

# NGO mobilisation around the SDGs

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## NGOs ARE MOBILISING AROUND THE SDGs

NGO mobilisation is required to ensure the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are implemented at the national level. This study investigates how NGOs mobilise in European countries, with a special focus on France and Germany, in order to encourage action and to identify obstacles and ways forward. It appears that although NGOs are increasingly aware of the SDGs and have started to take dedicated action on them, this mobilisation is still biased towards development organisations and, more generally, towards organisations working on international issues.

## SPECIFIC ACTION IS BEING TAKEN BUT OBSTACLES EXIST

NGOs are taking specific action to communicate the SDGs to a broader audience, as well as to hold their governments to account for their domestic implementation. To do so, they are creating new advocacy coalitions involving NGOs from different sectors, partnerships that reflect the integrated nature of the SDGs, but are not always achieved without difficulty. They are also actively participating in official SDG implementation processes, but are beginning to express serious doubts about the credibility and policy impact of these processes.

NGOs can also take specific action to hold the private sector accountable or can contribute directly to the SDGs through projects that they conduct on their own or in partnership with other actors. However, among the NGOs interviewed, many were reluctant to take up these two roles. The SDGs raise fundamental questions about the role of NGOs, their relationships with other actors, and the allocation of responsibilities to make change happen.

## FURTHER NGO MOBILISATION IS NOT JUST DOWN TO NGOs

If the UN and national governments want to keep up the momentum for the SDGs, it is in their interest to facilitate the advocacy and communication activities of NGOs, as well as their direct contributions and participation in partnerships. Priority should be given to communicating the SDGs to the organisations that know little about them, especially those working on social issues. Governments should also put the SDGs higher on their agenda, as NGO mobilisation is highly dependent on whether or not they consider the SDGs to be politically credible. Furthermore, if governments want to harness action through multi-stakeholder partnerships, they need to address NGO reservations about collaborating with the public and private sectors. This could be achieved by basing these partnerships on clearly identified objectives and on a credible accountability framework.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In September 2015, the States adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The preamble of the ambitious, universal and indivisible 2030 Agenda states that: “All countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan.” (UNGA, 2015).

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are key actors in translating the SDGs from international commitments to specific action at the national level. Through the analysis of existing reports (Spitz, Kamphof, van Ewijk, 2015; African Civil Society Circle, 2016) and interviews with experts and representatives of ministries, we identified four roles the NGOs can take up to push forward SDG implementation at the national level:

- Holding governments to account
- Communicating the SDGs to a broad audience
- Implementing projects
- Holding the private sector to account

While we focus on the national level here, the same roles could apply for sub-national NGOs, provided that local and regional governments are closely involved in the implementation process, as Agenda 2030 suggests (UNGA, 2015 (§45)).

The aim of this study is to contribute to a better understanding of NGO mobilisation to date. More specifically, we investigate:

- To what extent the NGOs are already mobilised;
- What they actually do with/for the SDGs;
- What they see as the value added and the current limitations of the SDGs and their implementation

In so doing, we intend to inspire and support NGO action, but also to provide policymakers and funders with ideas on how to step up this much needed mobilisation.

In this study, we focus on European NGOs. A recent study shows that NGO awareness is particularly low in Europe, with 54% of respondents being unaware of their country’s SDG implementation plans (Together 2030, 2017). In comparison, in Africa only 29% of respondents were unaware of their country’s SDG implementation plans. This discrepancy poses a challenge if the SDGs are to be implemented in and by all countries, in a universal manner.

The translation of the SDGs at the national level is a prerequisite for their success. Consequently, although we also cover European NGOs working on international issues, we place special emphasis on national NGOs, some of which have regional and local branches.<sup>1</sup> Finally, since the SDGs are an *integrated* agenda that embraces all dimensions of sustainable development, we cover a wide range of NGOs working in different “sectors”: development, environment, social welfare, gender equality, and education.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study is largely based on 20 semi-structured interviews with NGO representatives, conducted between December 2016 and March 2017, as well as a number of complementary interviews with UN

1. In the scope of this study we did not take into account the following levels of operation: community-based organisations, city-wide organisations.

and government representatives. In addition, we took part in the civil society consultation process held in France by the Ministry of the Environment between June 2016 and May 2017, and organised a workshop in September 2017 involving NGO and government representatives from seven European countries.<sup>2</sup>

As for the interviews with NGO representatives, we adopted a comparative approach focusing mainly on NGO mobilisation in France and Germany. The choice of these two countries is based on the fact that although they are close and have many similar conditions, the degree of mobilisation around the SDGs is currently quite different in both. The comparative approach method was therefore especially helpful in identifying enabling factors, but also potential obstacles that are due to the country context.

The UN defines NGOs as “any non-profit, voluntary citizens’ group which is organized on a local, national or international level. Task-oriented and driven by people with a common interest, NGOs perform a variety of services and humanitarian functions, bring citizens’ concerns to Governments, advocate and monitor policies and encourage political participation at the community level.”<sup>3</sup>

Most of the NGOs we interviewed were umbrella organisations that grouped together several member organisations at the national level. This enabled us to get a broader view of what NGOs do with the SDGs, since we were able to ask not only about their umbrella organisation, but also about any members operating locally.

