A possible preparation for the HLPF would be regional dialogue sessions that would enable governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders to engage in the process and feed in their concerns and ideas on a beyond-2030 framework. Moreover, inclusion and transparency must be further strengthened by addressing the barriers outlined in the previous sub-section on inclusion. To maximise transparency and stakeholder engagement at the two fora, several measures should be taken. These include live streaming all events and negotiations, allowing spontaneous questions, and accountability regarding how stakeholder recommendations are incorporated into outcome documents (Martens, 2024; Murphy et al., 2022). Furthermore, the SDG Summit is ill suited for negotiating transformative agreements, as the UN consensus principle can dilute outcomes. The summit also faces similar barriers to transparency as did the IGN in 2015. Finally, the US – having under-estimated the OWG format in 2015 – may not agree a second time to an inclusive, OWG-like format (interview 5 & 6).

Outside the UN, BRICS+ and "G" formats can play a complementary role by streamlining strategies on beyond-2030 among influential states, and by expanding the bargaining matters that can be brought to the negotiating table and "exchanged" for sustainability issues. The G7, with its relatively homogenous membership, is more effective at achieving consensus, whereas the G20 offers greater diversity and representation of the Global South, though this diversity makes consensus more challenging. Stakeholders can provide recommendations to political leaders in the G formats through *engagement groups*, which consist of non-political stakeholders from each member country.

Regarding informal fora, the 2015 experiences highlight the need for pre-determined accountability processes that define how results from informal stakeholder consultations (digital surveys and national consultation fora) feed into the decision-making process. This could be implemented in the current My World Survey (UN SDG Action Campaign et al., 2024). While its results will be shared with national leaders, it remains unclear if they will be representative and how they will feed into UN political decisions.

Thus, this section argues that accountability of accompanying consultation processes needs to be increased. At the same time, existing fora such as HLPF and its SDG Summit, the BRICS+ and G formats can be leveraged to conduct and prepare negotiations for the format of the beyond-2030 process. However, for negotiations of the content of a new agenda, the HLPF still lacks a long-term stock-taking process, and accountability barriers of the SDG summit would have to be addressed.

3.2.4 Fault lines: continued relevance and new issues

3.2.4.1 Continued relevance of fault lines from 2015

Section 3.1 reveals that most fault lines from 2015 are still debated in today's international landscape – specifically, human rights, distribution of financial burden and responsibilities to preserve global public goods, inequality, and growth–environment trade-offs. In addition, some issues, on which agreement had been reached in 2015, such as follow-up and review mechanisms, and the ambition and quantification of goals and targets, will likely re-emerge as disputed issues in the beyond-2030 discussions, given the current resistance to accountability by some states (Worden & Inboden, 2024). Similarly, the withdrawal of US support for gender and reproductive rights, and the EU's lack of support for technology sharing will likely re-open debates on

these issues. In addition, new fault lines emerge: legitimacy and reform of international institutions, AI regulation, cross-border spillovers, global taxation and global emergency response.

3.2.4.2 Impact of conflicting country positions on transformative outcomes in a new agenda

Which positions undermine or strengthen existing principles of the 2030 Agenda and its implementation? Autocratisation and systemic rivalry have led some states, including China and Russia, to detach democratic and human rights from sustainable development. These efforts have been evident in platforms like the HLPF, where, for example, Israel sought to revise the 2030 Agenda's language on foreign occupation (Martens, 2024), and Russia positioned itself against human and gender rights and stakeholder engagement (Novoselova, 2025). Some low-income countries align with these countries as developing partners or refrain from sanctioning them, in particular Russia, for pragmatic reasons, prioritising basic needs over values. Notwithstanding this, democratic and human rights values are supported by many Global South and North states, with the former often demanding their consistent application and the dismantling of Western double standards, such as in the Israel–Hamas conflict (Beisheim & Brozus, 2024).

The Pakistan-led Like-Minded Group has been lobbying for *prioritising economic development* and greater *industrialised country contributions* to sustainable development via financing and emissions reduction, particularly at the Summit of the Future (Beisheim, 2024; Beisheim & Brozus, 2024). On the one hand, the greater responsibility of historic greenhouse gas emitters and high-income countries aligns with the CBDR principle and the right to development mentioned in the agenda. On the other hand, the prioritisation of economic growth contradicts the indivisibility of the SDGs and thus could be interpreted as revisionist.

