

Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci

Přírodovědecká fakulta

Katedra rozvojových a environmentálních studií

**RETHINKING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS?  
CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE 2030 GOALS.**

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MSc in International Development and Environmental Studies

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## Declaration

I, Zuzana Hudcova, LL.M. hereby declare that the Master thesis submitted to the Faculty of Sciences as a thesis graduation requirement under the guidance and supervision of Professor Doc. Mgr. Miroslav Syrovatka, PhD, is my original work and any theoretical and empirical literature have been duly cited and the sources have been duly acknowledged.

In Olomouc, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2023

.....

## Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were established in 2015 to achieve sustainable development in economic, social, and environmental dimensions by 2030. However, the SDGs have received criticism for their conceptual and systemic limitations, particularly regarding accountability, monitoring and measurement, ambiguity, trade-offs and internal clashes. This master thesis critically analyses the problematic and provides numerous recommendations to address these issues, including imposing its legal status, creating an independent unit to monitor compliance and performance, integrate the goals amongst themselves, their hierarchy, as well as integration of internal conflicts. Stemming from the initial analysis of 107 academic articles and its further research, this Master Thesis uses multidisciplinary methods to provide the recommendations.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Doc. Mgr. Miroslav Syrovátka, PhD, for his kind guidance, patience and his valuable advice on the research project.

Also, Thank you to my mum, my dad and Lilly for being an absolute inspiration.

## Instructions of the assignment (Initial research proposal)

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#### Zásady pro vypracování:

The sustainable development goals are an agenda adopted by the United Nations that aims to enhance and develop more sustainable conditions of living. This ambitious agenda faced numerous critical approaches for being inconsistent, impossible to implement, hard to monitor, or not realistically underlying the inequalities amongst the states. Moreover, this agenda is not legally binding, and therefore, the member states are not obliged to take measures to fulfill the goals. This master thesis will analyze the sustainable development goals' critique and will examine the goals efficiency in both developed and developing countries.

#### Seznam doporučené literatury:

Caprani, L., 2016. Five ways the sustainable development goals are better than the millennium development goals and why every educationalist should care. *Management in Education*, 30(3), pp.102-104.  
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Eisenmenger, N., Pichler, M., Krenmayr, N., Noll, D., Plank, B., Schalmann, E., Wandl, M. and Gingrich, S., 2020. The Sustainable Development Goals prioritize economic growth over sustainable resource use: a critical reflection on the SDGs from a socio-ecological perspective. *Sustainability Science*, 15(4), pp.1101-1110.  
Hickel, J., 2019. The contradiction of the sustainable development goals: Growth versus ecology on a finite planet. *Sustainable Development*, 27(5), pp.873-884.  
Weber, H. and Weber, M., 2020. When means of implementation meet Ecological Modernization Theory: A critical frame for thinking about the Sustainable Development Goals initiative. *World Development*, 136, p.105-129.

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## Table of Contents

<b>DECLARATION .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>INSTRUCTIONS OF THE ASSIGNMENT (INITIAL RESEARCH PROPOSAL).....</b>	<b>5</b>
TABLE OF FIGURES .....	8
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>9</b>
1.2 AIM OF THIS DISSERTATION.....	12
1.3 METHODOLOGY .....	13
<b>CHAPTER 2: ANALYSIS OF LITERATURE ON CRITICISM OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS .....</b>	<b>15</b>
DATA ANALYSIS .....	17
2.1 CATEGORIES OF SDGs CENTRAL TO CRITICISM.....	17
2.2 QUANTILES OF ANALYSED ARTICLES .....	20
2.2.1 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN QUANTILES AND CENTRE OF SDG CRITICISM .....	22
2.3 YEAR OF RELEASE OF ANALYZED ARTICLES .....	27
2.4 COUNTRY CLASSIFICATION BY WORLD BANK OF ECONOMIC LEVEL OF INSTITUTIONS RELEASING ANALYSED ARTICLE .....	30
<b>CHAPTER 3: EXAMINING THE NATURE OF SGDS .....</b>	<b>31</b>
3.1 NON-BINDING ESSENCE OF SDGs.....	31
3.2 LACK OF MEANS OF ACCOUNTABILITY AND EFFICIENT MONITORING .....	36
3.2A MONITORING AND MEASUREMENT OF FULFILMENT .....	36
3.2B ACCOUNTABILITY .....	38
3.3 AMBIGUOUS NATURE OF SDGs AND THE ROLE OF INDICATORS .....	41
3.4 LACK OF HIGHER EXTENT OF INTEGRATION WITHIN THE GOALS .....	42
3.5 EQUAL VALUE OF SGDS AND TRADE-OFFS.....	47
3.6 ARE SOME SDGs MORE EQUAL THAN THE OTHERS? .....	48
CASE STUDY 1: DEEPENING GENDER INEQUALITY IN NORTH-EASTERN GHANA (SDG 5).....	50
CASE STUDY 2: WORSENING THE ACCESS TO SAFE WATER DUE TO CLIMATE CHANGE IN JORDAN (SDG 6).....	51
CASE STUDY 3: CLIMATE CHANGE AND ITS EFFECTS ON HEALTH AND WELLBEING (SDG 3) .....	51
CASE STUDY 5: CONFLICTS AND UNSTABILITY AND ITS EFFECT ON SDGs AS A FRAMEWORK .....	54
<b>CHAPTER 4: FINDING POTENTIAL CLASHES.....</b>	<b>56</b>
4.1 ECONOMIC GROWTH (SDG 8) VERSUS THE ENVIRONMENT (SDG 6, 12, 13, 14, 15) .....	56
4.1.1 ECONOMIC GROWTH VS. ENVIRONMENT .....	57
4.2 ECONOMIC GROWTH VS. REDUCED INEQUALITIES .....	59
4.5 ACCESS TO SAFE DRINKING WATER AND NO HUNGER .....	61
<b>CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>62</b>
5.1 RECOMMENDATIONS LINKED TO THE SDGs AS FRAMEWORK (ESSENCE OF SDGs) .....	63
5.1.1 LEGAL FRAMEWORK .....	63
5.1.2 ACCOUNTABILITY AND MONITORING MECHANISM .....	63
5.1.3 INTEGRATION WITHIN THE GOALS .....	64
5.1.4 HIGHLIGHTING UPPER SALIENCE OF SPECIFIC SDGs.....	65
5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS LIKED TO THE INTERNAL CONFLICTS .....	66
5.2.1 ENVIRONMENTAL GOALS V. ECONOMIC GROWTH .....	67
5.2.2 ECONOMIC GROWTH V. INEQUALITIES .....	67
5.2.3 NO HUNGER V. ACCESS TO SAFE AND CLEAN WATER .....	68
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>72</b>

<b>ANNEXES</b> .....	<b>84</b>
1. COLLECTED DATA.....	84

## Table of Figures

Figure 1 This figure indicates the number of databases used in the research.....	16
Figure 2 This figure indicates the thematical scope of analyzed articles .....	17
Figure 3 This figure explores the scope of topic of criticism linked to SDGs as whole.....	18
Figure 4 This figure indicates the criticism of SDG 5.....	19
Figure 5 This figure demonstrates the criticism linked to SDG 6 .....	20
Figure 6 This figure highlights the quartiles of articles analyzed in this research.....	20
Figure 7 This figure explores the relationship between Quartile 1 and scope of criticism ....	22
Figure 8 This figure examines the relationship of Quartile 2 and center of criticism .....	23
Figure 9 This figure looks into the relationship between Quartile 3 and criticism of SDGs ...	24
Figure 10 This figure explores the relationship between Quartile 4 and criticism of SDGs .....	25
Figure 11 This figure examines the relationship between Quartiles and criticisms .....	26
Figure 12 This figure analyses the year of release and the criticism of SDGs .....	27
Figure 13 This figure examines the criticism of specific aspect of SDGs together with year .	29
Figure 14 This figure explores the economic classification of the institution releasing the article .....	30
Figure 15 UPR Structure .....	40
Figure 16 The value after analyzing states' prioritization of SDGs.....	47
Figure 17 Highlighting the importance of environmental SDGs (Rockstorm and Sudhey, 2016) .....	49
Figure 18 Environmental Kuznets Curve examining the relationship between economic growth and the environmental degradation (Kuznets, 1955).....	58
Figure 19 The Elephant Curve (Walker et al., 2018).....	60
Figure 20 Proposed structure of review session on SDGs.....	64



## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In late 1970s, it became evident that “the exponential growth in production and consumption within limited Earth ecosystem is not sustainable in long term.” (Novacek, 2001) The international community acknowledged this reality and established an international commission in effort to develop global response on sustainable development (Mensah, 2019). The commission was led by the Prime Minister of Norway Gro Harlem Brundland, seconded by the UN-Secretary General, Javier Perez, and years of research resulted in release of the 1987 ‘Our Common Future Report’ which, for the very first time, highlighted extremely important notion, *the sustainable development*. (Purvis, 2018) Numbers of scholars provided their own definition of sustainable development, for instance Brundland’s definition is the following: “development that meets the needs of the present while safeguarding Earth’s life-support system, on which the welfare of current and future generations depend.” (United Nations, 1987) On that note, the United Nations define this term as “as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (United Nations, 2023) Whilst different forms, shapes and patterns were followed throughout the years in order to approach systematic sustainable development, the efforts led to numerous international legal frameworks, as well as policies that were significant on local, national, regional or international level. (Chassagne, 2020) In 2000, the world leaders reunited to conduct a series of negotiation regarding the manners states should shift their policies towards sustainability again. This time, world leaders congregated in New York at the Millennium Summit which lasted 3 days, gathered approximately 150 world leaders, but most importantly, delivered the concept of *Millennium Development Goals*, or MDGs when abbreviated. In total 8 Millennium Development Goals aimed to eradicate extreme poverty, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality and empower women, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, providing environmental sustainability, as well as to create a global partnership for development. All these goals were supposed to be fulfilled in the period of 15 years, and therefore, by 2015. According to Lomazzi, “the Millenium Development Goals were the most widely supported and comprehensive development goals the world has ever established by then” (Lomazzi et al, 2014, p. 3) In effort to be able to measure national, regional and global performance, a set of indicators was established, and were particularly useful in encouraging funding and allocating aid efficiently. Whilst some of the MDGs were at least partially fulfilled in specific regions,

some were in the back of beyond of any stage of fulfillment, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. This is partly the reason why many scholars, such as Lomazzi et al. (2014) or Jakob (2017) approached them critically for their ambiguity and excessive ambition, inefficient data collection, lack of appropriate leadership of the MDGs enforcement, activating synergies arising from clashes amongst specific MDGs especially in the field of education, health and gender or overlooking the environmental destruction linked to the fulfilment of other MDGs (Lomazzi et al, 2014, p. 213), (Jakob, 2017, p.2). Yet, MDGs became a salient driver for a change, for example contributed to halving the population which lived in extreme poverty. (Aseefa, 2017, p. 2) Therefore, there was a urgent need to hand over and deepen the sustainable agenda to its successor, the SDGs that extended the agenda into other areas and added additional 9 goals, mostly principles enshrining environmental sustainable practices in the sphere of water, land, ecosystems, energy, climate change and need for sustainable cities, as well as deepened specific indicators and goals. The set of SDGs in the current settings was designed at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012, in Rio de Janeiro. (Grochova and Litzman, 2021, p. 712) Upon the negotiations and considered the urgency of establishment of genuinely efficient systematic leverage against climate change, SDGs faced multiple criticism. For example, Griggs and al. (2014), pointed out their skepticism towards the planned framework's profound efficiency (Griggs and al., 2014, p. 306). On that note, Constanza and al. (2016) distinguished how the concept of Sustainable Development Goals lacked required 'end goals', somewhat approval aspect for states for their compliance (Constanza and al. 2016, p. 354).

SDG	Goal	Criticism
1	Eradicate poverty	Lack of definition of poverty, (Cuaresma, 2016), Insufficient acknowledgement of inequalities, (Oerther, 2020), lack of emphasis on social protection, (Oerther, 2020).
2	End hunger	Limited focus on small-scale farmers, (Gil, 2019), Insufficient attention to gender equality, Disregarding the downside of high-tech solutions, Limited attention to food waste, (Atukunda, 2021),
3	Good health and wellbeing	Limited focus on mental health (Votruba, 2016), underrepresentation of non-communicable diseases. (Kuefogl, 2022)
4	Quality education	Narrow focus on access to education, (Saini, 2022), lack of focus on early childhood, (Brisset), education and non-formal education, (Boeren, 2019),
5	Gender Equality	Narrow focus on all genders, lack of LGBTQ, insufficient integration, (Ognuspactnum, 2020)
6	Safe drinking water	Limited focus on waste water management, (Winkler, 2018) lack of climate change acknowledgement, (Guppy, 2019),
7	Affordable and clean energy	Limited attention to energy governance, (Burke, 2022), no attention given to social justice, (Tucho, 2020),
8	Decent work and economic growth	Economic growth in spotlight whilst overlooking social and environmental impact, Overlooking environmental sustainability, (Steindl, 2022),
9	Industry, innovation and infrastructure	Limited focus on rural areas, Solely focusing on technology transfer, (Kuefogl, 2020),
10	Reduced inequalities	Inadequate focus on intersectionality, Limited focus on wealth inequality, (Oerther, 2020),
11	Sustainable cities and communities	No higher focus on rural areas, Utterly overlooking social inequality, contradictions, (Songuepta, 2020)
12	Responsible consumption and production	Not applied on corporate responsibility adequately, Lack of recognition of Global North-South division, (Gasper, 2019)
13	Climate Change	Limited scope of climate change adaptation, Not integrated sufficiently into the SDG framework, Oftentimes subject to trade-offs,
14	Life below water	Higher degree of ambition is needed to be codified in the indicators, Not considering the global governance in terms of the oceans, (Baker, 2023),
15	Life on land	Inappropriate attention to land-use change, (Katila, 2020), Lack of consideration of social and economic dimensions, (Kraus, 2022),
16	Just, peaceful and inclusive societies	Ambiguous indicators, Deflection from key issues, such as corruption, Limited accountability mechanisms, (Massey, 2022)
17	Partnerships for the goals	No concrete actions, Unbalanced power structure. (Filho, 2020)

As the table above implies, SDGs have been in a centre of constructive criticism and many of the weaknesses, either related to their structure, hierarchy, indicators, or integration, as well as on further aspects when being analysed on an individual level, were discussed by the academic community.

## 1.2 AIM OF THIS DISSERTATION

The aim of this dissertation is to analyze the weaknesses and strengths of SDGs, their nature, comparability and hierarchy. Likewise, this dissertation will critically examine relationships amongst specific SDG, such as growth-environment nexus, and will further assess to what extent is their relationship effective. Moreover, some other important deficiencies, such as issues with efficient measurement of states performance, non-legally binding status of SDGs or problems with insufficient integration amongst the indicators.

It is necessary to stress that whilst this dissertation aims to critically analyze the SDGs, the critical analysis is viewed by lenses of global governance and sustainable management, and therefore, does not aim to criticize the concept or establishment. In fact, this master thesis' objective is to provide recommendations on potential innovations which could be characteristic with higher extent of efficiency of the goal fulfillment, and therefore, enhancement of this mechanism in pathway to sustainable future. For these purposes, the central research question is the following:

***What are the weaknesses and rooms for improvement of SDGs in terms of increasing its efficiency?***

In order to be able to answer the central question, this research will break down in numerous sub-questions, such as below:

1. *What are the weaknesses linked to the non-binding nature of SDGs?*
2. *How are SDGs monitored and how are states held accountable?*
3. *To what degree are SDG indicators efficient?*
4. *Are SDGs sufficiently interconnected?*
5. *What are the issues linked to hierarchy and equal nature of SDGs?*
6. *Are there any potential clashes between specific SDGs?*

### 1.3 METHODOLOGY

This dissertation is primarily based on qualitative research methods, and therefore, a profound examination of various academic sources, such as academic writings, journal, official released reports by the UN, was conducted. While the research attempts to answer the central question which is stated above, the Master Thesis breaks into 6 sections according to the required information implying from the research' such questions. The methods of research used for different questions vary in nature as some of the questions are more focused on international law whilst others are focused on environmental management or global governance (and thus, international relations paradigms are applied).