In our sample, as mentioned earlier, we chose NGOs from different sectors of activity. The following table shows how we chose our interviewees in France and in Germany. We reached out to both advocacy NGOs and NGOs implementing projects on the ground (it is possible for a single NGO to play several roles simultaneously).

We were unable to hold interviews with NGOs from all sectors, and we conducted more interviews in Germany than in France, and more with advocacy NGOs than with other NGOs. This could be due to the fact that the SDGs are better known in Germany, to both advocacy NGOs and NGOs in certain sectors, which may therefore have been more willing to discuss the topic. In any case, this explains why we focus more on the role of holding

the government to account, and should be borne in mind when reading and interpreting our results. The full list of interviewees can be found in the appendix.

Activity sector	French NGOs contacted	French interviews conducted	German NGOs contacted	German interviews conducted
Sustainable development	1	1	3	3
Environment	2	1	3	3
Welfare, poverty reduction (domestic)	3	1	4	2
Gender	2	0	2	0
Education and civic engagement	3	0	2	2
Development and international cooperation	4	2	2	2

### 3. ARE NGOs MOBILISED ON THE SDGs?

#### Mobilisation varies across countries

What is striking is that NGO mobilisation varies considerably across countries. In Germany there are more NGOs that know and work with the SDGs than in France. Every NGO we interviewed in Germany gave a resounding “yes” to the question of whether or not NGOs have taken ownership of the SDGs, whereas replies along the lines of “not yet” were more common from those in France. However, knowledge of the SDGs among French NGOs is increasing. Several are now thinking about closer partnerships and have committed to stepping up mobilisation around the SDGs.<sup>4</sup>

How can this difference be explained? In addition to the several possible explanations that will emerge throughout this report, two others are worth mentioning here: first, German NGOs seem to give more credibility to this UN agenda and perhaps to the UN in general. Second, the SDGs were adopted a few months before COP21 on climate change, on which the French government and NGOs focused their attention.

According to the participants of our workshop, NGO mobilisation around the SDGs appears to be particularly advanced in Italy, Belgium and Austria.<sup>5</sup>

2. Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Romania, Spain. Representatives from EU-based NGOs and one representative from Uruguay were also present. To watch interviews with participants, go to: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLMjMVFPWwsQ4-8b7LYC96Paj\\_hb49dGNK&disable\\_polymer=true](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLMjMVFPWwsQ4-8b7LYC96Paj_hb49dGNK&disable_polymer=true).

3. See more on: <https://outreach.un.org/ngorelations/content/about-us-o>.

4. On the occasion of the second anniversary of the SDGs, 30 NGOs jointly formulated their recommendations for SDG implementation in and by France, see more at: <https://www.coordinationsud.org/actualite/sommes-voie-objectifs-de-developpement-durable/>

5. As one way to advance mobilisation, SDG coalitions involving not only NGOs working on international issues but also CSOs working on national issues have been formalised in these countries:

### Mobilisation varies across sectors

In France, as in Germany and other European countries, whether an NGO knows about and works with the SDGs still largely depends on its sector of activity and, perhaps even more importantly, on its history with and interest in the UN agenda.

Development NGOs are more involved than others, for example. These organisations closely follow the UN agenda and were already mobilised around the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the predecessors of the SDGs, together with the Rio process on sustainable development. Environmental NGOs are involved to a certain extent, but mostly those that have been involved in the Rio process for a long time.

National social NGOs, on the other hand, are less mobilised around the SDGs, although this depends on whether or not they are used to working with UN agendas. Interest among social advocacy NGOs is steadily growing. Where social NGOs that implement projects on the ground are concerned, it is clear that many of them do not yet know about the SDGs. This is the case of many welfare organisations, for example. This is also due to their specific structure and to the fact that their local offices are not used to working with UN agendas.

The organisations that are more mobilised have an important role to play in communicating the SDGs to organisations from other sectors that are less familiar with international discussions. In Germany, this link has been made to some extent: NGOs working internationally have invited national NGOs to participate in an informal cross-sectoral network on SDG implementation by Germany. This explains why more and more organisations are getting involved, including welfare organisations and teachers' unions.

It is worth noting that the bias in NGO mobilisation towards development organisations reflects what happened during the SDG negotiations. According to some interviewees, development NGOs were much more active in this process, and only a few environmental organisations were involved, even though the decision to establish global SDGs was taken at Rio+20. NGOs acting exclusively at the national level were much less involved in the negotiation and consultation process, which makes it more difficult for them to join the process today. This is even more true for the local and grassroots level (Sénit, 2017).

For Belgium, see more at: <https://www.cncd.be/Objectifs-de-Developpement-Durable-5726>

For Italy, see: <http://www.asvis.it/>

For Austria, see: <https://www.sdgwatch.at/de/>

## 4. HOW DO NGOs USE THE SDGs TO HOLD GOVERNMENTS TO ACCOUNT?

According to the NGOs interviewed, the accountability role towards the government is the main role they have to play. They consider that responsibility for implementing the SDGs lies first and foremost with the government, and it is therefore no surprise that they put most of their energy into this role.

