

The Transformative Power of the Sustainable Development Goals: Creating an Integrative and Coherent Framework for Multilateral Agreements

In September 2015, world leaders adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development along with 17 broad “Sustainable Development Goals” and 169 more specific targets. A key condition for this 2030 Agenda to be effective is that trade-offs between environmental protection, social inclusion and shared economic growth must be avoided. This again requires systematic integration and higher degrees of rule coherence to fundamentally reshape the relationships between environment, society, and economy. There are, however, severe limitations on creating such an integrated and coherent governance system for sustainable development. This is the focus of this paper. We analyze in particular the possibly transformative power of the 2030 Agenda regarding multilateral agreements that are key in implementing some of the goals and targets. Drawing on political and legal conditions, we examine three critical determinants of the relationships between these dimensions of sustainable development as targets for fundamental transformations: resource allocation, social justice, and economic structures. Traditionally, global governance efforts on integration are focused on policy integration between global institutions. However, we argue for a cross-scale integration approach that highlights governance efforts in bringing together institutions with clear scopes and jurisdictions. We develop a three-step analytical approach, consisting of (i) legally and politically defined objectives and purposes, (ii) screening matrix on jurisdictions and scopes of multilateral agreements, and (iii) in-depth analysis of key impacts and interactions. We have analyzed over 60 multilateral agreements, carefully selected from the databases International Environmental Agreement, ECOLEX and InforMEA. We follow the Earth system governance approach of defining trade-offs as broader types of institutional integration which go beyond policy integration as global governance efforts. Further, we conclude that normative incoherence can be reduced by a variety of general techniques, namely the establishment of primary rules across regimes and a reconsideration of treaty interpretation as means to increase rule-coherence.

This paper seeks to make a substantial contribution to the stream on “governance, social justice and cooperation”, as it provides novel insights to the normative dimension in the relationship between environmental sustainability and social justice in Earth system governance.

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