As a very first step of this critical examination, an analysis of literature was conducted. This was done by searching articles on various scientific databases, such as the Web of Science, Scopus, Science Direct, JStor or Google Scholar. After inserting key words, such as "critical examination of SDGs," "criticism of SDGs," "weaknesses of SDGS," "inconsistencies of SDGs," "inadequacy of SDGs," or "failure of SDGs," the first 107 relevant articles were analysed and added as a base for analytical part of this study. The data collection in the course of this stage served as solid base of acquiring information and different approaches regarding specific SDGs and their respective critical perceptions. When processing the data, their years of release, quartile, income status from the institution, referent object of criticism and the source (database) were collected in effort to enable further data analysis attempting to investigate patterns and parallels of the data. Afterwards, the data was analysed by quantitative methods and the parallels between specific variables was investigated.

As for the first sub-question, regarding the weaknesses linked to non-binding nature, multiple academic articles are investigated. In the first section, the materials used for answering the sub question draw on research by Bierman (2017), Kotze (2016), Kim (2016) along with other international legal frameworks, such as *Paris Agreement*, *Kyoto Protocol*, *Iron Rhine Case* (2001) and *Argentina v. Uruguay* (2010). When analysing the nature of international law, a solid academic background is ensured by Klabbers (2017) and Shaw (2001). At the same time, in answering this sub-question, this Master Thesis leans on highly influential writings in the field of Global governance and International Relations, more precisely, Hans Morgenthau (1949) or Kenneth Waltz (1974), who provide explanation of states' behavior in the international community which depicts the environment of the sub-question.

Secondly, the second question investigates SDG's measurement and accountability mechanism. For this section, solely qualitative methods were used. More precisely, this section leans on scholars, such as Janouskova (2018), Guppy (2019), Hickel (2020), Kubiciewski (2021) or Ottersen (2017). Furthermore, a model of international human rights mechanism procedure, the UPR, is applied on the SDGs.

Thirdly, the third sub-question analyses ambiguity of the SDGs. When answering the question, academic articles from Burger and Parker (2022), Longford (2016), Filho et al. (2020), Engelbretsen (2017) or Gulseven (2020) provide an integral academic base for creation of further arguments.

Fourthly, as for fourth sub-question investigating the efficiency of integrations amongst the SDGs, again, merely qualitative research was conducted. Major academic contributions and evidence was based on Moldavska and Welo (2019), Lim (2018) and Rai (2019).

Fifthly, for the purposes of analysing the sub-question number five, hence, the equal value of SDGs and trade-offs, along with a prominent study by the Stockholm Resilience Centre (2018), by using qualitative research methods, this section also leans on various scholarly works, such as Berrone (2023) or Yang et al. (2020).

Finally, the last sub-question regarding the clashes between specific SDGs was likewise qualitative research methods based, analysing various articles such as Hickel (2018) or Kopnina (2022).

## CHAPTER 2: ANALYSIS OF LITERATURE ON CRITICISM OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

In order to be able to provide more throughout critical examination of SDGs, a literature analysis of in total 107 academic articles was conducted. In the course of this investigation, the following aspects of the scope of specific article became essential and therefore, were analysed.

Firstly, the “central” SDG was noted, amongst 17 goals, there was also an answer to choose “all of them,” and hence, an option to note that the article criticized either the structure, hierarchy or nature of SDGs, deflecting from putting one specific goal in a spotlight.

Secondly, during this analysis the academic quartier of each journal was looked into as well. In fact, quartiles became a manner of ranking academic journals based on their prestige and impact within a particular field of study, for the purposes of this research, the main academic disciplines were Social Sciences, Sustainability Studies, Environmental Sciences, Environmental management, Economics, Global Governance and Management Studies. It is also important to highlight that there are two main systems for ranking academic journals by quartiles, such as the Web of Science and Scopus. Both systems use a four-quartile ranking system, with the top 25% of journals in a field being ranked in the first quartile, the next 25% in the second quartile, and so on. The reason beyond selection of noting quartiles lies in finding correlations between highly ranked academic journals and specific target of critical analysis of SDGs.

Thirdly, “a time mark” and thus, a year of journal’s publication became likewise one of the prominent factors as the information enables one to find correlations of a particular criticism and time period. For example, it would provide important information on whether the narrative towards some specific criticism intensified in different time periods. The time mark was collected articles released from 2014, a year before establishment of SDGs until 2023, the current year of this research. Fourthly, the economic profile of journal provider country was explored as well, providing salient information on how the critique could vary according to economic division of the institution. For these purposes, the default indicator was divided into three categories, more precisely Low-income, Middle-income and High-income countries. Fifthly, another factor was the criticism itself. This is arguably the most important information of the whole analysis as it creates a platform where different academics, in different time

periods, under different institutions with different economic profiles can share their viewpoints on the problem.

Finally, this literature review analysis on the top of the aforementioned elements also provides information on which database was used in the process of searching and finding the article. In total, five academic databases were used, more precisely- Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, Science Direct and Google Scholar. Whilst Scopus and Web of Science were the most frequent databases for the articles, JSTOR, Science Direct and lastly, Google Scholar were used as well.

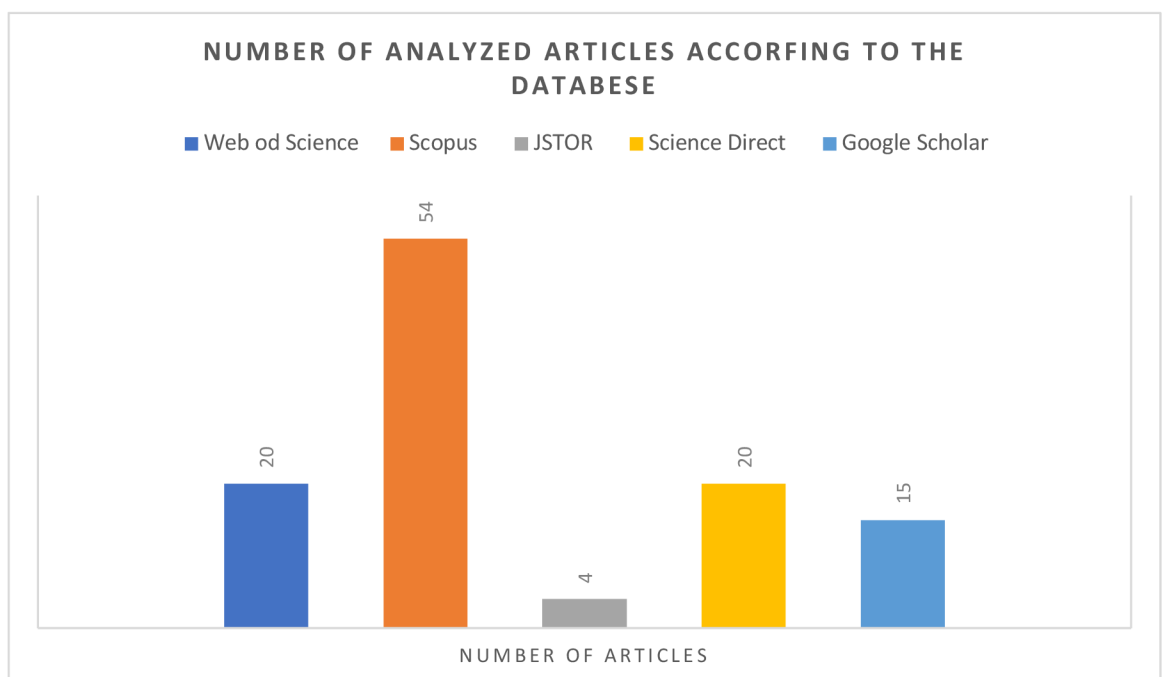


Figure 1 This figure indicates the number of databases used in the research



## DATA ANALYSIS

As it was stated above, 107 were subject of the analysis. The source of these articles were academic journals, with the highest occurrence of sources such as the Sustainability Science, Sustainability, Third World Quarterly, Global Governance, Sustainable Development, Economics or Global Policy.

### 2.1 Categories of SDGs central to criticism

The first, and arguably, the most important factor of this literature analysis lied in the examination of which SDG has been central to the criticism of the article. The findings indicated that 81% of articles critically analysed SDGs as a framework, and therefore addressed their inconsistencies on a systematic level. Furthermore, whilst the second most frequent criticism was addressed towards SDG 5, gender equality, the third most recurring element was SDG 6, the access to safe and clean water.

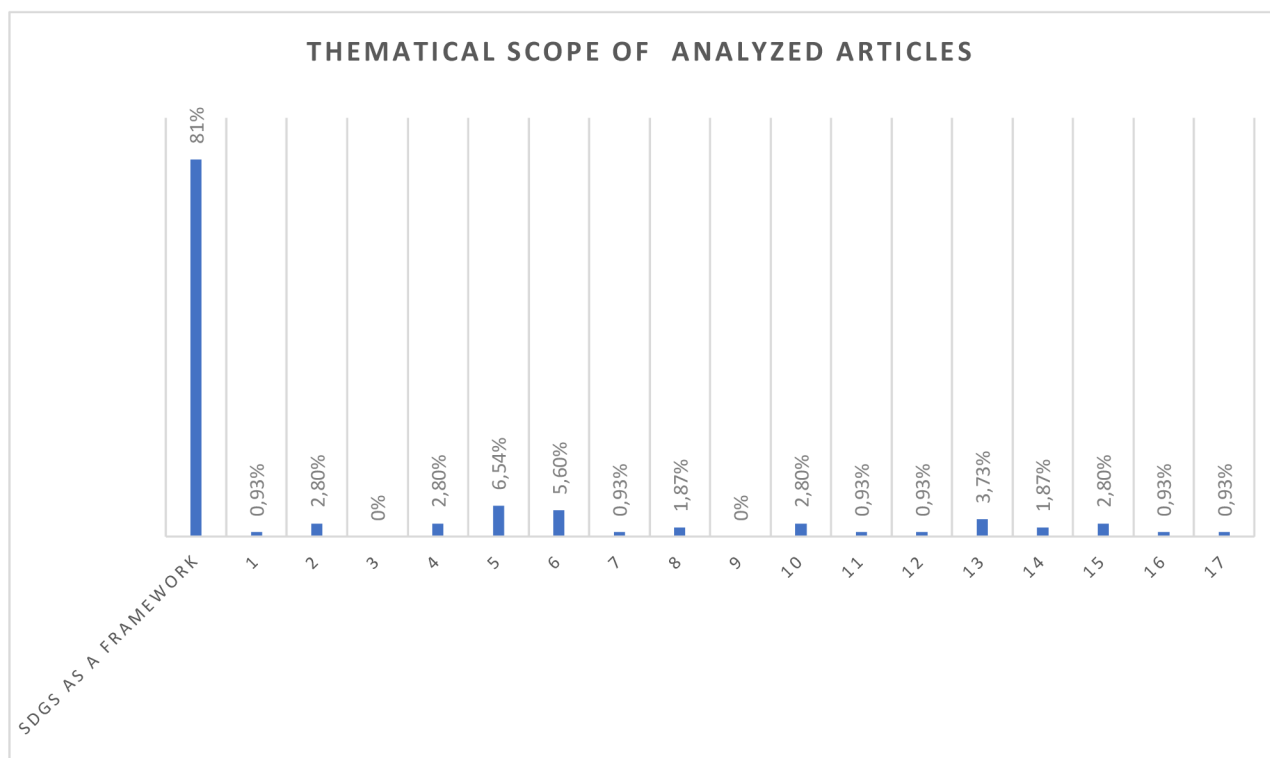


Figure 2 This figure indicates the thematical scope of analyzed articles

If one would closely observe the acquired criticism linked to issues regarding SDGs as a framework, the most frequent response was internal clashes amongst SDGs. In fact, the

highest most frequent object of criticism (25%) analysed one of the most profound clashes, the one of economic growth and environmental SDGs and the trade-offs linked to this. Unfortunately, most of the states chose economic growth which heavily undermines the fulfillment of environmental orientated goals. Additionally, the second most covered aspect was lack of integration of goals (13,33%), and thus, somewhat “separation” aspect which leads towards active weakening of SDGs. Thirdly, another recurring element was linked to the indicators and their inefficiency.

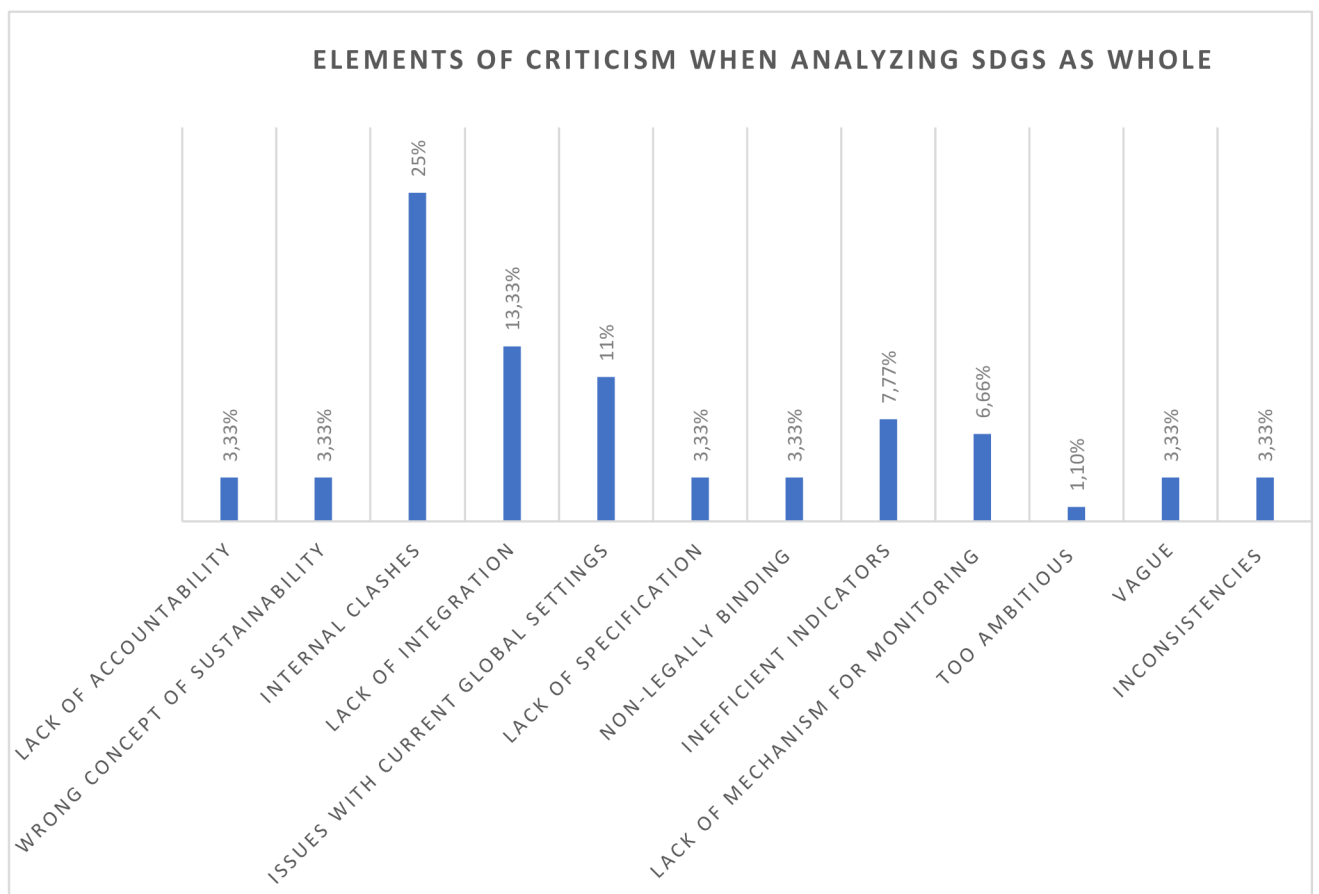


Figure 3 This figure explores the scope of topic of criticism linked to SDGs as whole

If one closely observes the main fields of criticism of the second and the third most criticized SDGs in this analysis, and more precisely, SDG 5 and SDG 6, the articles brought in the spotlight the following issues.