NGOs take up this role in different ways. 1) The first is of course by following and participating in the official SDG implementation processes at country or UN level. NGOs use these processes as windows of opportunity to advance their claims. 2) They also use the SDG indicators to monitor progress, albeit rarely. 3) Moreover, NGOs use the SDG framework as a reference in their advocacy work to reinforce their claims. 4) Finally, in order to have a greater political impact in these processes, they build NGO coalitions involving a broad range of organisations.

Below, we elaborate on these four types of action taken by NGOs to hold governments to account for the SDGs, showing what they actually do and identifying the limitations NGOs face.

### 4.1. Following and participating in official implementation processes

At the international level, countries meet every year at the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) to consider progress made in achieving the SDGs and to exchange on what they are doing domestically to reach those goals. France and Germany both volunteered to present their progress through a Voluntary National Review (VNR) in 2016.

At the national level, countries are “encouraged” by the UN to develop implementation strategies, building on existing planning instruments such as national sustainable development strategies, and many European countries have begun this process (Brimont *et al.*, 2017). Germany for example has already revised its sustainable development strategy and aligned it with the SDGs (German Federal Government, 2017). These official processes are an opportunity for NGOs to be heard, to highlight the progress still to be made in order for their country to become sustainable, and to push forward their policy options.

In Germany, NGOs were quite active during the revision of the sustainable development strategy and this is still the case. They publish position papers, release *spotlight reports* that critically analyse whether Germany's development model is sustainable (Forum für Menschenrechte, FUE, Venro, 2016),

and organise conferences and workshops. In addition, NGOs were invited to comment on Germany's Voluntary National Review during the HLPF.<sup>6</sup>

As already pointed out, NGOs are not equally active in all European countries, and especially in France. Why is this? Is it because these official processes are not sufficiently open to NGOs? In the European countries investigated, NGOs are able to participate in the national implementation processes, and the same is true at the international level. The problem is that NGOs have doubts about the outcome and more importantly about the impact of these processes on overall government strategy.

The lack of credibility of these national processes is particularly important in countries like France, where the policy instrument for SDG implementation remains unclear. "In France we lack an action plan for SDG implementation. Will there even be one? If yes, how will it link to the existing sustainable development strategy? Will there be two parallel processes?", asked one NGO.

There are doubts about the credibility of SDG implementation processes even in Germany. As one NGO representative said, "Here, we get involved. The real question is whether participation mechanisms are effective and whether they have any impact on the decision-making process." Although, German NGOs repeatedly stated that revising the Sustainable Development Strategy was a good start, NGOs are aware that this instrument had limited success in the past and warned about the restricted impact it is likely to have on the government's overall strategy in the future.

Given these reservations about the policy impact of official SDG processes and strategies, some NGOs do not see any value added in participating in these processes. Others that have been involved are beginning to express their disappointment about the discrepancy between the official SDG implementation process on the one hand, and the reality of political decisions on the other. According to one NGO: "In Germany more and more politicians talk about the SDGs, but what we would like to show is the discrepancy between the SDGs and the Volkswagen emissions scandal, the barriers towards a real reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the low quotas for women, growth in exports of small arms, and so on." The NGO continues by explaining that SDG implementation is often steered by environmental ministries that have little influence on these decisions.

So the real question for this and for other NGOs is how can they get more involved in the processes in which these decisions are actually made?

NGOs are also concerned about the HLPF. They expected this international forum to be a place where they could put pressure on countries, but those that took part in the HLPF in 2015 and 2016 were disappointed. From the viewpoint of these NGOs, the presentations by countries were perceived as a "public relations exercise". Since these presentations are the main accountability mechanism for the SDGs, the fact that they are perceived as such is a serious threat to the success of the SDGs. One participant in our workshop argued that given that the role of the HLPF and the national reviews as accountability mechanisms is ineffective, the most important role for NGOs in implementing the SDGs is to hold their governments to account.<sup>7</sup>

To sum up, NGOs have two major misgivings linked to official SDG processes at the national and international levels. The first is whether or not civil society participation mechanisms are linked to any specific outcome (e.g. sustainable development strategy). The second, even more important misgiving is whether or not these processes will have any impact on actual political decisions. All of these doubts about the political importance of the SDG implementation processes, both nationally and internationally, explain why some NGOs, in France in particular, invest little time and effort in them. They prefer to focus on other political processes where they can expect to have an impact.

## 4.2. Using the indicator framework

Most NGOs agree that the SDG indicators constitute a unique opportunity to monitor and compare the performances of countries around the world, be it on a specific topic or on the overall goals. The indicator framework, as part of the official process, is a powerful tool to hold governments to account for their promises.

However, in practice, very few NGOs have so far used the indicators in their advocacy work. One exception is the 2030 Watch project, launched by the Open Knowledge Foundation Germany,<sup>8</sup> to monitor the performance of Germany and other high-income countries on a sample of indicators.