In contrast, regulating *international spillovers* can be seen as reformist. It expands the agenda's principle of indivisibility by taking into account a new interlinkage: issues and actions influencing sustainable development across borders (Berger et al., 2024). For instance, the regulation of global value chains could enhance sustainable development and improve over the status quo of insufficient regulation by avoiding the shifting of responsibilities and negative effects between countries.

Financing for the SDGs remains deficient. While closing this gap would be a step towards reaching the agenda's objectives, there remains disagreement between high- and low-income countries on the distribution of costs, and reluctance of international financial institutions (IFI) to sufficiently shift their focus from development to sustainable development. Notwithstanding this, some progress to free up resources has been made in the Pact for the Future (2024) and the 4th Financing for Development Conference (2025) in the areas of debt, additional resources, and taxation of high-net-worth individuals. With regard to technical cooperation, the reluctance of the US and EU to *share technology* with key actors such as China (Bunde et al., 2024) likely represents a step back from the 2030 Agenda.

Reforming multilateral institutions for greater participation and voice, in particular of LMICs, aligns with SDG 16's goal of inclusive institutions. It is supported by states that strive for a multipolar world order,[8] as well as states that feel that global institutions are skewed towards the Northern states' interests. At the same time, there are proposals by more autocratic states – such as the afore-mentioned like-minded group at the Summit of the future and HLPF – to curtail the influence of non-state actors (UN institutions and civil society) on state affairs. These proposals are a step back since they weaken the legitimacy of international institutions and international cooperation. This was illustrated by Russia's claim at the HLPF 2025 that sanctions imposed on Russia inhibited sustainable development.

8 The "Nordics", Costa Rica, Germany, Mexico, Small Island States, Asian countries (e.g. Indonesia and Thailand), which aim to reduce China's power in their region, some authoritarian states, block free states (particularly Colombia) (Beisheim & Brozius, 2024).

3.2.4.3 The current context's influence on the likelihood of solving recurrent issues and applicability of best practices

The likelihood of solving recurring issues will be affected by the current worsening crises and political power shifts. In principle, the greater urgency to solve some established fault lines, (such as the growing financing gap, in particular in light of the debt crisis), might give new momentum to these issues and open up room for compromise. In contrast, escalated conflicts and the right-wing shift of some governments will likely entrench issues such as foreign occupation and human rights. Furthermore, changes in positions of influential actors, such as the EU's reluctance to share technology, or the stand made by other actors – such as the US – on gender rights and health, can tilt the balance of power on issues that had been agreed on in 2015. Similarly, political power shifts within and between countries bestow greater political power on some Global South countries to tilt the discussion towards their position. These unclear majorities, and limited room for compromise on the above issues, means that solving them in the beyond-2030 negotiations requires de-polarisation through trust-building and cooperation. It may also be possible to build compromises on less polarising sub-issues, such as continued sharing of some less-debated technologies, for example, for extraction and processing of critical raw materials (Bunde et al., 2023; Bunde et al., 2024).

The five best practices from 2015 for solving fault lines – early definition of the agreement process, civil society lobbying, informal mediation by countries, cooperation between IGN and FfD chairs, and avoiding unnecessary watering down of goals, targets and indicators – are predominantly still applicable to the beyond-2030 negotiations. While current attempts to exclude civil society from negotiations might weaken its influence, actors such as the Beyond 2015 coalition managed to influence the process even without formal accreditation in 2015.

Contemporary attempts to water down commitments to the 2030 Agenda have been made by, for example, Israel and Russia in the Summit of the Future negotiations, and the US during the preparations for the 4th International Conference on Financing for Development (Beisheim, 2024; Olivié, 2025). Watering down was frequently used in 2015 to smooth conflicts over debated issues, but reduced the ambition of targets – and should thus be minimised in the beyond-2030 discussions. Contributing factors to dilution in 2015 were low availability of indicator data and data control by select institutions, reluctance to accept binding commitments, rigid deadlines and lobbyism. Except for some improvements in data availability, these obstacles will likely re-occur unless explicitly addressed. Early action is crucial, as later revisions have proven difficult, and vague targets result in weak indicators.