When it comes to SDG 5, ensuring gender equality this goal in the literature review analysis concerned 6.54% of articles. In total, 49,99% of the articles also examined another issue linked to this SDG, the insufficient degree of the goal integration in its targets. One of the arguments was that the LBGTO problematic was not included in the targets at all. (Celebi, 2022) At the same time, 33,33% of the articles investigated issues of SDG 5 causing internal conflicts with other SDGs, more precisely, SDG 8, economic growth. Last argument lied in problems linked to global governance settings in which are women, according to the author, systematically discriminated. (Sen, 2019) The following diagram enables to represent the data visually.

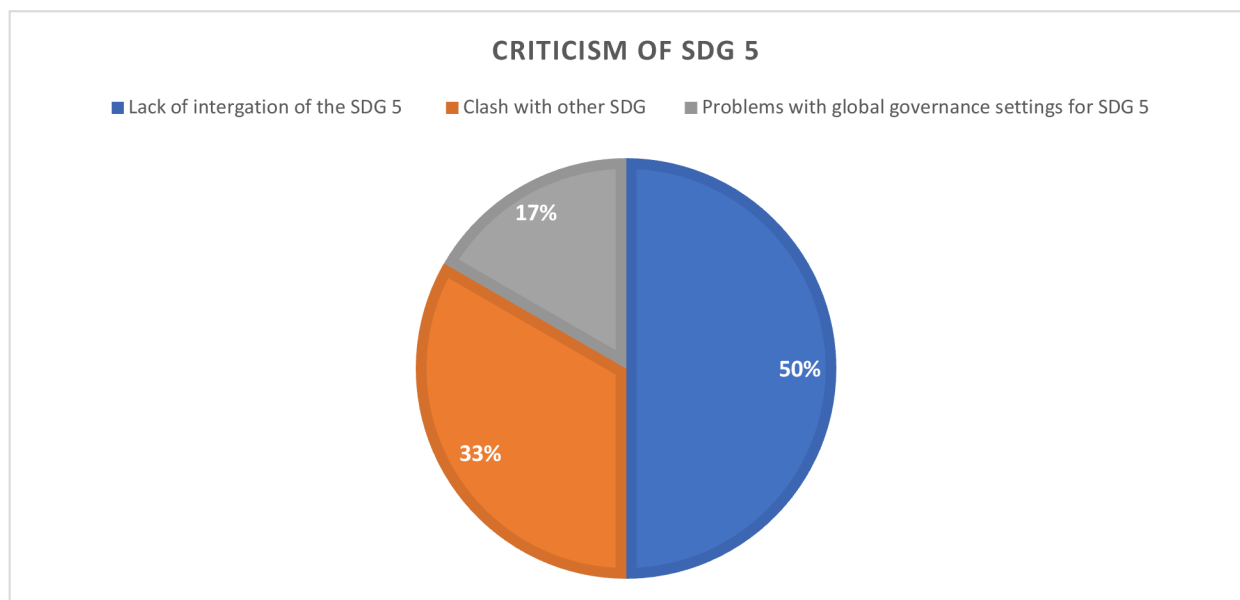


Figure 4 This figure indicates the criticim of SDG 5

In regard of SDG 6, the third most criticised SDG in this literature analysis, the SDG was condemned by 5,60% of the articles. Half of the articles expressed their critical views on the insufficient integration of SDG 6 within the framework of SDGs, especially in terms of wastewater (Obaideen, 2022) and lack of sanitation integration into the framework (German, 2023). The second most discussed aspect was the wrongful indicators, overlooking tremendously important realities, such as 6.1 and 6.2 and the issues linked to their design and impossible monitoring. (Guppy, 2019) At the end, the last argument lies in non-legally binding nature of this SDG and their insufficient translation into accompanying international human rights network. (Winkler, 2018) The data are indicated in a visual manner in the diagram below.

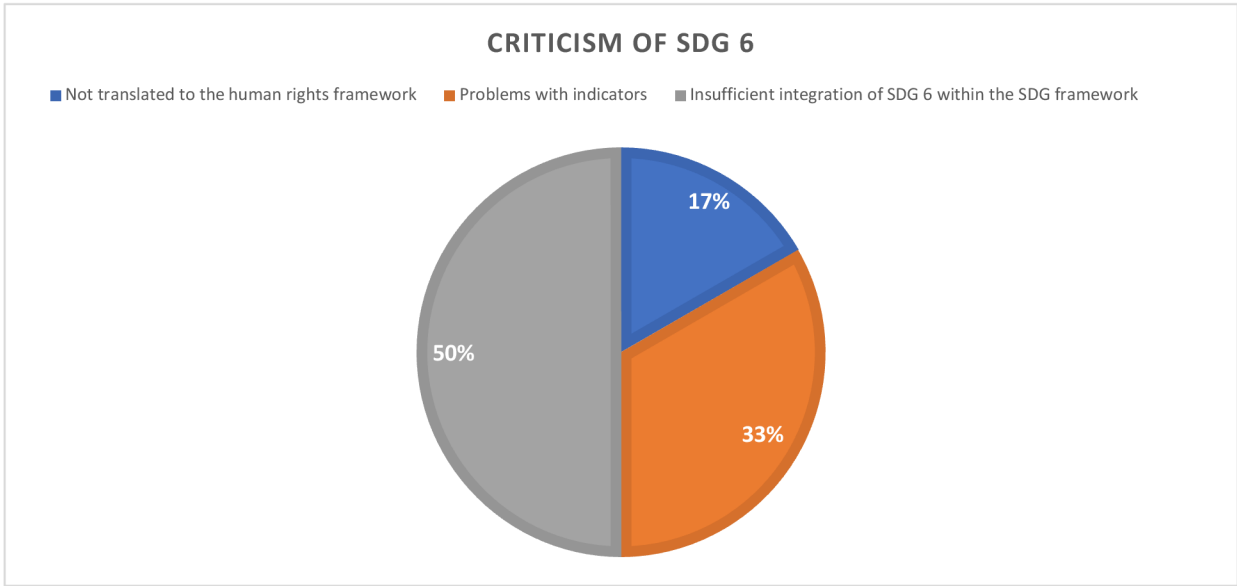


Figure 5 This figure demonstrates the criticism linked to SDG 6

## 2.2 Quartiles of analysed articles

By the same token, when it comes to the ranking of respective articles, the analysis investigated specific quartile for particular field, as well as year, as the quartiles and thus, the “ranking” of each journal might shift.

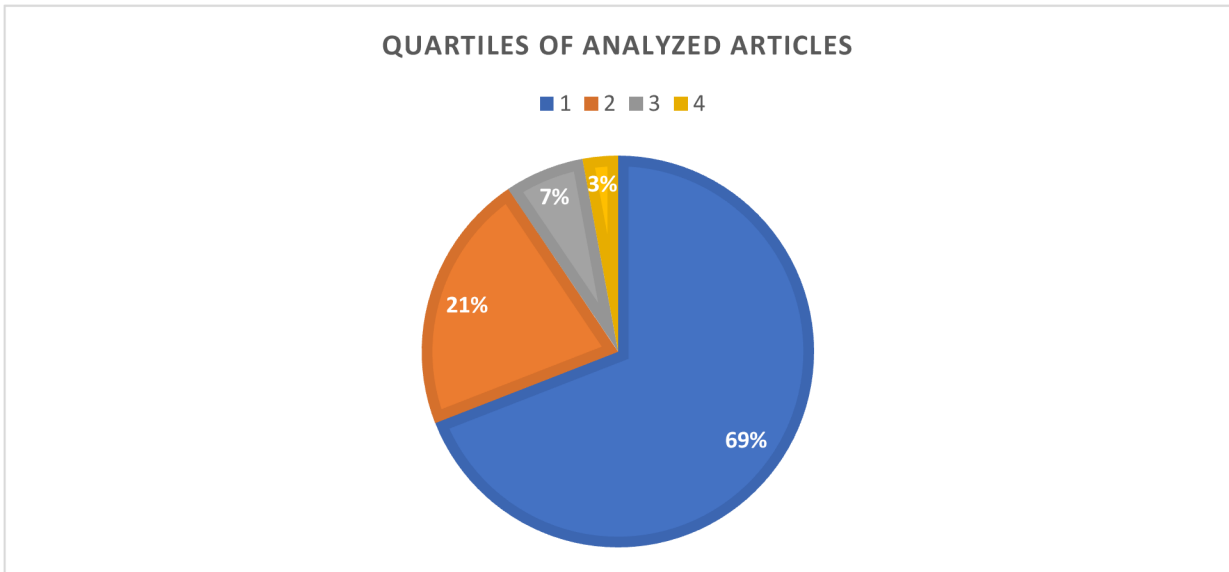


Figure 6 This figure highlights the quartiles of articles analyzed in this research

Whereas 69.2 % of articles were ranked with Quartile 1, 21% reached dimension of Quartile 2, the Quartile 3 was represented by 7% of articles and lastly, only 3% of the articles were ranked with Quartile 4. These findings reveal that the majority of articles were ranked with the best grade they could and therefore, this increases the added value of this analysis.

The reason why this factor was chosen was the following, the collected data could create an opportunity to analyse the pattern between the quality of journal and the scope of criticism of specific article. Such analysis was undertaken after the data collection and the findings revealed the following.

As for the articles ranked with Quartile 1, the most frequent perceived issue with SDGs concerned internal clashes (36,6%), and was followed by another oftentimes recurring problematic, and hence, sparse integration of the goals (25,5%). Moreover, the third most analysed aspect were the challenges linked to not correctly defined indicators (15,58%). Also, 7,79% of articles highlighted the importance of issues with current global governance settings. The inefficient monitoring of the performance of states in different SDG areas was another discussed issue and was represented by 6,49% of articles. Furthermore, 2,59% articles investigated ambiguous nature of SDGs and the same number, 2,59% of articles looked into the lack of mechanisms to hold states accountable. Lastly, 1,29% of articles deemed SDGs too ambitious.

## 2.2.1 Relationship between Quartiles and centre of SDG criticism

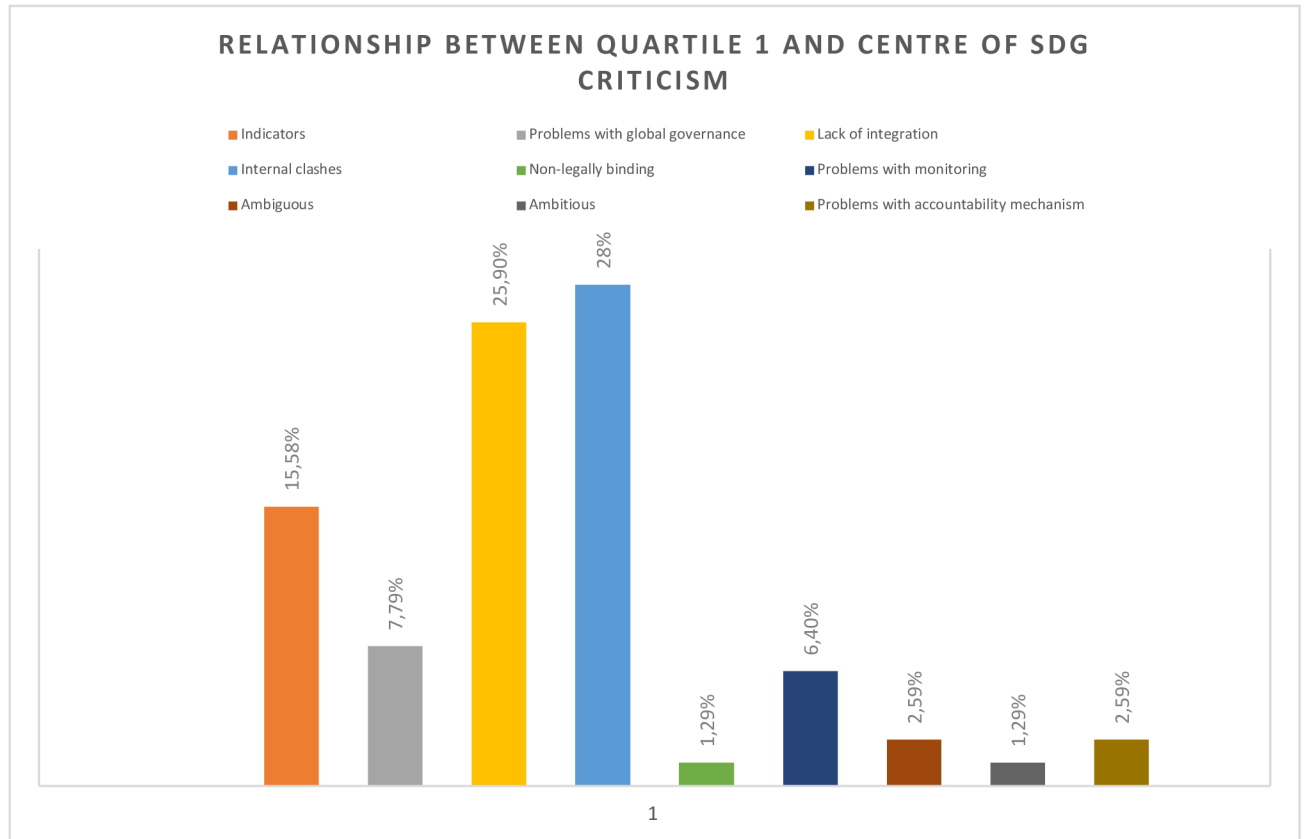


Figure 7 This figure explores the relationship between Quartile 1 and scope of criticism

On the other hand, when it comes to the articles classed with Quartile 2, the most frequent answer was represented by 33,33% of articles and suggested that the SDGs face an enormous issue and challenges linked to its implementation due to current global governance settings which are based on neoliberal capitalists' assumptions which are undermining the conditions for developing countries to fulfil the 2030 agenda. (Brisset, 2017) In addition, 26,66% of articles emphasised the lack of interaction between SDGs. In addition to this, 19,9% of articles criticised the non-legally binding nature of SDGs. Lastly, 6,66% of articles analysed problems with SDG measurement and remaining 6,66% investigated issues with SDG indicators.

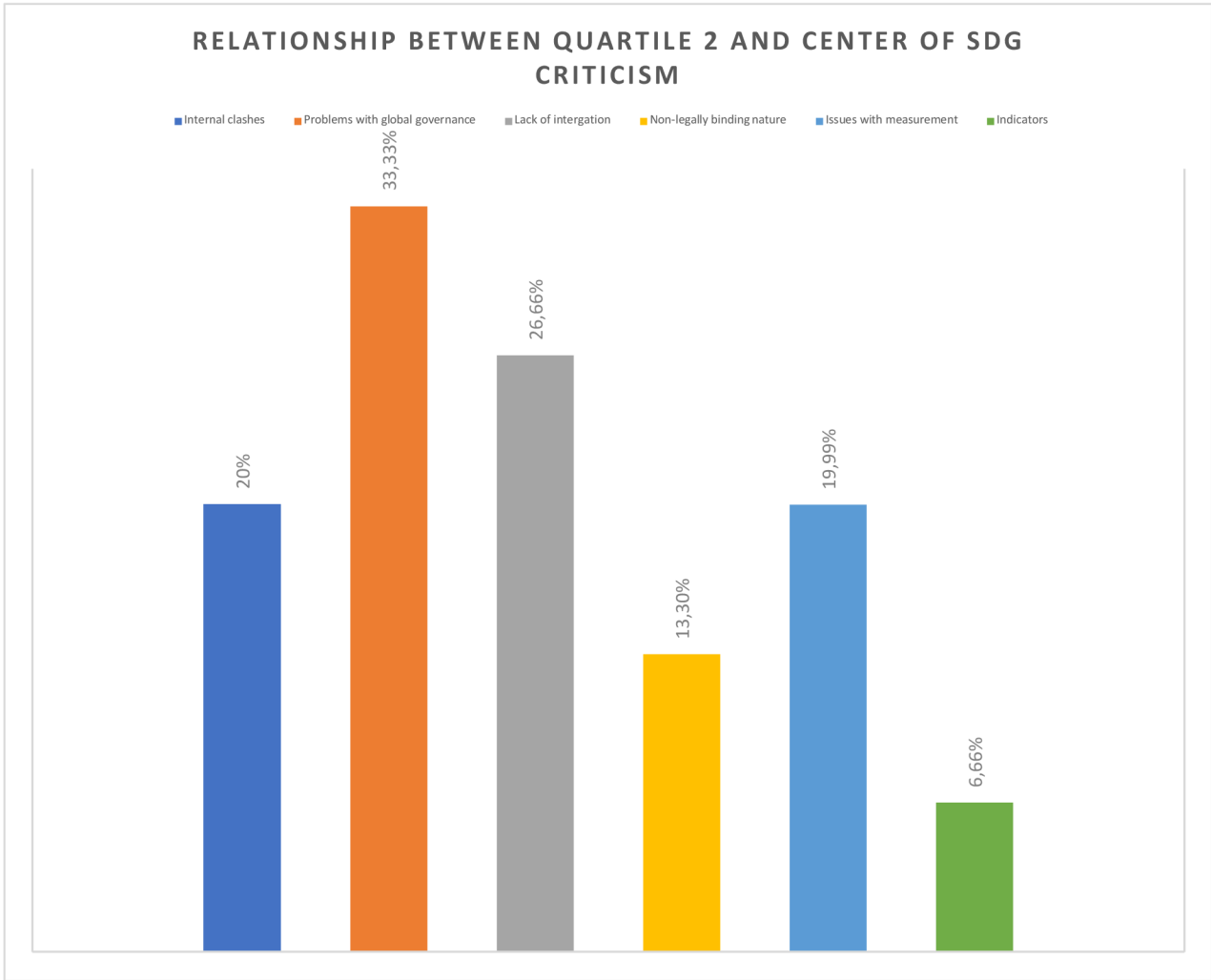


Figure 8 This figure examines the relationship of Quartile 2 and center of criticism

Thirdly, pertaining to the articles ranked with Quartile 3, there was not single “most-repeating” answer. The percentage was distributed equally among finding an issue with persisting concerns with feasibility of SDGs in the current global settings (25%), indicators (25%), and insufficient integration of the goals (25%). Afterwards, two other elements were analysed with the same amount, 12,5% of articles analysed problems related to problematic concept of sustainable development and another 12,5% criticised faulty reporting as an issue.