Why do so few NGOs use the indicators as a tool to hold their government to account? Following up on the indicators is critical, but it requires certain

6. Giving the floor to civil society representatives at the HLPF to comment on national progress is a practice that has become quite common among European countries volunteering for a national review.

7. See more on : [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6dYIKGaQ6wU&list=PLMjMVFPWwsQ4-8b7LYC96Paj\\_hb49dGNK&index=3](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6dYIKGaQ6wU&list=PLMjMVFPWwsQ4-8b7LYC96Paj_hb49dGNK&index=3)

8. See more on: <https://2030-watch.de/en/methodik/>.



skills and is very time-consuming, as one NGO explained: “We would like to look at the indicators but we do not have the time”.

Moreover, the current state of the indicator framework is unsatisfactory for many NGOs. First, data does not yet exist for some indicators, particularly for the most innovative ones, which are the ones that would be of greatest interest to NGOs. Second, although some indicators have been agreed on, disaggregated data is currently unavailable, which is important to NGOs.

Furthermore, the number of indicators and the differences between national and international indicators can be confusing. The German sustainable development strategy, for example, does not systematically use the same indicators as the ones negotiated by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goals. France will also use a mix of UN and national indicators to follow up on its progress towards the achievement of the SDGs.<sup>9</sup> The Statistical Committee states that the official global indicators will be “complemented by indicators at the regional and national levels, which will be developed by Member States” (UNGA, 2017). So while complementing the UN indicators with national ones is necessary and useful, it may also constitute an obstacle for NGOs when comparing a country’s performance with that of other countries.

### 4.3. Referring to the goals and targets in their traditional sectoral advocacy work

Another way NGOs hold governments accountable for the SDGs is by integrating specific goals or targets into their traditional advocacy activities. One example is a French NGO coalition using SDG 3, on health, to support its call for greater ODA allocation to health.<sup>10</sup> Another example is a German NGO using Target 4.7 on civic education and education for sustainable development to widen its sphere of influence as “it gives us, as a development NGO, a mandate to get involved in the political education debate in Germany”.

The SDGs are used by many NGOs as a reference to add international legitimacy to their claims, claims they have sometimes been making

for decades, as the following shows: “The SDGs make our arguments more relevant. Suddenly, it is not just one environmental NGO that is making these claims, but a UN agreement. That adds more weight to our arguments.” NGOs, however, are aware that the SDGs are not a silver bullet: “It is not a very strong instrument, but it provides us with one more tool to put forward our arguments.” They are also aware that the strength of this instrument depends on SDG uptake by the government and its various administrations: “The SDGs are quite well known today by the different departments—probably better than in other countries thanks to their integration in our Sustainable Development Strategy. For advocacy, we believe the SDGs represent an added value”, as one German NGO explains.

What is striking is that very few of the NGOs interviewed refer to specific goals, and even fewer to specific targets or indicators (see Section 4.2). Instead, they refer to the overarching principles of the SDGs: they advocate “leaving no one behind”, they emphasise the importance of policy “coherence”, and they use the universal nature of the SDGs to support their claim that “domestic policies need to avoid negative impacts on third countries”. While these principles are very important, it is surprising that NGOs do not mobilise the more specific achievements of the SDGs.

One explanation is that NGOs working on a particular topic already refer to existing frameworks and targets, agreed nationally or internationally. These frameworks are often more ambitious or more tangible, and the SDGs do not therefore represent any added value for them.

In France for example, indicators have been established to monitor progress, and multiple targets have been adopted in recent years on climate, energy and biodiversity, all of which are more ambitious than those in Agenda 2030 (Hege *et al.*, 2017). This explains why some environmental NGOs do not see any value added in the SDGs: “the environmental goals are relatively weak and often do not extend the level of ambition beyond that which already exists”.

As far as social NGOs are concerned, they usually call for a human rights based approach to the SDGs. Although the SDGs are “grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [and] international human rights treaties”, some NGOs regret that the link between Human Rights treaties is not clear enough in the targets and indicators. A number of NGOs do not therefore see any value added for their sectoral advocacy work, as one welfare organisation told us: “We already have the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which is much more

9. The French list of indicators is currently being discussed in a dialogue between stakeholders and the national statistical agency. The fact that this dialogue is possible is interesting. Interaction between the national statistical agency and NGOs is not possible in Germany, where the statistical agency has no mandate to speak to civil society representatives.

10. See more on: <https://www.collectif-sante-mondiale.fr/collectif-action-sante-mondiale/>.

detailed than the SDGs”. Some NGOs also believe that the two frameworks are mutually reinforcing, and they call on governments and other stakeholders to use human rights to strengthen the SDG accountability framework.<sup>11</sup>

But even when the SDGs do bring something new to advocacy work, NGOs do not necessarily seize the opportunity. One NGO argued: “Some of the SDGs are quite specific, such as SDG 10.1 on income inequality. So it is reasonable to wonder why they are not used more by NGOs. What happens is that we become used to working with the indicators and goals we already know, and do not necessarily see the potential of the SDGs.”