Debates over binding commitments, in particular regarding target quantification, are particularly likely to resurface, as concerns about national sovereignty and insufficient capabilities to implement targets remain relevant in today's context of rising autocracy, nationalism and funding shortfalls. A third, but hidden, reason to oppose quantification could be lack of commitment. Each concern calls for different solutions. S*overeignty concerns*, while often serving as token arguments, can be appeased by highlighting states' freedom to define and prioritise their own national indicators. If *capabilities* are limited, two measures can mitigate this concern. The first involves providing low-capability countries with the means to reach targets and indicators. While both technology sharing and financial support are currently debated issues, at the minimum, capability development and digitalisation assistance could support domestic resource creation. Secondly, one can pre-define differentiated national indicator targets that are binding and ambitious but perceived as fair and attainable with national capabilities. For example, contributions could be determined through countries' initial position on an S-shaped transition path (Klasen & Lange, 2012; Rippin, 2014),[9] or based on whether a country is currently above or

9 Klasen's approach should be adapted to sustainable paths that differ from last century's country paths.

below a sustainable living standard (Rodrigues, 2024).[10] Low *commitment* calls for quantified targets. If these are not politically feasible, an alternative is to set principles at the highest level which, if then broken down to actions at lowest level, leave little leeway.[11] Moreover, lessons from 2015 suggest that allocating more time to the less polarised formats, such as the OWG, could help achieve consensus on concrete target values. These need to be complemented by a strong monitoring framework and other incentives to hold states accountable. In addition, clustering of SDGs or targets, for example by interlinkages, could impede cherry-picking (Rippin, 2014; Sachs et al., 2019). The adoption of the conceptual framework of the Global Sustainable Development Report 2019 and 2023, clustering the SDGs around transformation areas and levers, can serve as a promising starting point to reflect on interlinkages. Finally, strategies that increase ownership of the SDGs and targets in general remain crucial (see Section 3.3).

Lobbying on behalf of vested corporate and political interests can be counter-balanced by other stakeholders. For instance, in 2015, MGoS and the Beyond 2015 coalition prevented the dilution or deletion of selected goals and targets. However, stakeholder access to fora in which targets were finalised (IGN) and indicators set (IAEG) was limited. Increasing transparency of these fora for civil society and the scientific community might provide important checks and balances. Watering down in the indicator-setting process can also be mitigated by selecting scientists with a sustainability focus and by pre-publishing guidelines for indicator selection, which will encourage scientists to take interlinkages between targets into account.

This section has shown that many fault lines remain relevant, albeit supplemented by a few new ones. Successful strategies for solving fault lines are still applicable, while strategies that led to sub-optimal results in 2015 need to be replaced by new approaches that avoid watering down the aspirations of the beyond-2030 negotiations.

3.2.5 Negotiation strategies: adaptation to new political, digital and legal developments

Negotiation strategies nowadays have to be adapted to four characteristics of the current context. First, *multi-alignment* of Global South countries across traditional blocks and by topic. Second, *alternative development definitions*. Third, *digital and AI-generated misinformation*, which is increasingly used to influence world politics. In particular deep fakes, currently most used by China and Russia, contribute to trust erosion and can lead to inaction by spreading doubt, dividing allies, or mobilising new groups (Kleemann, 2023). Fourth, *rights of non-human entities* other than businesses. Civil society has increasingly invoked such rights in courts to accelerate progress on the SDGs (UNDP, 2024). We describe below how these four characteristics influence the applicability of our lessons learned in 2015.

As ownership of the 2030 Agenda has been dwindling, we need to find ways to build and maintain ownership of the beyond-2030 process. As in 2015, early support for a beyond-2030 framework can likely be secured by engaging key *norm entrepreneurs* in influential fora and *analysing reasons for resistance* in today's politically fragmented landscape. However, success of the norm entrepreneurs approach also depends on who chairs key fora in the lead-up to 2030 – a yet unknown variable. In addition to these established strategies, the potential for multi-alignment now allows us to form new, diverse alliances where interests align (Beisheim & Brozus, 2024), even in formerly polarised fora like the IGN. These alliances are now more topic-

10 One drawback of this approach is the low incentive for countries below the threshold to increase efforts for environmental sustainability.

11 An example of a general principle is "the stock of resources for the next generation should be preserved".

specific, requiring fault-line specific analysis of state positions.[12] Topic-specific alliances with subsets of G77 countries may be possible on the issues of civil society and youth inclusion in UN discussions,[13] human rights, the UN as an independent multilateral actor (Small States Group), gender (Small States Group and Latin American Countries[14]), climate (SIDS), taxes and debt (African Group) (Baumann et al., 2024; Beisheim & Brozus, 2024).