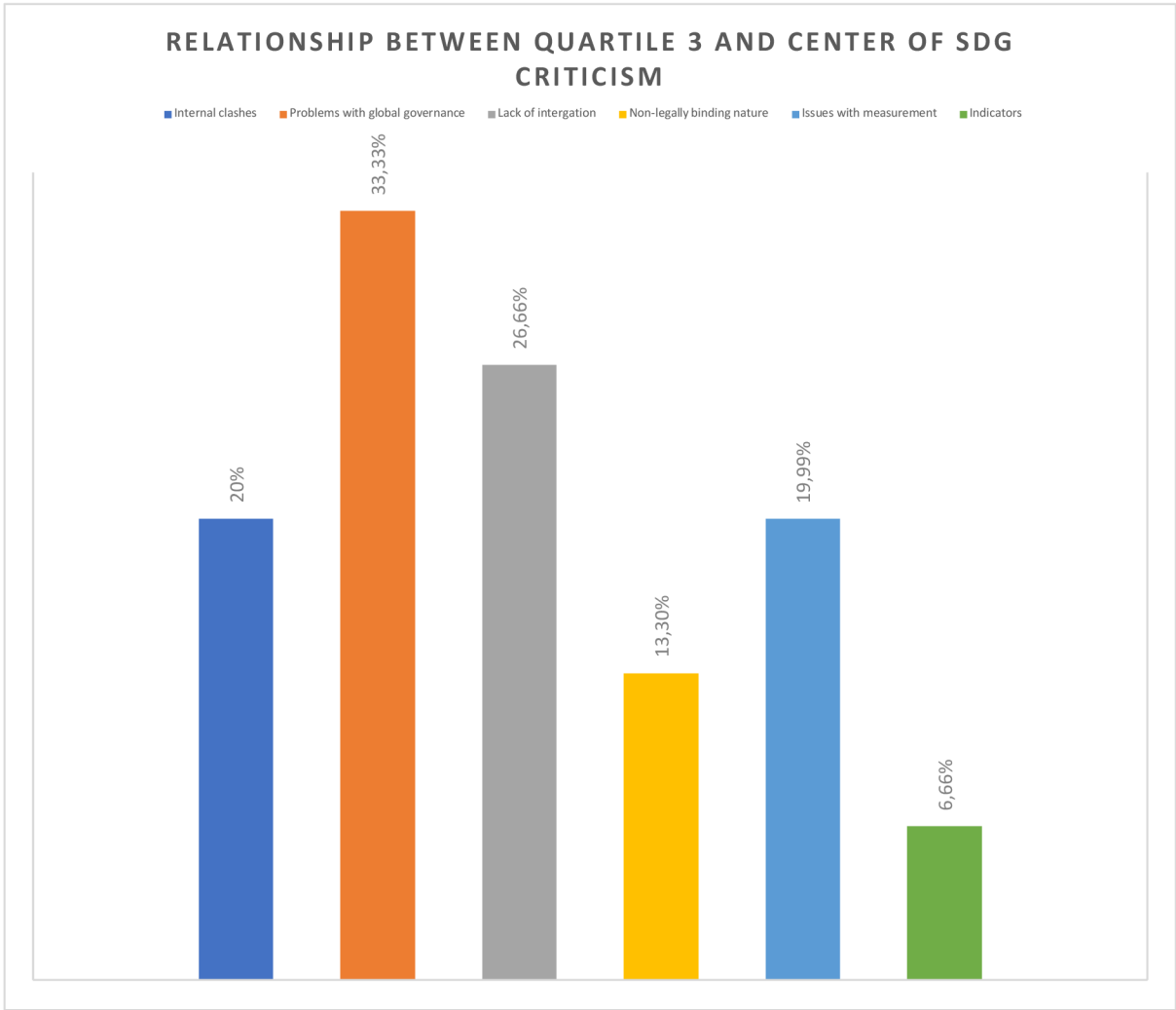


Figure 9 This figure looks into the relationship between Quartile 3 and criticism of SDGs

Finally, apropos of the articles labelled with Quartile 4, there were only two articles in total, both covering different problematics. Therefore, 50% of the articles investigated fragmentation occurring due to strong sectionalism and lack of further integration of the goals. The second article, and therefore another 50% of articles for Quartile 4, looked into the absence of translation of SDGs into human rights framework.



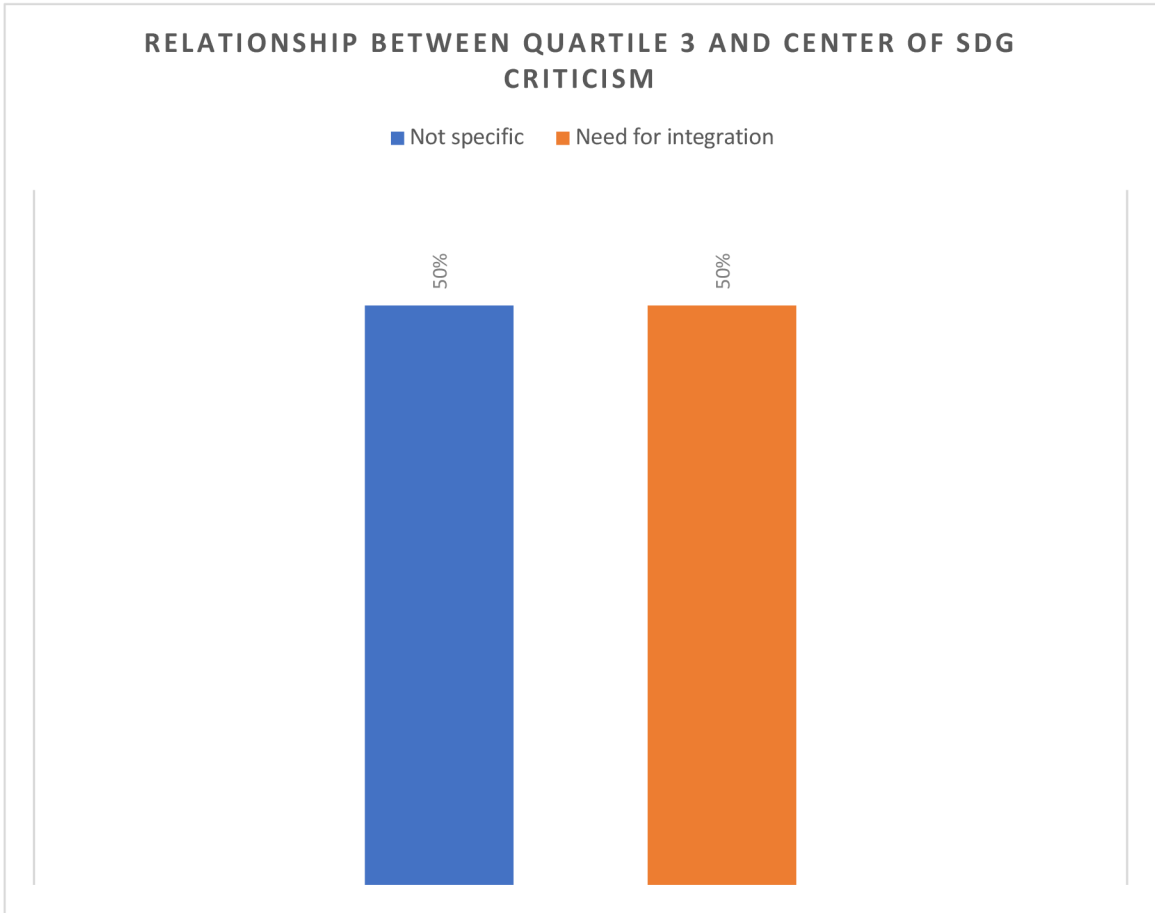


Figure 10 This figure explores the relationship between Quartile 4 and criticism of SDGs

To summarise the aforementioned data, if one observes the first three Quartiles due to sufficient data,<sup>1</sup> it becomes apparent that the most frequent points of criticism were internal contradictions, insufficient integrations amongst the goals and issues with indicators along with challenges linked to the current global governance settings. As only minor issues were considered the following features- monitoring, non-legally binding nature, ambiguity, accountability and excessively ambitious goals which the international community would not be able to fulfil by 2030. The following table puts all the quartiles together enabling easier extent of comparison of differences amongst the data.

<sup>1</sup> Unlike Quartile 4 which only contained 2 articles and therefore, the number would not have any higher value.

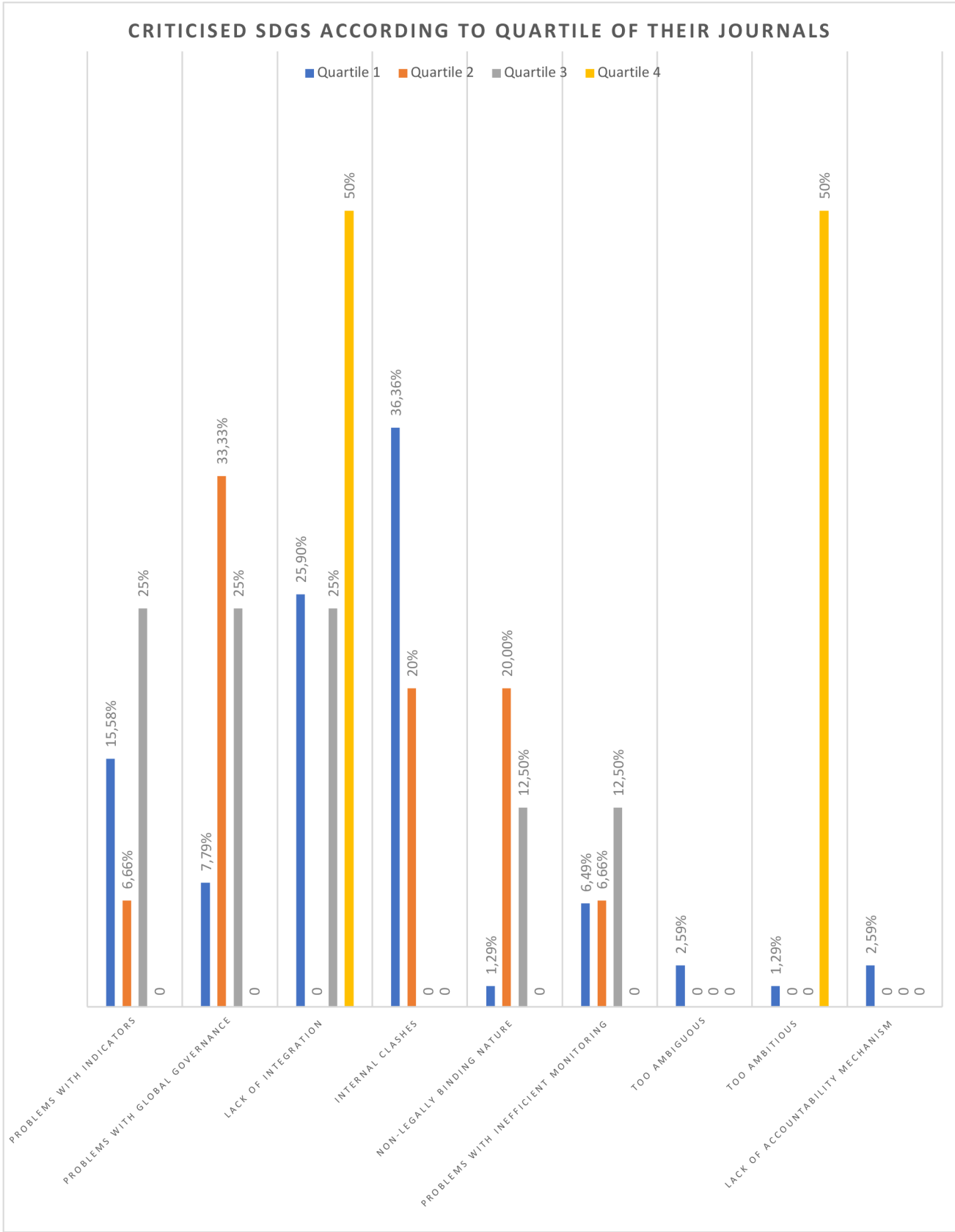


Figure 11 This figure examines the relationship between Quartiles and critics

### 2.3 Year of release of analyzed articles

Furthermore, another point of analysis was the period when specific article was released. In fact, collection of such data allows to analyse the approach of academic community throughout the time and therefore, one could spot whether certain critical points and their evolution throughout the time. The most collected articles were released in 2022 (24,29%), 2019 (15,88%) and 2020 (14,95%). Perhaps one reason beyond the accessibility of this specific time period lies in the fact that the SDGs were established in 2015, and therefore, the academic community had longer time to notice the challenges and to look into them properly.

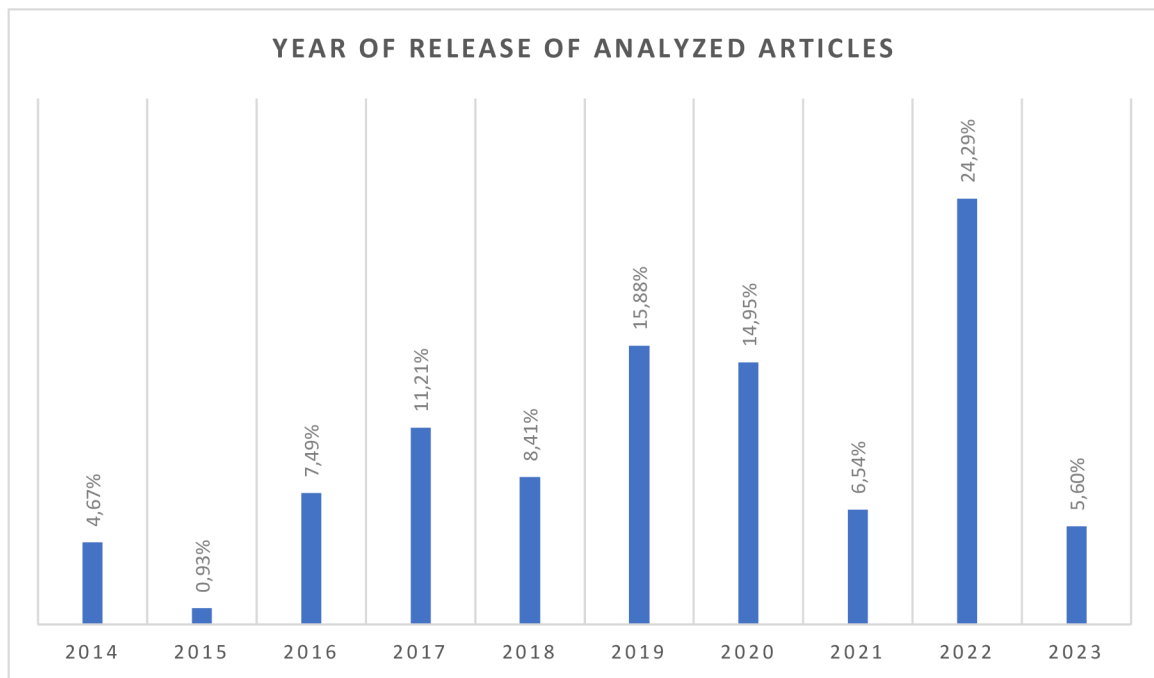


Figure 12 This figure analyses the year of release and the criticism of SDGs

An interesting shift could be seen in regard to calls for integration amongst the goals which would forestall fragmentation of SDGs, enabling environment for higher efficiency of SDG synergies. If one observes the data in the period of 2019-2023 very closely, it becomes evident that higher number of articles further in time<sup>2</sup> tend to rise in intensity of calling for such reform. This could be explained by the fact that the interlinks and call for synergy of

<sup>2</sup> Apart from 2021 where the aspect is lacking completely.

multiple policies covering higher number of goals became more and more desired and deemed as an efficient approach.