#### 4.4. Building NGO coalitions

The most significant added value of the SDGs for advocacy NGOs is that they are an opportunity to create new—or to strengthen existing—coalitions. They enable NGOs to speak with a louder voice and to have a greater impact on decision-makers. As one NGO representative put it: “The SDGs appeared on the scene and I realised that there were no connections between the different sectors. We now have a joint position with more than 70 NGOs. This puts us in a powerful position, which the decision-makers understand, and so they want to meet with us.”

These coalitions are also a way to set the example for the government in terms of overcoming silos. “When we work across sectors as NGOs, we are setting the example. If we can overcome silos, so can ministries”, said one NGO.

Such coalitions can be seen in Germany, where an environmental and a development organisation have launched an informal network to strengthen their cross-sectoral collaboration, leading to common accountability activities on the SDGs. Around 40 NGOs (development NGOs, social welfare organisations, peace organisations, environmental NGOs, etc., as well as trade unions) published a joint position paper<sup>12</sup> in which they set out how Germany should implement each of the 17 goals.

Cross-sectoral NGO collaboration to support SDG implementation is also emerging in other

countries such as Belgium and, most recently, Austria.<sup>13</sup> At the EU level, SDG Watch Europe<sup>14</sup> brings together NGOs from different sectors and different European countries. In France, such a broad collaboration between sectors to support SDG implementation at the national level is still in its infancy. However, smaller scale partnerships exist, between different development NGOs for example. Although still in the early stages, collaboration among French NGOs is slowly increasing, with 30 NGOs having jointly formulated their recommendations for SDG implementation in and by France.<sup>15</sup>

However, building a coalition of NGOs that actually works is a major challenge that should not be underestimated. It is very time-consuming and there is often no funding for these activities. Furthermore, while NGOs claim that coming together allows them to speak with a louder voice, it is not that easy to find a common voice. Negotiating common positions can be complicated and some platform coordinators regret that NGOs tend to “cherry-pick” and focus only on their sectoral SDGs. The challenge is thus to work together in a way that is not just adding “silo” approaches to a long wish list, but exploring positions that overcome these silos. The coordinators are also worried that they will be unable to keep up the momentum over the years. Finally, they also wonder how, as a coalition, they can use the SDGs to work together beyond following the official SDG implementation process. It has yet to be seen, for example, whether these coalitions will be an opportunity to address tensions that may exist between NGOs representing different interests, and to find common solutions to societal problems such as energy poverty.

To sum up, existing SDG coalitions remain fragile and face challenges such as: will they go on functioning once the governments have defined their implementation strategies and monitor progress over the years? Will they conduct joint actions or develop common positions on more specific issues? “Now that we are sitting together, people find one another and new things can happen”, one NGO told us. As a step forward, one German NGO has initiated discussions on what SDG implementation at the national level means in terms of budget.

The future of these coalitions does not only depend on NGOs, but also on how governments and

11. As a practical tool to achieve this, the Danish Institute for Human Rights has developed a Human Rights guide to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), see more: <http://sdg.humanrights.dk/>.

12. German NGO Forum on Environment and Development ed. (March, 2016): Die Umsetzung der globalen 2030-Agenda für nachhaltige Entwicklung. Retrieved from: <http://www.forumue.de/die-umsetzung-der-globalen-2030-agenda-fuer-nachhaltige-entwicklung/> (27 June 2017).

13. For Belgium, see: <https://www.cncd.be/Objectifs-de-Developpement-Durable-5726>

For Austria, see: <https://www.sdgwatch.at/de/>

14. See more on: <https://www.sdgwatcheurope.org/our-work>

15. See more on: <https://www.coordinationsud.org/actualite/sommes-voie-objectifs-de-developpement-durable/>

the UN will implement the SDGs. At the international level, for example, some organisations are already of the opinion that the SDGs are not particularly “integrated” in practice: the weak inclusion of environmental NGOs in the HLPF, the predominance of social and development issues in the annual themes of the HLPF so far, and the fact that it is hosted by a UN Agency whose mandate focuses on social and economic affairs, are reasons put forward by some NGOs that have begun to lose interest in the SDGs. It is claimed that the SDGs fully integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development, but some think this is not reflected in the international implementation and review process.

## 5. BEYOND ADVOCACY – WHAT ELSE DO NGOs DO WITH THE SDGs?

Beyond their actions to hold governments accountable for achieving the SDGs, we identified three further roles NGOs can take up. NGOs can communicate the SDGs to mobilise citizens, they can hold private companies to account, and they are expected to themselves contribute to this global agenda. These roles are perhaps surprising in the context of the SDGs, since it is States, and not businesses, NGOs or citizens, which have signed the 2030 Agenda. Nevertheless, this Agenda states that all stakeholders “will implement this plan” (UNGA, 2015).

### 5.1. Communicating the SDGs

NGOs are aware that they have a major role to play in communicating the SDGs to the public. One of the objectives of raising public awareness is to encourage citizens to make their own contributions to those goals. Another is to increase societal demand for the SDGs, and hence the capacity of NGOs to put pressure on the government.