During the negotiation process, ownership can be created through *co-creation* and *a science-based common knowledge and communication base*. Some powerful actors, such as China and the Group of Friends in Defense of the Charter of the UN, disproportionately influence positions of the G77 (Baumann et al., 2024). At the same time, multi-alignment renders small and low-income countries more resilient to pressure from single or groups of countries (Beisheim & Brozus, 2024; Ishmael, 2024); this makes it unlikely that the creation process will be dominated by a few Global North players. Similarly, establishing a science-based knowledge base remains relevant; it can soften competing development agendas (Munro, 2023) by promoting a joint understanding of sustainable development and best pathways to achieve it. It may also counteract the rising influence of fake news (in combination with AI regulation). The next Global Sustainable Development Report, to be published ahead of the SDG Summit in 2027, will likely play a key role in this respect. Finally, strategies before and during negotiation must address new causes of ownership loss, such as frustration due to the perceived gap between talk and action in implementing Agenda 2030, or open denouncement of the SDGs by key players such as the US.

Negotiation strategies to de-polarise and reach c*onsensus on highly disputed issues* remain relevant. Unnecessary conflict, North–South polarisation and distrust in the UN hinder transformative agreements even where interests of low-and high-income countries align (Baumann et al., 2024). In this respect, Beisheim and Brozus (2024) suggest that middle powers are particularly suited to take on a *mediator* role. In addition, while civil society is rejected as a relevant actor by some states, their mediation efforts are even more called for in times of entrenched conflicts. Use of ambiguities as a negotiation strategy should be avoided, if possible, and conflicts and their causes named and decided transparently and clearly.

In 2015, parallel agenda proposals produced one ambitious outcome agenda but strained resources. Today, competing agendas risk yielding a less progressive framework (Munro 2023), or several, conflicting, agendas as a result of economic competition and polarisation, undermining global cooperation (Geißelmann, 2024). To prevent this, politicians holding key positions in groups like G77 or BRICS+ should be convinced to support a progressive agenda. However, respect for diverse perspectives has to be balanced with caution against cultural arguments that justify harmful practices (Munro, 2023).

Similarly, most strategies used by civil society in 2015 to support transformative results – such as *generation of arguments and attention* for selected topics – are easily transferable to the new context. There are two exceptions. First, *lobbying individual states* – albeit still resource-intensive – may now be more fruitful for civil society than a focus on state groups, due to shifting alliances and multi-polarity. Second, *cross-community communication and action* remains relevant, but diverging approaches – ranging from activism to leveraging binding international law – could fragment civil society efforts. Moreover, siloed thinking is still widespread, for example in the peace and governance communities (interview 3), and entrenched by siloed fora. The HLPF, however, as discussed above, holds the potential to connect communities and highlight interlinkages of their respective issues. At the same time, some participants at the

12 Beisheim and Brozius (2024) and Baumann (2024) offer an overview of various states' support for a transformative agenda.

13 Especially Cabo Verde, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Timor-Leste, Vanuatu; informally also Brazil and South Africa; and India for sustainable development but not security issues (Baumann, 2024).

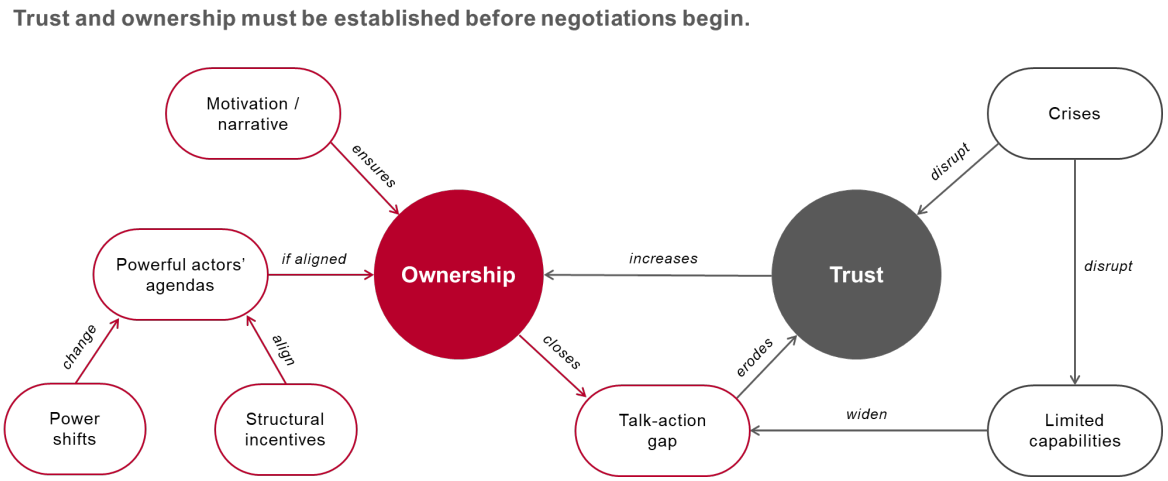
14 Especially Colombia, Costa Rica and Mexico (Baumann, 2024).