### CRITICISM OF SDGS ON THE BASIS OF THEIR YEAR OF RELEASE

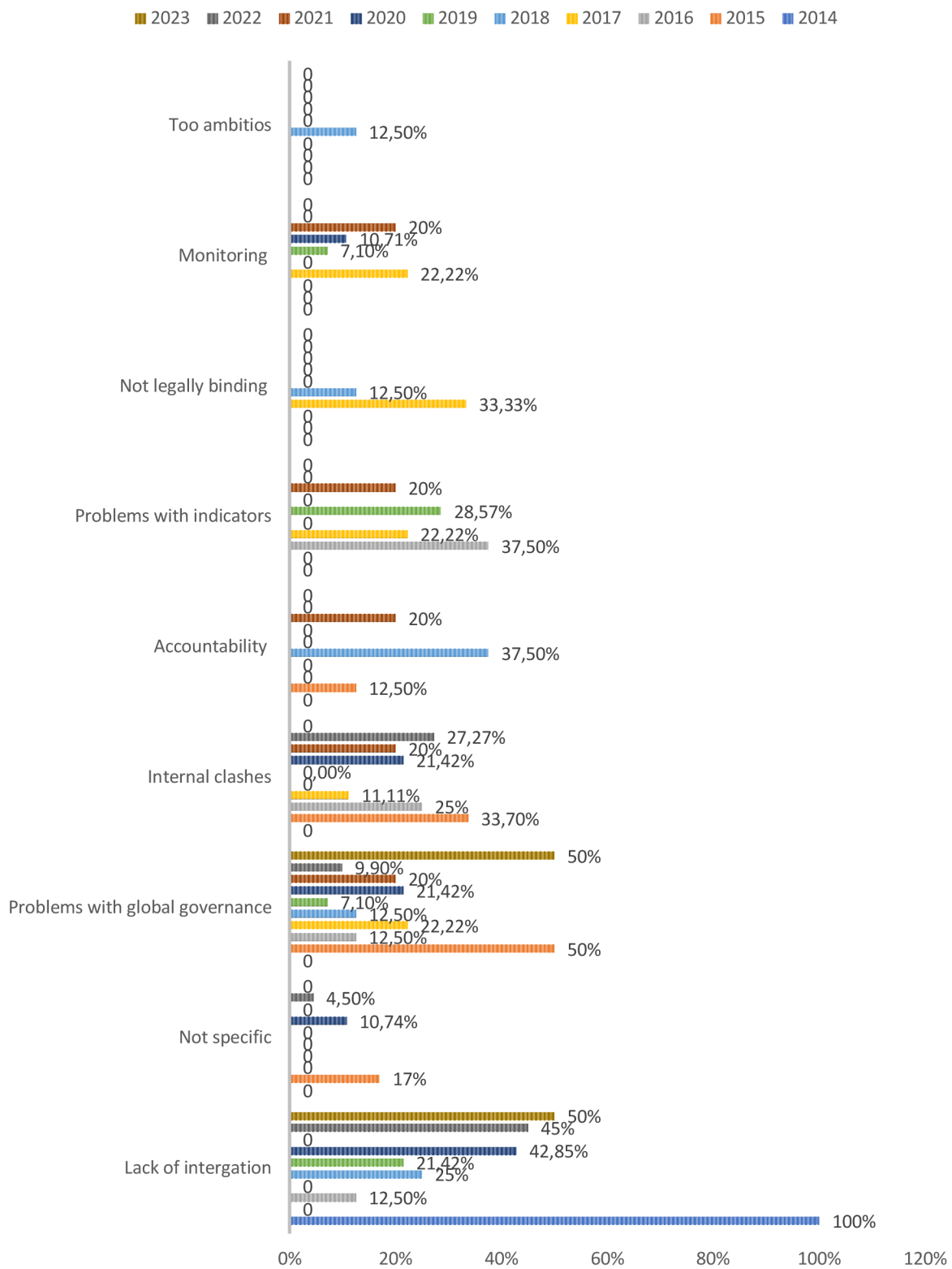


Figure 13 This figure examines the criticism of specific aspect of SDGs together with year

## 2.4 Country classification by World Bank of economic level of institutions releasing analysed article

An extremely interesting correlation was offered by combining the following data-economic classification of the institution, more precisely high-income, middle-income and low-income distinction as made by the World Bank, together with the main subject (SDG) of criticism. Such combination and finding potential parallel could lead towards distinction between perception of weaknesses of different SDG by institutions and scholars from different economic background. It would be likely that low-income and middle-income countries would hold different approach towards what is problematic and which challenges with SDGs should be tackled. Unfortunately, in this analysis the data in this aspect were collected in extremely homogenous manner with vast majority of sources being published by the high-income countries (94%). Solely units were collected from Middle income (4%) and low-income (2%) countries. Such an imperceptible amount of data for the two categories forestalls from finding the parallel. However, together with cultural division as distinguished by Hauntingon (1996), such aspects would be interesting to investigate in further research.

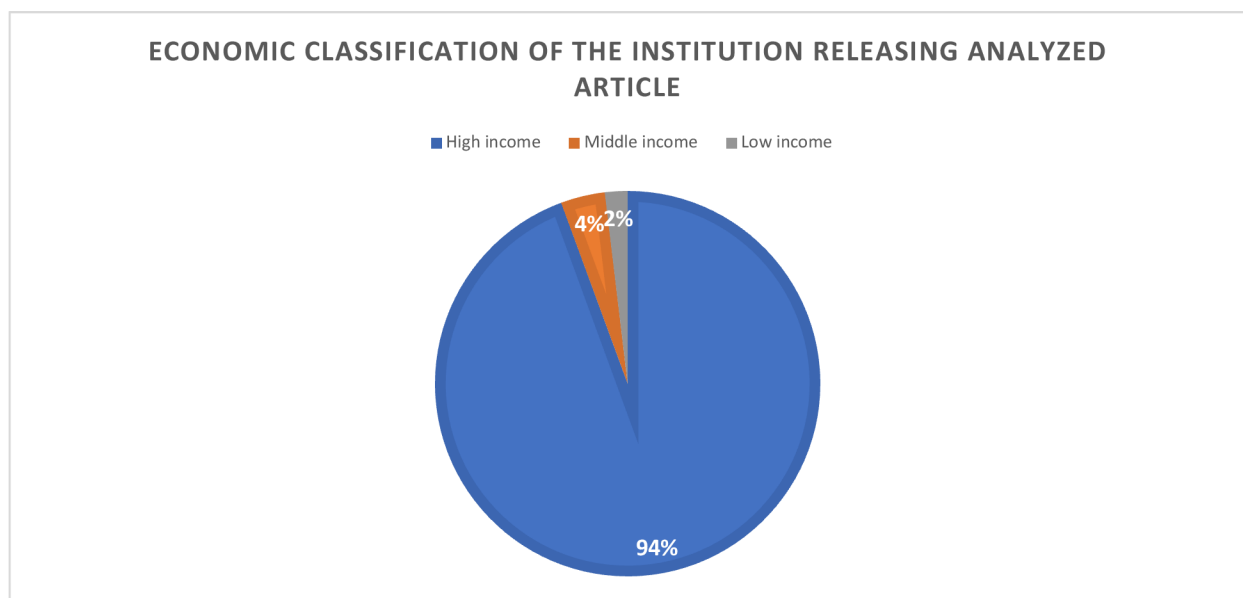


Figure 14 This figure explores the economic classification of the institution releasing the article

## CHAPTER 3: EXAMINING THE NATURE OF SGDS

Known as “the global goals”, 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its 169 targets are an array of how international community is eager to end poverty and hunger, provision of sustainable economic growth, as well as good health and well-being to everyone, quality education and high educational attainment, gender equality, dismantle the environmental degradation and climate change on numerous front- land, water, air, ensure all people living in peaceful and prosperous political environment, and also, to strengthen the partnerships amongst countries. (Department of Social and Economic Affairs, 2015) Hence, the SDGs aim to achieve development in social, economic and environmental spheres. (De Mora Jimenez, 2019, p.146) In addition, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (2022) refers to the scope of SDGs as to “5 Ps”, in other words “people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnerships” (UN ESCWA, 2022)

### 3.1 Non-binding essence of SDGs

Whilst sustainable development agenda highlights concepts and guidance on achieving profound level of sustainability in various spheres, Friedman (2016) points out one of the major deficiencies of the SDGs in his article, the goals are not legally binding *per se*. (Friedman, 2016, p. 129- 131) Biermann and al. (2017) define the nature of SDGs enforcement as “detached from the international legal system.” (Bierman, 2017, p. 26- 27) In other words, the states are not legally obliged to fulfill their commitments and thus, if they do not comply with the goals, they will not be penalized, and *ergo*, not passively motivated to fulfil their agendas. (Spangenberg, 2017, p.318)

If one perceived this reality through political realism lens, he might say that the most unsustainable practices of the most unsustainable states can be easily overlooked. Although some scholars highly praise the participatory approaches states can hold due to lack of legal codification and at the same time deflect from “mandatory” nature (Brisset, 2015, p. 21), (Pogge and Sengurupta, p. 58- 59), stemming from liberalist notions of global governance, the prevailing criticism of this aspect could be explained by applying realist assumptions regarding balance of power, state ecocentrism, drive for national interest rather than collective and high extent of selfishness amongst the great powers and hegemonies. Therefore, legal codification

of SDGs could have potential for both groups of political theorists, for those with liberal perception of international relations, the law behind SDGs would become a platform where states could happily and collectively implement their agenda and for political realists it would become a “limitation” of states’ national interest and selfishness. (Berridge, 2001, p.183)

It would not be profoundly correct to state that SDGs are not included in the international legal system to some extent. Kim (2016) analyzed the “proxy” nexus between international law and the SDGs and stated the following “did not emerge from, and were not inserted into, a normative vacuum. They are grounded in international law and made consistent with existing commitments expressed in various international legal instruments. Naturally, a nexus exists between international law and these global priorities.” (Kim, 2016, p. 21- 22) In his work, he highlighted already existing international legal sources, such as the *1945 UN Charter*, the *1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the *2015 Paris Agreement*, the *1997 Kyoto Protocol*, or the *2002 ILA New Delhi Declaration of Principles of International Law Relating Sustainable Development* amongst others. Likewise, the author points out the main tenets of sustainability were long established in the ICJ rulings. For instance, in *Gabcikovo-Nagymaros case* the ICJ provided that there is a need to “reconcile economic development with protection of the environment.” (Gabcikovo-Nagymaros Case, ICJ, 1995) This norm was further confirmed in *Iron Rhine* (Iron Rhine Arbitration, ICJ, 2001) or in *Pulp Mill Case* (Argentina v. Uruguay, ICJ, 2010). Apart from the aforementioned, Ebesson (2022) emphasises that other SDGs are certainly enshrined in the *Convention of Biological Diversity* or the *United Nations Combatt on Dessertification* amongst others. (Ebesson, 2022) It is also essential to stress that in 2023, there was newly concluded treaty regarding the SDG 14, the protection on oceans, with the name of the *High Seas Treaty*.

This statement could further serve as evidence that there is an undeniable link between the established norms of international law and the SDGs, nevertheless the current system is more “sporadic in nature” and hence, does contain tremendous inconsistencies as the system does not approach a degree of fully efficient and explicit codification of all the SDGs. Either more comprehensive systematic framework could be established, comprising and legalising every single SDG, or the principles of sustainable development could be enshrined in bloc legislation based on the type of sustainable development that the legislative framework would enforce, for instance “*the Convention on Sustainable Social Development*”, “*the Convention on Sustainable Environmental Development*” and “*the Convention on Sustainable Economic Development*.” All these would translate the targets and indicators into legal norms which



would actively push states to implement the goals by 2030 as they would be legally bound to do so. Whilst this invention and emergence of new legal mechanism might sound too good to be true, its birth might have a dark side. In fact, it is questionable whether within the given timeframe, the international community would be able to implement and accept such legislation and also, if the international system in its current settings enables appropriate enforcement of the international legal norms and thus, would act as a driving force if sustainable development agenda ever becomes legally codified. This problematic stems from the nature of international law. Unlike the national law, as its name implies, international law refers to legal norms concluded predominantly amongst states which are deemed to possess their sovereignty, and therefore, in practice there is no above authority over them, meaning that international law can be made solely if states give their consent. Hence, Klabbers (2017) proclaimed international law to be “consensual system.” (Klabbers, 2017, p. 12- 15) Numerous political neorealists analyzed this problematic further, for instance, Waltz (1974) who highlighted the anarchic nature of the international system, where states are not supervised, and he highlighted that there is no superior authority enforcing the transboundary legal norms. (Waltz, 1974) In other words, unlike the internal legal enforcement within a state, in the international arena, the executive authority, such as “police in national system,” is lacking. Surely, there have been various international active legal mechanisms which became a stage for states to settle their disputes, such as the International Court of Justice, the International Criminal Law or the International Court of Human Rights, nonetheless their efficiency lies in states’ willingness to be a party in such a dispute or conflict resolution procedure. (Shaw, 2001)

One could demonstrate this problematic on the following case study, the enforcement of the *Kyoto Protocol*. In 1997, in the spirit of climate change combat, the international community agreed on lowering the number of green-house gases and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions to the atmosphere for the industrialized countries and aimed more precisely to lower the amount below the level of emissions back in 1990. While the effort to establish such legal base marked the first ever incentive on international level to decrease the CO<sub>2</sub> contributions, and led to 191 countries ratifying and thus, becoming parties to this legislation. (Falkner, 2019) However, some countries never signed this legislation, especially those, whose economies were highly reliant on industry and polluted heavily the atmosphere, such as the United States, a hegemony. Another convenient example would be Canada, who was a signatory party to the *Protocol*, nevertheless has never ratified the *Protocol* and even withdrew 15 years afterwards. (Peterson, 2009)

This problematic was a referent object of Morgenthau's (1949) work, called the *Politics Amongst Nations*, a realist classic that explains how the power is distributed in the international community and how hegemonies have power to sway the norms in the manner they desire because of the political and economic interdependency of less powerful states on hegemonies. Again, this could be very relevant point put in context with the SDGs. (Morgenthau, 1949) For example, if one observes closely the current hegemony, the United States, it becomes apparent that some of the theoretical paradigms could be applicable in practice. Whilst the rest of the international community relatively "globally" signed and ratified arguably the most recent environmental contract, strongly arising from the SDGs, the *2015 Paris Agreement*, the United States infamously withdrawn from the treaty in 2017. Such action, committed by smaller and "less-prominent" power would be faced with economic sanctions, freeze of diplomatic relations and other forms of soft power which would lead to the state compliance and re-consideration. Nonetheless, since the US is indeed a hegemony, and the rest of the international community is heavily dependent on its economic, military and political power, which in practice means that the US can get away with actions like this. The same is applicable to another emerging hegemony, China, which happened to bypass the international law oftentimes, such as in the *Philippines v. China* (South China Sea Arbitration, ICJ, 2019), without any profound consequences. (De Castro, 2018) (Jones, 2016)

To summarise, it is not certain if translation of SDGs into framework in the sphere of public international law would be fully efficient due to states sovereignty and consensual nature of international law. Therefore, if implemented, it is essential to acknowledge the risks linked to its implementation.