Some NGOs are already assuming this communication role. In Germany and France, we witnessed NGOs integrating the SDGs into their awareness raising campaigns. NGOs in the field of sustainable education are also active, with one example of best practice being the civil society coalition *Asvis* in Italy, which has catalogued existing educational material connected to the SDGs and has set up an e-learning course for school teachers.<sup>16</sup> The same coalition has also organised an awareness raising festival to mobilise citizens and decision-makers across Italy.

16. See more on: <http://www.asvis.it/activities/537-1471/education-for-sustainable-development>.

However, there are a number of difficulties that NGOs face when trying to assume this role. One of them, put forward in France for example, is obtaining funding for SDG awareness raising projects. It is worth noting here that the European Commission is now financing a Europe-wide communication and mobilisation project for the SDGs, which is being carried out by NGOs across 15 countries.<sup>17</sup> Two other intertwined challenges are the lack of media interest in the SDGs, and the complexity of the SDG framework, with all its goals and targets, which makes the SDGs difficult to communicate. These challenges are so considerable that some NGOs do not see communication as a priority.

### 5.2. Holding the private sector to account

NGOs are very aware that the private sector is quite active on the SDGs and that governments expect a lot from their financial and extra-financial contributions. This private sector engagement is met with some scepticism, however, particularly concerning whether it will lead to a transformation of business models. While most NGOs interviewed admit that private sector involvement is to some extent necessary to achieve the SDGs, they underline that this involvement must be transparent and ambitious, and that it is essential to ensure companies actually deliver.

At the international level, NGOs take up the role of holding the private sector to account in several ways. On the occasion of the UN Private Sector Summit 2017, a group of NGOs and human rights institutes called on businesses in an open letter to avoid repackaging existing commitments. They also stressed that these contributions should be more accountable and transparent and should place human rights at the heart of business.<sup>18</sup>

Some NGOs focus less on the contributions and commitments of single companies and more on the question of what role the private sector should or should not play in SDG implementation. Many NGOs we spoke to are worried that proponents of privatisation and public-private partnerships present the private sector as the most competent

17. The project is led by SDG Watch Europe and financed by the DG DEVCO programme DEAR (Development Education and Awareness Raising).

18. Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, Danish Institute for Human Rights, Institute for Human Rights, Institute for Human Rights and Business, International Corporate Accountability Roundtable, Oxfam International, Shift. (2017, September 13). An open letter to United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres and United Nations Private Sector Forum 2017 Participants. Retrieved from: <https://business-humanrights.org/es/node/162595> (2017, November 27).

actor in terms of providing the means for SDG implementation. A coalition of NGOs at the international level has written a spotlight report on the SDGs in which it criticises this trend and warns of its social, material and economic costs, as well as of a weakening of the public sector (Civil Society Reflection Group on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 2017). Most NGOs contacted are afraid that the public sector is outsourcing its responsibility for the SDGs to the private sector. They thus fear that strong private sector involvement in SDG implementation without a clear accountability framework will lead to a blurring of responsibilities.

At the national level, companies have started to communicate on their contributions to the SDGs via their philanthropy or CSR activities. NGOs could play a role in ensuring the transparency, ambition and delivery of these commitments, by verifying whether company engagement is merely lip service or actually involves a transformation of business models. They could do so by naming and shaming or by entering into partnerships with businesses, taking on the role of a “critical friend”.<sup>19</sup> The NGOs we interviewed, however, do not invest time in holding single companies to account for their commitments. This is also due to the fact that, since businesses have not signed the SDGs, NGOs find it difficult to hold them accountable.

### 5.3. Implementing projects

Another NGO role when it comes to the SDGs is to contribute directly through projects, either alone or in “multi-stakeholder partnerships” (MSPs) also involving private companies, local or national governments, and research centres. One example of this kind of MSP at the international level is “Champions 12.3”, a coalition of 30 leaders from private companies, national governments, international institutions, think tanks and NGOs, whose objective is to accelerate progress towards meeting SDG target 12.3, which seeks to halve per capita food waste and to reduce food losses. These champions intend to inspire action by leading by example, communicating the importance of target 12.3, showcasing successful strategies to motivate others, and advocating for more innovation and investment.

NGOs are called upon by governments to contribute to the SDGs through similar projects, including in France or Germany, where the mantra

is that “everybody should mobilise for the SDGs”. This call is met with some scepticism by the NGOs we interviewed, however.

As regards MSPs, the NGOs we interviewed appear very cautious, especially when these partnerships lack a clear accountability framework, featuring ambitious objectives and a robust monitoring tool. Entering into partnerships with governments or private companies raises concerns for those NGOs, which feel more comfortable in the role of external watchdogs, and insist again on the fact that what is needed first and foremost is action by governments to adapt their national regulatory and budgetary framework. They also fear not having enough weight in these partnerships to ensure commitments made by the other actors are ambitious enough and are actually delivered.

As regards their potential contribution through their own projects, most NGOs say that their activities already contribute to the SDGs and that they have not been waiting for the SDGs to take action. So, beyond just *rebranding* their on-the-ground projects, the question they face is: should we do more or differently?