Future of Sustainable Development Workshop, Groningen (6–8 October 2025) voiced the opinion that stakeholder work at the UN has become less coordinated due to a proliferation of stakeholders and untrained representatives.

3.3 Next steps: preparations before and beyond the negotiation phase

Lessons learned from 2015 not only need to be adapted to today's context – the context itself can and should be shaped to create conditions conducive to transformative negotiations. This work must begin well before formal talks start. While this paper has focused primarily on the negotiation phase, experience from the run-up to the SDGs indicates that building broad commitment to a beyond-2030 agenda requires sustained efforts to strengthen ownership of and trust in the negotiation process and a new agenda outside the negotiation room. Figure 2 illustrates the key factors that influence ownership and trust, and highlights how these interact.

Figure 2: Determinants of trust and ownership



Source: Authors

- This time, the Beyond 2030 process is initiated by all UN Member States, in lieu of an initiative of Global South countries. Accordingly, co-creation of the South has to be ensured, while taking into account small states' diplomatic resources. Moreover, alternative development agenda proposals may now come from revisionist actors and should thus be avoided.
- Actors who expect the goals to be merely updated or extended may advocate for a shorter process compared to that of 2015, moving straight into negotiations. However, a prolonged stocktaking phase is vital to reduce polarisation, increase trust and ensure facts-based, ambitious outcomes.
- Recent successful demands for the exclusion of civil society from UN debates and negotiations need to be counter-acted. Moreover, we need to find ways to incorporate demands of non-traditional stakeholder groups such as youth delegates and activists. Technical opportunities offered by digitalisation for greater inclusion should be exploited, but accompanied by accountability measures and precautions to counteract misinformation. Potential future negotiation fora such as the HLPF and SDG summit should be adapted to become even more inclusive and transparent.
- While disruptive actors have gained power, multi-alignment may offer opportunities for topic-specific alliances.

One way to ensure ownership early on is to find and promote **a compelling narrative** that **intrinsically motivates stakeholders**. The SDG's motivation had several flaws: it failed to reconcile key tensions – namely CBDR, balancing present and future generations' needs, and reconciling social needs with planetary boundaries – nor did it sustain long-term support, or convey the need for changes in economic and power systems to achieve the goals. A new narrative should avoid these pitfalls, while motivating as many stakeholders as possible. Proposed narratives include functional approaches that emphasise, for example, climate change's irreversibility (Frangoul, 2022) and co-dependencies (Kamau et al., 2018), or frame financing for development as "investment" to reduce risk of conflict and climate costs (Achim Steiner in Global ODI, 2024) and crises as opportunities to "build back better" – rebuilding infrastructure and social systems sustainably rather than de-prioritising sustainable development (United Nations Department of Global Communications, 2020). In turn, moral narratives stress common humanity, equality and justice (Ishmael, 2024; Scholz, 2024).

Ownership also hinges on alignment with **powerful actors' agendas**. In this way, the rise of populist, nationalist and autocratic governments has weakened political commitment to the SDGs. Choosing a narrative that ensures support by actors currently not in power can sustain ownership when political power shifts. Moreover, weak national support for a transformative beyond-2030 agenda could be counterbalanced by strengthening democracy (interview 3) but also local and civic voices and action (interview 4) in the agenda-setting process. Internationally, giving small states greater voice in multilateral institutions relevant to sustainable development could increase their ownership of a global agenda (interview 3) and balance powerful states' influence. Additionally, **structural incentives** such as accountability and monitoring mechanisms can align national politicians' agendas with the desired public agenda.

Low **trust** can create a vicious ownership cycle whereby actors hesitate to commit or contribute to an agenda, fearing others will freeride or misuse resources. Reversing this cycle requires building trust and ex-ante credibility through the closure of the perceived and actual **talk–action gap** in SDG implementation. This starts with a realistic assessment of contributions, recognising the role of LMICs in climate action and the upholding of human rights, and acknowledging some HICs' double standards and backlog in human rights, inequality, and national indicator setting and achievement. A second step is to address the domestic talk–action gap and to minimise negative international spillover effects. A coalition of the willing can lead and showcase the benefits of national SDG progress. Where a talk–action gap arises from limited implementation **capabilities**, this requires support for low-capability countries, and resolving persistent disagreements on funding, technical aid, and fair distribution of responsibilities.