Arguably a potential solution preventing low participation would be treating and accepting the SDGs as "jus cogens" norms. (Kleinklein, 2017, p. 309-317) *Jus cogens* is so-called "peremptory" norm, and thus, a norm that embodies a fundamental principle of international law that is accepted by the international community, and which must not be derogated from under any circumstances. By the same token, *jus cogens* belongs to *erga omnes* norms that are owned to whole international community. (Klabbers, 2017, p. 58) The concept of *jus cogens* is important because it helps to establish a hierarchy of norms in international law, with *jus cogens* norms at the top of importance of international law. (Shaw, 2001) This means that if a state violates a *jus cogens* norm, it can be held accountable by the international community, even if it has not ratified the relevant treaty or convention. Additionally, *jus cogens* norms provide a basis for the international community to intervene in the internal affairs of a state in order to protect fundamental human rights. Traditionally, *jus cogens* norms comprise

the most heinous actions, such as genocide, piracy or slavery. Nonetheless, recently, numerous scholars started to ponder whether climate change commitments would not be applicable via *jus cogens* norm. (Cervantes, 2022) (Kotze, 2016)

Since climate change is a global issue that poses a threat to the environment, human rights, and sustainable development, it is widely recognized that the impacts of climate change have the potential to affect the entire world population, including future generations. This is also the reason why the principles of *jus cogens* are being applied to climate change in the following ways.

Firstly, *jus cogens* norms include the right to a healthy environment, which is recognized as a basic human right. Climate change has the potential to cause significant harm to the environment, including the destruction of ecosystems, biodiversity loss, and changes in weather patterns. The right to a healthy environment may be invoked to protect against the impacts of climate change, and therefore, has a higher legal value.

Secondly, another basis of *jus cogens* is the duty to prevent harm. This principle requires states to take steps to prevent harm to the environment and human rights, including the impacts of climate change. States have a duty to take measures to mitigate the causes and effects of climate change, including reducing greenhouse gas emissions and promoting sustainable development.

Thirdly, *jus cogens* norms also include the principle of intergenerational equity, which recognizes the need to protect the rights of future generations. Climate change poses a threat to future generations, who will be most affected by its impacts. The principle of intergenerational equity may be invoked to protect the rights of future generations and ensure that they are not unfairly burdened by the impacts of climate change. (Cervantes, 2022)

Insofar, there is no direct application of *jus cogens* norms to the SDGs, nevertheless it can be argued that many of the goals and targets set out in the SDGs are consistent with *jus cogens* norms. For instance, SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) can be seen as consistent with the right to an adequate standard of living, which is a recognized *jus cogens* norm. By the same token, SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) and SDG 14 (Life Below Water) can be seen as consistent with the right to a clean and healthy environment, which is also recognized as a *jus cogens* norm. Therefore, a potential recommendation could be seen in establishing all the SDGs in different *jus cogens* norms, which could significantly sway the perception of states of SDGs as they would own the principles to the whole community (*erga omnes*) and there would be motivated by consequences of not complying with the peremptory norm.

## 3.2 Lack of means of accountability and efficient monitoring

### 3.2a Monitoring and measurement of fulfilment

As it was stated above, an integral part of monitoring and measurement of the SDGs is played by the indicators which represent a specific sub-field of change of each SDG. One strength of the SDG indicators is that they are evidence-based and scientifically sound. The indicators were developed through a rigorous process that involved consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, including governments, civil society, and the private sector. This has helped to ensure that the indicators are relevant and reliable, and that they capture key dimensions of sustainable development. The academic community also distinguished numerous inconveniences of the indicators, which are described-in-depth in the course of this master thesis. (Janouskova, 2018) (Guppy, 2019) (Liberio, 2022)

In order to measure the fulfillment of SDGs of the respective states, so-called “Sustainable Development Index” was established to monitor each goal in every country. Depending on the state of specific indicator, the index distinguishes three phases and colors in effort to visually represent the progress and thereby, distinguishes between the following stages. Firstly, if a particular target is met, the goals colors in green and is accompanied by “On track or maintaining SDG achievement” statement. Secondly, less optimistic is a situation where the target states that “Significant challenges remain” and is visually represented in orange color. Thirdly, and least positive option is in red color where the target statement indicates that “Major challenges remain” this means that the target is far from being fulfilled and must overcome tremendous challenges. Withal, the performance of each state is held and states are ranked according to their score where every indicator is weighed with the same value. (Lin, 2020, p. 2-3)

One potential problem stems from the uneven value of higher number of social over targets over those that are environmental and economic in nature. (Hickel, 2020, p. 152) I one examines the SDGs more precisely, he might observe that 12 out of 17 SDGs, and hence, 70 percent of the goals are in social field which leads towards an environmental problematic linked to ranking. Being socially outnumbered, such system gives the impression that states with the best performance in the goals are achieving sustainability in all fields, however in practice is it

far from truth. For example, according to the SDG index, Sweden is one of the most sustainable countries, nonetheless different collected data reveal that if one considers its material footprint, Sweden is one of the least environmentally sustainable countries. Yet, this reality is hidden in the shadow of success in the socio-economic sphere. (Hickel, 2018)

In addition, the United Nations Environmental Programme (2020) identifies that 52 percent of environmental targets suffer from significant gaps that do not assist sufficiently to indicate whether there is an actual progress or whether the state's performance is solely stalling. (UN Environmental Programme, 2020, p. 3) Similarly, the report from the World Bank (2021) highlighted notable deficiencies in data collection, which hinder the evaluation of a country's advancement towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The report pointed out that, on average, countries have provided information on only 55% of the SDG indicators from 2015 to 2019. Moreover, no country has reported data on more than 90% of the SDG indicators, and in total 22 countries have reported data on less than 25% of them. Nonetheless, the article acknowledges that countries have shown progress in reporting data for most SDGs in recent times. (World Bank, 2021)

Furthermore, a very interesting approach was taken by Kubicielwski (2021) who emphasised the need to reform SDGs reporting. In his article he describes the prominent value of integrating more aspects in the indicators in order to make the progress measurable. His model contains mainly additional information on human development and progress in societal area and is put throughout the whole SDG framework. (Kubicielwski, 2021)

Similarly, Forbye, Constanza et al. (2016) pointed out that a change is required in the wording of SDGs, in effort to guide the states adequately, the narrative must be changed to use more specific narrative detailly describing room for policy improvements and societal changes that are integral for the SDGs fulfilment. (Costanza et al., 2016, p. 347)

While these arguments are out on the table, it is important to hold in mind that indicators serve as a basis that shortens and simplifies information and thus, deflects from complexities. (Merry, 2011) (Morse, 2015, p.364) For these purposes, a suggestion will be the following: create more indicators which will better depict the complexities and interlinkages which will serve as a solid base for governments' and non-state actors' policy making. (Smith, 2020)

Another issue arising from the current SDG monitoring system is the fact that national reporting gives an opportunity for states to sway the data according to their willingness. (Glass and Newig, 2019, p. 13) (Fisher and Parr, 2019) While such actions are extremely undesirable, it is very likely some countries do improve their actual performance when reporting as good

compliance might higher their chances in diplomatic field, as well as financially if the states are dependent on humanitarian or development aid. In order to fight against this issue, it would be recommended to establish an independent unit or UN agency that will unbiasedly monitor particular state's compliance and performance of SDGs. The proposal is described in detail in the following section.

### 3.2b Accountability

Engelbretsen, Haggen and Ottersen (2017) pointed out that “mechanisms to hold states accountable for their responsibilities implying from international conventions are generally weak.” (Engelbretsen, Haggen and Ottersen, 2017, p.365) On that note, Friedman (2016) in his article introduced potential room for improvement in terms of establishing an efficient, independent accountability mechanism which would encourage the states to truly comply with the ambitious agenda, rather than excluding this mechanism which put the whole set of goals at stake. (Friedman, 2016, p. 134) Hunt (2015) believes the process in which is SDGs' compliance monitored is solely somewhat the first step of potentially effective procedure of accountability, however, according to his words, it is needed to deflect from measuring “global” accountability towards measuring “national” and “sub-national” degree of accountability as well. On the national and sub-national levels, it is vital to include not solely state actors, but most importantly local stakeholders too as on stakeholders' shoulders lie ponderous weight of contribution towards the 2030 SDG agenda. (Hunt, 2015) On that note, Donald et al. (2016) believes that relying on one accountability mechanism is not sufficient and suggests using “web of accountability” as efficient accountability mechanism. (Donald et al., 2016, p. 203) This complex, multi-analysis would ensure the states are being monitored and actively accountable for their sustainability compliance, which again, deflects from the current system where states' performance is measured, nonetheless in less “holistic” manner.

The current accountability mechanism lies in the monitoring “toolkit” and data collections made by states and multiple UN agencies. The SDG Annual Report is released by the United Nations Secretariat and informs about the regular progress on each goal. This process is linked with some deficiencies, such as data unavailability, where especially developing countries lack the capacity to monitor and report properly on SDGs and also, no unified method of reporting on progress. (Guo et al., 2022, p. 1793)

Therefore, perhaps a potential solution could be seen in replication of the international human rights system. More precisely, to create an explicit and independent sustainable

development goals soft law framework with its independent investigative body which would monitor and enforce the goals, pushing on governments, as well as local non-state actors via means of regular review procedure. The process could be inspired by the Universal Periodic Review, unique process of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) which takes place every 6 months, annually analyzes the human rights situation in 48 states. In this manner, the UPR process aims to enhance the constitutional rights, civil liberties along with other universal human rights on a global and national level by encouraging the dialogue, cooperation and enabling environment for exchange of recommendations. Howbeit some countries are still reluctant to the concept of human rights as such and several authoritarian states leave their governance in destitute thereof, there is evidence on a positive impact on progressing with states' human rights situation and compliance with. For example, a study by the OHCHR (2023) revealed that after the first cycle of the UPR, approximately 85 percent of acquired recommendations upon the process of UPR, driven states to either fully or partially implement the recommendations into their human rights framework. In addition, another study conducted by the World Future Council indicated that the UPR steered towards progress in various human rights areas, such as the protection of children's rights, the abolition of death penalty, or the promotion of gender equality. (OHCHR, 2023) *Ergo*, one could spot the potential to create a platform for states for international dialogue, transparency, making recommendations and via participatory approaches being part of the process. If a similar concept of a regular monitoring session, implemented by a special UN agency which would solely focus on monitoring, collecting data and enforcing SDGs, its "voluntary" nature could become a starting point for major changes and higher level of compliance and implementation. Of course, the establishment of such a new concept could become "blood, sweat and tears," mainly because it would take tremendous effort to copy-paste the UPR system in the SDGs terms. In fact, the process starts with the submission of a national report by the "State under review." To wit, the state under review is required to provide an overview of human rights situation on national level and highlights the measures that were taken from the previous UPR recommendations. Along with the state, various UN agencies, civil society organisations and other salient stakeholders take part in forming the report and deliver further data on the human rights implementation. This step would be likely to be replicated in the SDG system as well. It would be needed to collect required data and to submit the national report of a specific state together with contributions by non-state actors, such as the UN agencies or non-profit organisations in effort to provide the least biased and most up-to-date data possible. Afterwards, if one comes back to the UPR process, the review sessions take place at the Human Rights Council in

Geneva. This session gives states the opportunity to ask questions and to make comments on the human rights situation in the country under review. Correspondingly, the state under review is expected to provide response to each recommendation, indicating whether it accepts it or rejects it together with outlining how the state is planning on the implementation of each recommendation. This could also have its potential to create a transparent and participatory manner how states could interact and exchange good practices along with recommendations in order to increase their future fulfilment along with further methods and means. It would be desirable, if either one particular UN agency would host the review progress or a new UN body would be created with one sole role, to measure, review and facilitate the process of the SDG review. Subsequently, following the UPR process, there is another step in the post-review session period, where the State under review is expected to provide an interim report on the procedure and progresses in implementation of the received UPR recommendation which takes place in four and a half years. (Shan and Sivakunuran, 2021, p. 298) Then, the UPR process is repeated, contributing to strengthening of the human rights situation. When applied on the SDG review, the cyclical nature would be highly desired, as it would promote the goals and would ensure the pathway towards its fulfilment. The mere issue arising from the UPR structure is the repeating period of four and half years. Given limited timeframe the SDG have to get implemented would not correspond with such a long “waiting” and “reviewing” period, which is inherently linked to changing human rights system. This, nonetheless, would not be efficient, and therefore, a shorter (halved) monitoring period would be suggested in effort to be able to review the state and their journey towards SDG’s fulfilment. Furthermore, thanks to its “friendly” and “collaborative” essence, the acquired recommendations could also provide policy suggestions, financial shifts or innovations that could be used for the purposes of SDGs contributions.



Figure 15 UPR Structure



### 3.3 Ambiguous nature of SDGs and the role of indicators

Another characteristic and perhaps a weaknesses at the same time, could be seen in the goals' high degree of ambiguity. Albeit Burger and Parker (2022) believe that the extent of ambiguity is giving states “interpretive” flexibility, nevertheless this aspect could be useful and curse *au contraire*. (Burger and Parker, 2022, p. 17-23) When it comes to viewing the flexibility through red-tinted glasses, one could argue that the ambiguity provides states abundance of flexibility in their interpretation, as well as their implementation, which can be custom-made for their specific context, and thus, by doing so, the flexibility of interpretation deflects from “one size fits all” approach. Likewise, high degree of flexibility is linked with a room for innovation as it allows states to explore new approaches and solutions to achieve goals. According to Langford (2016), flexibility of SDGs can also positively contribute to the inclusive approach where numerous stakeholders can participate with their own expertise towards the goals. SDGs being utterly “unrestrictive” and becoming space of “liberal” interpretation of particular SDG could be in reality more efficient than the opposite, using too narrow and restrictive policy sets, especially when applying the SDGs globally within the wide range of states whose sustainable development level vary. (Langford, 2016).

Additionally, one might say that SDGs are also based on liberal notion of international relations, the paradigm in which states morale is not selfish and are driven by genuinely good intentions leading towards sustainable development. Contrarily, using the realist paradigm of the international relations, there are numerous scholars who loudly condemn the vagueness within the SDGs. For instance, Engelbretsen (2017) implies that the issue regarding SDGs might be rooted in its ambiguous language. He further explains that the largest ambiguity lies in the fact that there seems to be distinguishment between “we” the ones who that are promising brighter and more sustainable future and “we” the ones who are responsible for finding the solutions and taking action. Whilst this aspect might be considered as minor, Engelbretsen (2017) believes it creates a confusion and makes the agenda “everyone’s-but-nobody’s business,” which is according to his view a factor that undermines the action towards SDGs. (Engelbretsen, 2017) On that note, Filho and al. (2020) add that vagueness might result in hampering “data and technology” which are essential in monitoring progress made in SDGs. At the same time, he highlights the degree of prominence in harmonizing of all possible means of agendas into “one common SDG language.” (Filho and al., 2020) This aspect could lead to deepening efficiency of SDGs global compliance. In the current settings, there is a tremendous risk of not reporting on particular issues and developments due to the fact that the monitoring

within the international community remains inconsistent with their interpretations, as well as priorities. Both of these factors might culminate to the uneven progress across different countries and communities.

Closely linked to the previous argument, it is paramount to highlight that the vagueness of the SDGs actively undermines the accountability procedure as well. In fact, given profound level of flexibility contributes towards the difficulties with harmonisation of governments and organisations which further leads towards lack of accountable process, a key mean to achieve the SDGs. (Mustajoki et al., 2020)

Gulseven (2020) demonstrated this reality further on United Arab Emirates inability to achieve SDG number 14, the life under water. In his paper he argues that some indicators are inherently “unmeasurable”. His statement is based on the indicator 14b1, more precisely, “the degree of application of a legal/regulatory/policy/institutional framework which recognizes and protects access rights for small-scale fisheries.” According to his view, there are no starting points which would enable to measure the progress regarding this indicator further and therefore, some of the sustainable development goals lack the SMART aspect, which in other words stands for their Specificness, Measurability, Achievability, Relevance and Time-orientation. (Gulseven, 2020, p. 53) Based on this case study, it would be essential to reform the indicators that play an integral role in measuring states’ performance in regard to specific development goal. The SMART aspect as defined by Gulseven (2020) deems to be an important accompanying factor for more reliable measurement of data, as well as the guiding light for the states. (Gulseven, 2020, p. 58) Thus, adding more specific instructions, measurable units, relevance and time-planning could be a prominent step towards a pathway of more systematically efficient indicators.