Doing more requires having access to more financing, but so far the SDGs have not translated into a substantial increase in funding for NGOs, be it from public or private funders. NGOs report that donors have just begun to adapt tender requirements, mostly in terms of changes to the *wording* of project requirements. They also report new opportunities to request funding from other types of funders. “There is a new funding context”, a German NGO told us. “Today, as a development NGO, we could ask the Ministry of Environment for funding”. This is an interesting development and has been positively mentioned in the German context. However, such a development might raise concerns in some countries if it is not met with an overall increase in the resources allocated to NGOs. In this case, the SDGs could actually lead to further competition among NGOs for access to existing funding.

Rather than doing more, the SDGs could encourage NGOs to conduct their projects differently. “There is no SDG project”, as one NGO put it, but the SDGs can serve as an evaluation tool for existing and new projects to ensure that they are coherent, that they actively contribute to some SDGs and that they avoid negative impacts on others. A few NGOs are already thinking about using the SDGs as a tool to evaluate their own projects, such as WWF Europe, which developed an internal SDG Checklist. To what extent NGOs will use the SDGs as an evaluation tool is still unclear and will depend to a large extent on the orientation of donors.

19. Byanyima, Winnie (2016, November 30). Why Oxfam won't compromise on SDGs. In: Greenbiz. Retrieved from: <https://www.greenbiz.com/article/why-oxfam-wont-compromise-sdgs> (2017, June 7).

## 6. WAYS FORWARD

As we have seen, NGOs are progressively mobilising at the national level for SDG implementation. This mobilisation varies across European countries, but even in countries like France, NGOs are increasingly aware of the SDGs and have started to take dedicated action. However, this mobilisation is still biased towards development NGOs and organisations that are familiar with the UN system.

How can NGOs mobilise further?

Below we summarise the challenges NGOs encounter in their mobilisation around the SDGs and what could be done about these by NGOs but also by other actors. If the UN and national governments want to keep up the momentum for the SDGs, it is in their interest to facilitate the advocacy and communication activities of NGOs. Moreover, governments and the UN also have an interest in supporting NGO mobilisation if they want them to contribute directly to the SDGs, either alone or in partnership with other actors.

A first challenge is to embark those NGOs that know little about the SDGs or do not understand what benefit they could gain from them, especially those working on social or environmental issues at the national or local level. The NGO community has a key role to play here. The higher degree of NGO mobilisation observed in Germany is directly linked to the efforts of certain organisations, which are specialised in following the UN agenda, and in informing and mobilising other organisations for which the UN and global goals may seem far removed from their daily activities. The UN and national governments must also contribute to filling this gap through communication activities targeting NGOs that are on the sidelines, or by further opening their official implementation processes to those NGOs, designing those processes with them and making sure their areas of interest are considered.

Second, in order to further mobilise NGOs, policymakers must put the SDGs higher on their agenda. The mobilisation of NGOs, especially advocacy NGOs, is highly dependent on whether they consider the SDGs to be politically credible. NGOs have two major reservations about the HLPF follow up and review system and official national implementation processes. The first concerns whether or not these processes are linked to any outcome (e.g. sustainable development strategy). The second, even more important reservation is whether or not these processes will have any impact on actual political decisions. It is important to consider that there is a close relationship between NGOs making the SDGs a priority and governments

doing the same. This relationship goes both ways, leading either to a virtuous circle of action or a vicious circle of inaction and blaming one another.

A third way to further mobilise NGOs, and more specifically advocacy NGOs, is to build on the real value added of the SDGs. In many cases, advocacy NGOs in European countries already have access to various political processes on their specific focal areas such as climate, as well as official targets that are more ambitious than those of the SDGs. The SDGs do not therefore represent a major new opportunity to hold governments accountable on specific issues. Their value added lies more in their capacity to support the building of NGO coalitions working on environmental, social or development issues. Though challenging, these coalitions can give NGOs advocating for sustainable development a louder, more effective voice. Moreover, such coalitions are key to raising the interest of an increasing number of organisations in the SDGs, and it is the responsibility of the NGO community to build those national cross-sectoral collaborations, to bring them to life and to take advantage of them beyond the definition of implementation strategies by governments. Governments and the UN also have a role to play, by ensuring they truly integrate all dimensions of sustainable development when they implement the SDGs. This is worth remembering: some environmental NGOs, for example, have already begun to lose interest in the HLPF and the SDGs because they feel their focal areas are not sufficiently included in the discussions.

Mobilising NGOs to hold the private sector accountable remains a difficult task. It is important that governments and the UN make it clear that asking the private sector to engage is not a way to offload their responsibilities. Another way forward would be for governments and/or the UN to be more active in holding the private sector accountable, and to embark NGOs. One idea that emerged during our discussions with the latter was that governments (at the national level) or the UN (at the international level) should develop an “SDG charter” together with NGOs and the private sector, to be signed by all non-state actors communicating on their contribution to the SDGs. Such a charter would be one way to embed these commitments in a clear accountability framework that includes a list of requirements, such as respect for human rights, transparent monitoring and reporting, etc., and only the organisations that sign this charter would be registered as SDG contributors and invited to showcase their actions during the events organised by the UN or governments.