Both trust and capabilities are disrupted by the **multi-crises**, which undermine solidarity, deplete resources and fuel fears of technology misuse. Creating a climate of cooperation and trust therefore also requires preventive measures to mitigate violent conflicts, climate change, pandemics and economic turmoil and, wherever possible, leverage unavoidable crises for transformative change.

In essence, we need to create a foundation of trust and ownership before official negotiations begin. This requires creating a unifying and motivating narrative; addressing political power shifts, for example through democracy support; strengthening accountability mechanisms; closing SDG implementation gaps, including through support of low-capacity countries and acknowledging a fair distribution of responsibilities; and addressing the intensifying multiple crises.

4 Conclusion

As one interviewee argued, even a weak set of goals is better than no goals (interview 4). A collective framework is essential to address the worsening global, interconnected challenges beyond 2030 (UN, 2014). The evaluation of the 2015 negotiation process provides valuable insights into how to shape the beyond-2030 process. In particular, it teaches us how trust and a common knowledge base can be established through the right process design. It highlights that a combination of early, targeted lobbying of norm entrepreneurs and politicians in key fora and cooperation in small, dedicated groups increases support, but also that transparency and inclusion of diverse political and non-political actors in the negotiation process and large fora are crucial to achieving an ambitious agenda. Furthermore, we identify several main recurring fault lines: human rights and values, a joint motivation, systemic change, distribution of technical and financial responsibilities, and quantification and monitoring of the goals. The lessons learned also indicate negotiation strategies on how agreement on at least some of these fault lines may be reached without compromising ambition.

While most of these lessons remain relevant in the current context, some have to be adapted to changing power constellations and multi-alignment, and take into account new disputed issues such as AI, international spillovers, reform of multilateral institutions, and national sovereignty. Lower trust and weakened political ownership will likely make negotiations more challenging, reinforcing the need for a well-designed and inclusive beyond-2030 process, but also broader efforts to increase support for the agenda, driven by coalitions of the willing.

While we have gained valuable insights into the 2030 negotiation process – its fora, process design, inclusion, and negotiation strategies, along with how to apply or adapt these insights to the beyond-2030 discussions – the scope of our paper is limited. In the following, we highlight key areas that require further research to better inform the beyond-2030 process. These include the likelihood of new negotiations and agenda types, agenda content and implementation, how to tackle new fault lines and unsolved issues from the 2030 Agenda, and create ownership for a new agenda outside the immediate negotiation context.

A key question for the beyond-2030 process is whether to extend the 2030 Agenda, amend it to enable better implementation, or create a new framework with new or additional goals. This requires evaluating the current agenda and its implementation challenges, and identifying issues for inclusion that will gain importance in the future (Cernev & Fenner, 2024). It also calls for assessing feasible outcomes under evolving power dynamics. Geißelmann et al. (2024) explore which global power constellations and political goals may bring forth no or different sustainability agendas. Further research can help predict which elements of these scenarios are most likely to be realised.

Research can also help identify suitable, topic-specific partners for the beyond-2030 negotiations. This entails analysing the positions of international organisations – such as UN agencies, international financial institutions and regional development banks – and of states, including how positions are shaped by countries' experiences with implementation of the 2030 Agenda (interview 3), a potential withdrawal of the US, and the behaviour of influential middle-powers such as Brazil, India, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Moreover, researchers and policy makers should propose improved designs for a beyond-2030 process that build upon the successful designs from 2015 (and potentially other innovative concepts used in the UN) but are even more inclusive, less polarised and better equipped to mitigate the influence of vested interests, in particular for the indicator selection commission and IGN.

Finally, research plays a key role in understanding the drivers behind declining ownership and how to create conditions for renewed, broad-based support. This includes evaluating narratives

and motivations for sustainable development, testing their political and public appeal, and identifying effective communication strategies (Soergel et al., 2024). Research should also explore how to manage resistance to, and the side effects of, transformative change (Fukuda-Parr, 2023; Malekpour et al., 2023). Further work is needed to understand and counter the rise of populism, nationalism, and authoritarianism, and to enhance civil society engagement and accountability. To close the implementation gap, research can help fill data gaps on SDG progress (Sachs et al., 2024) and identify politically feasible ways to strengthen accountability and monitoring. Science can also guide how to secure domestic support for SDG action and reduce negative international spillover effects. Finally, further analysis is needed to understand the root causes of current crises, how to leverage them for transformative change, and how to pursue sustainable development in post-crisis contexts.

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