### 3.4 Lack of higher extent of integration within the goals

SDGs enshrine 17 principles of concept of three pillared sustainable development. Three spheres of drivers of a change varying with its profound essence and attempting to tackle challenges linked to different aspects of development which are extremely interconnected. Many scholars and other actors, the international institutions for example, refer to this method as to “holistic approach.” And high number of them, including UNEP (2019), Saez de Camara (2021), Moldavska and Welo (2019) claim that without applying holistic approach, the international community will not be able to meet majority of the SDGs. (UNEP, 2019) (Saez

de Camara, 2021) (Moldavska and Welo, 2019) On that matter, Lim explicitly states that “continuous failure to address the integration within the SDGs, will jeopardise realisation of the ultimate end-goal.” (Lim, 2018, p. 220)

And if the SDGs are closely observed, an element of the aforementioned holism is not sufficiently present. This reality could be demonstrated on the following example. The SDG number 6 which is ensuring the availability of sustainable water management, access to water and sanitation together with hygiene, is oftentimes deemed as “lonely wolf of the SDGs.” (Rai, 2019) If we closely look at the structure of the SDG, the following indicators are embedded. The main aim of the whole SDG is to “achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all by 2030.” (United Nations, 2015)

Target	Objective
6.1	“Achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations.” (United Nations, 2015)
6.2	“Improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimizing release of hazardous chemicals and materials, halving the proportion of untreated wastewater and substantially increasing recycling and safe reuse globally.” (United Nations, 2015)
6.3	“Substantially increase water-use efficiency across all sectors and ensure sustainable withdrawals and supply of freshwater to address water scarcity, and substantially reduce the number of people suffering from water scarcity.” (United Nations, 2015)
6.4	“Implement integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation as appropriate.” (United Nations, 2015)
6.5	“Protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes.” (United Nations, 2015)
6.a	“Expand international cooperation and capacity-building support to developing countries in water- and sanitation-related activities and programmes, including

	water harvesting, desalination, water efficiency, wastewater treatment, recycling and reuse technologies.” (United Nations, 2015)
6.b	“Support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management.” (United Nations, 2015)

After analysing the targets properly, one might say that only one cross-cutting issue in a form of a different target, is involved in the second indicator, which embodies the principles of gender-equality where the menstrual hygiene management is taken in account. Nonetheless, one can also notice that other cross-cutting issues are not integrated. (Lucks, 2016) For instance, the nexus between climate change, which is again enshrined in another target, is completely missing in defiance of its extreme effect on water management and further aspects of sustainability in water sector.

Although one might argue that some of the effects are already highlighted in the indicators, such as water scarcity, other significant issues are left unnoticed. For instance, the water-borne diseases which are the side-effects of raising temperatures and extreme weather and affect the most vulnerable populations. It would be desirable to add these elements to the framework under new indicators, because it could create a new layer of knowledge and action where the integration is alarmingly needed. In fact, spread of water-borne diseases endangers not only SDG 3, but also SDG 1 and 10, and therefore this missing indicator could undermine the fulfilment of 4 SDGs.

Over and above that, another cross-cutting issue is not sufficiently stressed in the indicators, or if it is, then in tremendous vague terms. (OHCHR, 2023) The phenomenon of migration, which was formally accepted by the General Assembly as issue with higher level of international agenda and attention is entirely gone astray. Perhaps, talking vaguely, one could say that partially forced migrants could be part of “those in vulnerable situations” as embedded in indicator a, however if so, it would be on the states’ degree and willingness of interpretation and their active deduce, unquestionably avoiding firmness of making a statement which is needed in this context. (Burger, 2022) One could counterargument with the fact that vague terms give flexibility to the states to provide their own definitions of the concerned aspects, albeit, in terms of global governance and required policy harmonization as a driver of global

change, this aspect could be highly inefficient. (McArthur, 2019, p. 680) (Tichenor, 2022, p. 436) (Engelbretsen, 2020) (Filho et al., 2017)

In addition, another cross-cutting issue that this SDG is short of is COVID-19. Certainly, when the SDG framework was drafted, no-one would ever predict the hit of the global pandemic, and therefore, this aspect could not be included properly. However, after the past experience with SARS and 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, it would be desirable to integrate global health emergency in the goals as well, especially due to the fact that globalisation together raising temperatures in consequence of climate change can potentially give birth to new health threats that will culminate into global dimension. In a view of the fact that water is a key mean how to prevent and protect population from some diseases. In summary, one reason for this is that SDG 6 is often seen as a standalone goal, separate from the other goals. This can lead to a lack of understanding about how water and sanitation issues are interconnected with other sustainable development challenges, such as poverty, hunger, health, education and most importantly, climate change. (Filho et al., 2017)

Furthermore, Obaideen et al. (2022) viewed this problematic from different angle, in their research they investigated how wastewater, an integral part of SDG 6. Their analysis shows that wastewater treatment can contribute to achieving 11 out of 17 SDGs by increasing water availability, enhancing human health, providing a new source of income, converting waste to energy, and reducing environmental impact. The article proposes a set of indicators to improve the contribution of wastewater treatment to the SDGs. The study emphasizes the significant influence of wastewater treatment on achieving the UN's SDGs and targets worldwide, especially for the social SDGs, such as SDG 1 (no poverty), SDG 2 (no hunger), SDG 3 (health), SDG 4 (education) and SDG 5 (gender equality). Similarly, Dilekli and Caszarro (2019) pointed that not only wastewater management, but also other aspects of hygiene and sanitation are immensely underrepresented and therefore, remain a challenge to get fulfilled. Another challenge is that progress on SDG 6 is often measured by access to basic services, such as safe drinking water and sanitation facilities. While these are important indicators, they do not necessarily capture the broader issues related to water and sanitation management, such as water quality, water scarcity, and the sustainable use of water resources. (Dilekli and Caszarro, 2019, p. 374)

To better integrate SDG6 into the SDG framework, it is vital to recognize the interconnectedness of water and sanitation with other sustainable development challenges and goals. (Rimba & Hirabayashi, 2023, p. 613- 615) This includes addressing issues such as water

scarcity, water pollution, the impacts of climate change on water resources, and access to water and its links to poverty, inequality, education and health. (Alcamo, 2019, p. 348)

In effort to improve the whole SDG system, the recommendation would lie in establishment of a new indicators or for the sake of practical side, potentially supporting document informing about the interlinkages and how certain SDGs are intertwined. This could become beneficial for the governments as they might spot some multidimensional relationships and impose broader policies contributing to achievement of more indicators. In case of invention of a sustainable framework in the post-2030 era, the policy drafters should make the indicators more interconnected in effort to cover broader scope of challenges.

The abovementioned lack of integration can be problematic because it fails to recognize the interrelated and interconnected nature of development challenges. For example, achieving SDG 2 on zero hunger requires addressing issues such as poverty (SDG 1), access to clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), and climate change (SDG 13). Similarly, achieving SDG 4 on quality education requires addressing issues such as gender equality (SDG 5), good health and well-being (SDG 3), and reduced inequalities (SDG 10). Hence, the lack of integration among the SDGs may lead to a fragmented approach to development, with different stakeholders working towards different goals and targets without sufficient coordination. This can result in duplication of efforts, inefficient use of resources, and missed opportunities for synergy and collaboration.

In effort to tackle this problem, there is a need to adopt a more integrated approach that states can pursue for SDG implementation. One of the solutions could lie in promoting more cross-cutting strategies, or in other words, efforts to identify and promote policies which can address multiple SDGs simultaneously, and thus, to kill two birds by one stone by policy coherence which would be mutually reinforcing. This will surely require greater attention to policy integration and coordination among different sectors and levels of governance as addressing the lack of integration among the SDGs is critical for achieving sustainable and inclusive development. (Guppy, 2019)

In summary, by adopting a more integrated and holistic approach to SDG implementation, the international community would be able to promote synergy and collaboration among stakeholders, and thus, maximize the impact of interventions, and advance progress towards a sustainable and equitable future. (Nunes et al., 2016) (Moldavska and Welo, 2019, p. 59) (Langford, 2016, p. 166)

### 3.5 Equal value of SDGs and trade-offs

When analyzing the SDGs visually, one can observe every goal has the same eccentric value. However, there is numerous evidence that indicate states do not take this reality into account. (Asadikia et al, 2021, p. 140) Berrone (2023) in his article indicates that mixed stakeholders, such as NGOs, local and international businesses or governments tend to pursue some of the SDGs in much higher intensity whilst other are bereft without any spotlight. He demonstrates his premise on target 8.1 which more precisely provides the following:

“Sustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances and, in particular, at least 7 per cent gross domestic product growth per annum in the least developed countries.” (United Nations, 2015) These goals apply equally to the developing countries, as well as developed. Nonetheless, according to author’s view, the SDG number 8 is “excessively prioritized” over any other SDG. Hence, he believes the visual representation of the SDG as an array shall look in the following way. (Berrone, 2023, p. 320)



*Figure 16 The value after analyzing states' prioritization of SDGs*

Likewise, Yang et al. (2020) investigated specific SDG priorities in particular regions and pointed out that different regions have different priorities. “With no hierarchy among goals, the number of targets that address each of the conflicting aims, and the focus of indicators monitoring progress towards them, provides grounds for assigning a factual prioritization to those aims addressed by more numerous targets and indicators.” (Yang et al., 2020, p. 320)

The thing is that the issue of SDGs having equal value is that it does not reflect the reality of the interconnectedness of the goals and the trade-offs that may be required to achieve

them. (Eisenmenger et al., 2020, p. 1109) While the SDGs are all important, they are not equally important in all contexts, and some may require more resources and attention than others. This could be demonstrated on the following examples. For example, achieving SDG 1 (No Poverty) may require significant investment in social safety nets, while achieving SDG 13 (Climate Action) may require significant investments in renewable energy and green infrastructure. Such different goals may require different degree of financial investment, and it may not be possible to achieve all of the goals simultaneously without making difficult choices and trade-offs.

Moreover, as the following section indicates, some goals may be more fundamental for the achievement sustainable development than others. For example, achieving SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) may be a prerequisite for achieving many of the other goals, as it is difficult to achieve sustainable development in an environment of conflict and instability. Therefore, to summarise, while the SDGs are all important, they may not be equally important in all contexts, and prioritization and reasonable trade-offs may be necessary to achieve sustainable development.

### 3.6 Are some SDGs more equal than the others?

Whilst the previous chapter analyzed the unbalanced value of implementation of specific SDGs, this chapter will attempt to answer the following questions. Are some of the SDGs inherently more important than the others? Does implementation of particular SDGs rely on fulfilment of other, primary SDGs?

It is apparent that the SDGs are tremendously tangled, and some elements can be only accomplished simultaneously. This phenomenon of “synergies” amongst SDGs is well-known by the world leaders. In December 2021, the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres remarked the following. “Without combatting climate change, we will not be able to achieve the socio-economic sustainable development goals.”

Furthermore, with the majority of targets of sustainable development in social sphere, multiple scholars and institutions attempted to depict the importance of environmental section of sustainable development goals. For example, Griggs and al. (2013) emphasized that sustainable development is “a development that meets the needs of the present while safeguarding Earth’s life support system, on which the welfare of current and future generations depend.” (Griggs and al., 2013, p. 305) On that note, the Stockholm Resilience



Centre came up with restructuring the SDGs into the “wedding cake” model or in other words, layered approach to the sustainable development goals. (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2016)

The model strategically puts the the goals linked to environment, and thus, biosphere as the most fundamental goals on which other goals are reliant. On that note, the authors of the model, Rockstorm and Sukhdev (2016) explain that their assumption recreate the SDGs in effort to provide a respect of planetary boundaries which can provide better enabling environment for fulfilment of other 16 SDGs. (Rockstorm and Sukhdev, 2016) In other words, the “Wedding cake” structure of the SDGs depicts the biosphere as the bedrock of economies and societies, serving as the underpinning for all 17 SDGs. This framework promotes a comprehensive approach to sustainable development, integrating social, economic, and ecological considerations.

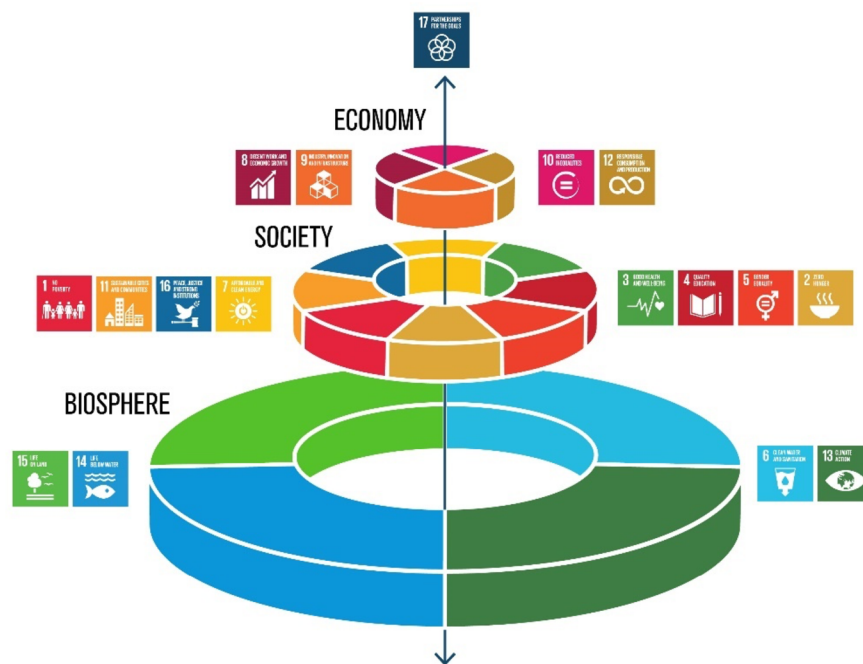


Figure 17 Highlighting the importance of environmental SDGs (Rockstorm and Sudhey, 2016)

Additionally, according to Rockstorm and Sukhhev (2016), the SDGs are a tremendous opportunity to establish a better future, especially in regard of all the aspirational goals, such as ending hunger, establishing equality or providing quality education. However, in order to fulfill such goals, they must occur within sustainable environment with a high capacity of biosphere. (Rockstorm and Sudhev, 2016)

The same argument is used in report by UNICEF Jordan Country Office (2019) who states explicitly the following, “All the SDGs are of importance; however, it is imperative to remember that our societies and economies are based on what the biosphere can offer us in terms of water, biomass, a functioning climate, and healthy oceans. Without achieving the following SDGs: SDG 6 Clean Water and Sanitation; SDG 13 Climate Action; SDG 14 Life below Water; and SDG 15 Life on Land, we do not have a basis to build thriving societies with resilient functioning economies that can nurture, protect and safeguard children.” (UNICEF Jordan Country Office, 2019, p. 23) The aforementioned premises could be further demonstrated on the following case studies.

### Case study 1: Deepening gender inequality in North-eastern Ghana (SDG 5)

A growing number of literature highlights the way climate change undermines gender equality. For instance, UN WOMEN (2022) highlights that women are usually more dependent, albeit do not have access to natural resources. (UN WOMEN, 2022) This statement also could be underlined by another factor, namely women being the most frequently responsible for water collection and household maintenance.