Encouraging NGOs to themselves contribute to the SDGs through their own projects is also a difficult task. Doing more than what they already do

will require additional funding. Doing differently requires both NGOs and funders—public and private—to realise that the SDGs can be used as an evaluation tool, to ensure the projects contribute to as many SDGs as possible and that they avoid negative impacts on others. What about taking action with others? Not all NGOs are interested in entering into MSPs, but for those that are, governments can play a more active, steering role at the national level rather than just calling for NGOs and other stakeholders to build such partnerships for the SDGs. They could identify the specific topics on which such MSPs are needed and organise a call for action, starting with the targets the country will struggle the most to reach, secure adequate funding for NGOs and support their call for ambition, transparency and delivery by linking MSPs to a clear accountability framework such as the SDG Charter suggested above.

Last but not least, it should be kept in mind that the mobilisation of NGOs is highly dependent on their financial capacity. Among the NGOs that clearly see the benefits provided by the SDGs, and which are convinced that they constitute an opportunity, there are some that are too financially constrained to launch new activities. To encourage more NGOs to take an active role in SDG implementation, whether through advocacy work, by communicating the SDGs to the wider public, holding the private sector to account or through new on-the-ground projects, public as well as private funders will have to increase their financial support. The fact that this support is greater in Germany than in France is one of the reasons given by NGOs to explain the different degree of mobilisation in these two countries.

## 7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Some NGOs are mobilising around the SDGs because they see an added value in this universal and integrated agenda. In other words, NGOs need the SDGs. At the same time, achieving this ambitious global agenda is a tremendous task and the SDGs need NGOs to deliver on their roles. In this study we have shown what these roles could be, and given examples of the numerous actions that NGOs are already undertaking to assume them. We hope that these examples will inspire others to

join the process, and that this study will encourage dialogue and mutual learning among NGOs from different countries and sectors. We have also identified some serious challenges to a broader mobilisation of NGOs around the SDGs, and have listed some ways for not only NGOs, but also governments, the UN and funders to contribute to overcoming them.

We would like to conclude by highlighting two issues that deserve further attention. First, in this study we considerably developed the role of holding governments to account. Many of the NGOs interviewed saw this as the most important role for NGOs in SDG implementation, especially given that official accountability mechanisms such as the High-level Political Forum are currently weak. We also showed that NGOs can and already do play other roles, such as communicating the SDGs, holding the private sector to account and contributing directly to the SDGs, either on their own or via multi-stakeholder partnerships. However, many NGOs interviewed showed some reluctance to take up the last two roles, as they fear this would lead to a blurring of responsibilities between NGOs, the private sector and States. Other NGOs did not show the same reluctance and expressed an interest in collaborating more with other actors, including the private sector, and sometimes even a need to do so. In this sense, the SDGs raise interesting questions about the roles of NGOs and more generally about the allocation of responsibilities between actors.

Second, given the doubts about the policy impact of official SDG processes and strategies, some NGOs do not see any value added in participating in these processes. They engage in more sectoral processes (such as those on energy, agriculture or development) where they believe decisions are really taken. They would benefit from reflecting on a number of questions: what are the most challenging SDGs for their country? What are the key political processes to target for those SDGs? And last but definitely not least: how can the interlinkages with other SDGs be taken into account? The main value added of the SDGs is that they highlight the challenge of policy coherence, and reforms such as the forthcoming European Common Agricultural Policy reform should take into account their impact on other countries, as well as on the environment, health, decent work and other SDGs. ■

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## APPENDIX

### List of interviewees:

Abshagen, Marie-Luise	German NGO Forum on Environment and Development (FUE)
Asali, Sami	Coordination Sud
Balz, Julia	NABU—Naturschutzbund Deutschland e.V.
Bouvier, Maelle	Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères
Carpentier, Chantal Line	UNCTAD
Chabrolle, Alan	France Nature Environnement
Darras, Marc	Association 4D
Darviot, Pierre-Antonin	Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères
Derdek, Noria	Fondation Abbé Pierre
Grigat, Sonja	Venro
Jesaitis, Maren	Oxfam Germany
Johann, Emilie	Secours catholique
Klinger, Ansgar	GEW—Die Bildungsgewerkschaft
Linner, Stefanie	Micha Deutschland
Lorioux, Vanessa	Ministère de la transition écologique et solidaire
Nicholson, Sally	WWF Europe
Obenland, Wolfgang	Global Policy Forum
Reichert, Tobias	Germanwatch
Rinjhout, Leida	SDG Watch Europe & Friends of the Earth Europe
Scholz, Imme	German Development Institute (DIE)
Scholz, Stefanie	Diakonie
Schwegmann, Claudia	Open Knowledge Foundation
Vedder, Alois	WWF Germany
Wenzl, Christine	Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland e.V. (BUND)





## NGO mobilisation around the SDGs

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