On that note, Eastin (2018) highlights the high extent to which women are prone to environmentally detrimental effects of climate change, and “the gender disparities in climate change vulnerability not only reflect pre-existing gender inequalities, but also reinforce them.” (Eastin, 2018, p. 293-298) This could be demonstrated further on the following case study. As Glazenbrook (2011) explains when climate change intensifies, women may have to take on additional unpaid care work, such as caring for sick family members, tending to crops and livestock, and collecting water and firewood. This can lead to increased time poverty, limiting women's opportunities to pursue education, work, and other activities outside the home. His analysis was based on data collection in Northeastern Ghana where women were not able to access basic services such as education and subsequent work and were left in an extreme poverty. (Glazenbrook, 2011, p. 775)

Another dimension to which climate change undermines SDG 5 is gender dimension of climate migration. Due to numerous natural hazards, climate change can lead to displacement and migration, which can have differential impacts on women and men. Women and girls may face additional risks and challenges during migration, such as increased risk of sexual violence, restricted mobility, and limited access to healthcare. This could thereby,

undermine not only SDG 5, but multiple, such as SDG 4, SDG 3, SDG 2, SDG 1 and SDG 10. (Lama, 2019, p. 354)

### Case study 2: Worsening the access to safe water due to climate change in Jordan (SDG 6)

Another fitting example on which the higher salience of tackling environmental SDGs with soaring priority can be demonstrated on decreased access to safe water due to extreme temperatures, a natural hazard that is driven by climate change. The access to safe and clean water can be found under SDG number 6, and apart from sustainable water management, one can find access to safe drinking water and sanitation for all. Yet, the extreme temperatures, minimal precipitation and inability of groundwater basins to replenish tremendously undermine the efforts to make “clean water for all.” According to a recent report by the Economist Impact, “the impacts of climate change effect on water stress are among the key risks to long-term growth in Jordan, exacerbating already difficult economic situation the country faces.” (The Economist’s Impact, 2022, p. 95-97) On that note, apart from economic growth and hence, inability to end poverty, there are numerous studies analyzing the negative effects of water stress in further sectors in Jordan, such as the agriculture leading to food insecurity, higher percentage of infant mortality or for instance education attainment by girls. UNICEF Jordan conducted detailed research regarding water stress and its role in increase of gender inequality and the findings revealed that due to increasing water stress, women and girls are unable to either work or study, especially if menstruating or pregnant, because the lack of water does not provide an enabling environment for them to menstruate in educational premises or at their workplaces. Therefore, one can observe that the water stress induced by climate change hampers the fulfilment of SDGs further, especially those related to economic growth, gender equality, no hunger and health and well-being. (UNICEF, 2019, p. 61-64)

### Case study 3: Climate Change and its effects on health and wellbeing (SDG 3)

The climate change toll is being paid in the field of health and wellbeing as well. Climate change can lead to an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, such as heatwaves, floods, and hurricanes. These events can cause physical injuries, illnesses, and death, all of which can impact the health and well-being of individuals, communities, and entire populations. (Rocque, 2021, p. 156) Moreover, climate change can also contribute to the spread of vector-borne diseases, such as malaria and dengue fever, as

well as waterborne diseases, such as cholera. These diseases can have a significant impact on the health of individuals and communities, particularly in low- and middle-income countries that may lack the resources to effectively manage and treat them. And therefore, this would significantly undermine the SDG 3. Furthermore, air pollution, which is often exacerbated by climate change, can also have a significant impact on health. Exposure to high levels of air pollution can cause respiratory illnesses, such as asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and can increase the risk of heart disease and stroke. (Rocklov and Dublow, 2020, p. 482) By the same token, climate change can impact SDG 3 by exacerbating health inequalities and making it more difficult to achieve the goal of ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages. To address these challenges, it is essential to take action to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change, while also working to promote health and well-being through targeted interventions and policies. (Laumann, 2022)

Whilst the aforementioned case studies enable to depict the problematic of turning the blind eye to the important and superior value of efficient climate change combat in effort to fulfill the rest of SDGs, it is more than important to acknowledge that climate change has detrimental impact and therefore actively undermines the rest of the SDGs. For example, global warming fuels and deepens poverty, tremendously affects the viability of numerous plant and animal species and endangers the existence of ecosystems, disturbs ecosystems under water, as well as contributes to the socio-economic aspects driving undemocratic systems and societies oppressing minorities. In other words, tackling global warming and slowing its effects on the ecological capital is the inception of fulfilling the SDGs. By the same token, the climate resilient policies should become a referent point to the path towards sustainability. Without acknowledging the prominent value of climate change and restructuring states' policies around this major issue, no further SDGs can be fulfilled.

Sachs (2017) argues that SDG 16 is “the most important of all the SDGs” because it provides the foundation for effective governance, rule of law, and accountability, which are necessary for achieving progress on all of the other goals. (Sachs, 2017, p. 2574) Similarly, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) (2021), a think tank focused on global security issues, has argued that SDG 16 is “critical for the success of the 2030 Agenda” because it promotes stable and peaceful societies, which are necessary for achieving progress on all of the other goals. (Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2021)

In other words, the reason why SDG 16 is considered a key goal is because it underpins the achievement of all the other SDGs. Without peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice, and effective institutions, progress on other goals may be undermined or even reversed. For example, conflict and violence can lead to the displacement of populations, undermine economic development, and limit access to education, health care, and other basic services. Ineffective governance and corruption can undermine efforts to reduce poverty, promote economic growth, and last but not least to protect the environment.

In addition, SDG 16 is critical for ensuring that “no one is left behind” in the pursuit of sustainable development. It emphasizes the need to promote and protect the rights of all individuals and ensure that they have access to justice and effective institutions. This is particularly important for vulnerable and marginalized populations, such as women, children, refugees, and indigenous peoples, who may face discrimination, violence, and exclusion.

Wesley, Tittle and Seida (2021) call attention to SDG 16 being the most fundamental feature and condition for achievement of SDG 3 (Good health and wellbeing). In their paper they emphasise the institutional importance by using the case study on Syria where due to the destructive Syrian civil war, in the first five years of the conflict, the national life expectation rate decreased by 20 years, and therefore, the institutional unrest caused by the civil war took its toll on the development in many areas, including health and wellbeing. (Wesley, Tittle and Seida, 2021)

#### [Case study 4: Corruption and its effect on SDG 16 amongst others](#)

One more aspect characteristic for undermining of SDG 16 is corruption. As Mackey, Vain and Kohler (2018) indicate that corruption is a major barrier to achieving sustainable development, and it undermines the progress made towards other SDGs. In their work they presume that corruption-free governance is needed for creation of enabling environment for fulfilment of SDG 3. (Mackey, Vain and Kohler, 2018, p. 639-641) The core issue about the corruption is that this phenomenon can lead to the misallocation of resources, weak governance, and reduced trust in public institutions, which in turn can hamper economic growth, undermine social cohesion, and exacerbate poverty and inequality. Corruption can also lead to human rights violations, such as restrictions on freedom of speech, association, and assembly, and denial of access to justice. It is obvious that all the aforementioned aspects put numerous SDGs in jeopardy.

The failure to achieve SDG 16, and in particular, the indicator aiming to addressing corruption, can undermine progress towards other SDGs. For example, corruption can undermine progress on SDG 1, which aims to end poverty in all its forms everywhere, by diverting resources away from poverty alleviation programs and into the pockets of corrupt officials. Moreover, corruption can also undermine progress on SDG 5, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, by perpetuating gender-based discrimination and denying women access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. To demonstrate how does corruption hinder on women's rights in practice, Nehan and Cox (2022) described the women right nosedive that occurred in Afghanistan after takeover by Taliban. The practices of this unstable and increasingly corrupt country classified women as the second-class citizens who have no access to education, only worsening the gender inequality in the country. (Nehan and Cox, 2022, p. 59)

Moreover, corruption can undermine progress on SDG 8, which aims to promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all, by creating an uneven playing field for businesses and deterring foreign investment. (Hoffiani, 2019) By the same token, corruption also undermines progress on SDG 10, which aims to reduce inequality within and among countries, by reinforcing existing inequalities and creating new ones.

### [Case study 5: Conflicts and instability and its effect on SDGs as a framework](#)

Unfulfillment of SDG 16 and therefore, injustice and weak institutions can lead to bursting out of conflicts and this is another area where the aforementioned unfulfillment has power to undermine the achievement of the rest of SDGs. In fact inside conflict-affected countries, achieving the SDGs becomes a significant challenge, as the resources are diverted towards addressing the conflict and conflict-based expenses. At the same time physical insecurity<sup>3</sup> undermines progress in areas such as education, health, and economic growth. (Kunar, 2018)

For example, in Afghanistan, despite some progress made towards achieving the SDGs, decades of conflict have severely hampered progress of SDG 3 (health) and SDG 4 (education),

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<sup>3</sup> In this case the concept of security is approached by traditional school of thought on security.

with the country still struggling with high levels of maternal mortality, low literacy rates, and limited access to basic services.

Furthermore, another such example is the ongoing conflict in Yemen, one of the largest humanitarian crises, which transformed Yemen to a failed state, disrupted access to justice, weakened institutions, and threatened the rule of law. Likewise, the Yemen war led to thousands of people in starvation, forced displacement and spread of physical and gender-based violence. The governance in Yemen also suffered, as in the midst of chaos and violence different factions started to control different parts of the country and imposed their own aspect of governance, such as rules, as well as regulations. Such institutional unclarity and inability to restore the order, the justice system collapsed leaving people behind to receive fair and impartial legal proceedings. It is apparent that conflict and instability is not an enabling factor for the SDG fulfilment, in contrary, it puts all the SDGs in jeopardy.

Based on the aforementioned arguments, one could say that like in Orwell's Animal Farm, some SDGs are much more equal than the others and thus, their importance reaches higher dimension and their unfulfillment endangers the whole set-up of goals. When it comes to unfulfillment of SDG 13, the climate action, is it evidence-based that the global change of temperature induces numerous natural hazards that endanger various SDGs, such as SDG 1, SDG 2 or SDG 5. Likewise, similar statement could be done about SDG 16, which enshrines base for peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDING POTENTIAL CLASHES

### 4.1 Economic growth (SDG 8) versus the environment (SDG 6, 12, 13, 14, 15)

Oftentimes, scholars loudly criticise the concept of three pillared sustainable development. For example, Redclift (2005) referred to this concept as to “an oxymoron that disguises the inherent conflict of human and natural systems” (Redclift, 2005). By the same token, Dasgupta (2013) highlighted that “the entire architecture of contemporary development thinking is stacked against nature” (Dasgupta, 2013, p. 2)

One could say that such oxymoron with conflictual nature can be found in the SDGs framework as well. Perhaps one of the most discussed aspects of the Sustainable Development Goals lies in the degree to which the SDG 8, sustaining economic growth for “at least 7 percent of GDP per annum” runs counter to, and what is more, oftentimes takes a precedence, to the environmental goals. (United Nations, 2015) (Novovic, 2021) The underlying concept lies in assumption that economic growth is a key tool to mobilize financial resources for further fulfilment of other SDGs, primarily SDG 1, 2 and 3 amongst others. Nonetheless, Hickel (2018) puts an emphasis on the fact that such a model is only applicable on low-income countries. He states, “past a certain threshold, additional GDP is no longer required to achieve these goals.” (Hickel, 2018, p.880) And therefore, there is no point for the high-income countries to excessively focus on their economic growth. Yet, this goal is frequently deemed as major goal and is being prioritized and traded-off at stake of the environment.

As it was stressed before, without the sufficient biocapacity, humankind would not be able to persist, and therefore would not be able to fulfill the SDG agenda in other spheres. This is reality is embedded and examined in scholarly work by Cumming (2018), Vasseur and al. (2017), Ronzon (2019), Kopnina (2022) amongst others. The question would therefore, be following, is there a way how the developing countries could economically growth as



prescribed by the SDGs without causing a massive environmental destruction which would have both local but also global impacts?

#### 4.1.1 Economic growth vs. environment

According to the statistics by the UNCTAD (2023) the economies of the 46 Least developed countries are based on agrarian revenues. (UNCTAD, 2023) It is also immensely important to highlight that the actors in agriculture of these countries encounter colossal hardship caused by the natural hazards linked to climate change, such as drought, extreme temperatures or seasonal floods. In terms of increasing their GDPs, Rostow (1962) in his theory analyzed particular stages of the transformation from agrarian economies towards the industrial defunct, and emphasized that it takes five steps, more precisely “The Traditional Society”, “Pre-conditions to take off”, “The Takeoff, Drive to Maturity” which results in “Age of High-Mass Consumption” which with its nature and concept highly environmentally unsustainable. (Rostow, 1962) If this aspect would be applied on the least developed countries it could lead to environmentally detrimental practices.

Nonetheless, there is another paradigm by Kuznets (1955) that indicates that with the increasing economic growth the environmental damage initially increases, however soon reaches the turning point which will gradually stabilize the environmental damage resulting in its fall even though the economic growth will persist. The only issue is that the Earth is in such an environmental crisis, it is questionable whether such actions would be in compliance with planetary boundaries. And also, it is important to highlight that the relationship between rise of GDP and human development is not always immensely strong. (Reddy and Kvantgraden, 2015- Hickel;s paper)

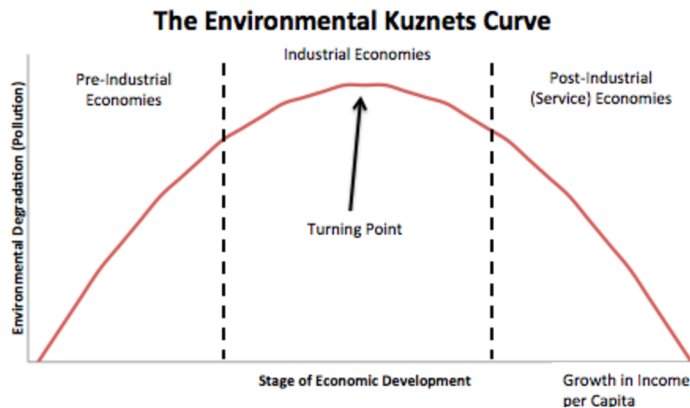


Figure 18 Environmental Kuznets Curve examining the relationship between economic growth and the environmental degradation (Kuznets, 1955)

A potential solution to this, could be seen in de-growth theory which grounds gradual and equitable reduction in economic activity to achieve environmental sustainability and social justice. According to the proponents of degrowth theory, the current economic system based on continuous growth and consumerism is not sustainable and has led to environmental degradation, social inequality, and economic instability. Degrowth theory calls for a transition towards a more sustainable and equitable society, with a focus on well-being, social justice, and environmental protection. (Robra and Heikurinen, 2021, p. 254) In addition, the theory also emphasizes the need to reduce humankind's reliance on fossil fuels, transition to renewable energy sources, reduce material consumption, and prioritize local production and consumption. It also calls for a redistribution of wealth and a shift towards more equitable economic systems that prioritize social well-being and ecological sustainability over profit. (Bolmonte-Urena, 2021) Contrarily, the critics of degrowth theory argue that it is unrealistic and would lead to economic stagnation, unemployment, and decreased innovation. However, proponents of degrowth theory argue that a shift towards a more sustainable and equitable economic system is necessary to address the pressing social and environmental challenges facing humanity today, as well as planetary boundaries.

According to Bolmonte-Urena (2021) SDGs should better integrate the main characteristics of green-growth theory in order to be fulfilled, such as sufficiently acknowledging the urgent need to address environmental challenges, prepare for green transition and green job creation. In fact, green growth stresses the salience of natural capital, such as biodiversity, ecosystems, and natural resources, as a foundation for economic development. This includes investing in ecosystem restoration and protection, sustainable land use practices, and sustainable management of natural resources. (Bolmonte-Urena, 2021)

A potential alternative to this could lie in applying a concept which was invented by an initiative of scientists called “L’Association Solidarite Echange et Development,” who suggested to include carbon intensity target to each SDG and hence, a tool for prioritization of goals which are environmentally friendlier than the others. In the current settings, some of the goals by design, in fact, might be undermining the environmentally orientated SDGs. This could go hand in hand with the following statement by Norstrom et al. (2014) who suggested that the integration of economic growth with the environmental goals is a keyway forwards towards the implementation of SDGs and creation of entirely and truly sustainable development. (Normsorm et al, 2014)

As a matter of fact, their model could be developed into more complex system of linking SDGs to their impact on the environment, for example SDG 8 (economic growth), offering alternative green policies with reduced carbon footprint. For the purposes of such system, every SDG would be ranked with a carbon intensity target, as well as with its possible effect on the environment. This way, the interlinkages would be ensured, and the states would be sufficiently guided to deflect from policies that are harmful for the environment.

#### 4.2 Economic growth vs. reduced inequalities

SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) can sometimes clash with each other. (Kmdingi, 2021) On one hand, SDG 8 aims to promote sustained economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all, which can lead to increased economic opportunities and reduce poverty. However, on the other hand, pursuing economic growth may exacerbate inequalities and marginalization, leading to social exclusion and increased poverty. This is where SDG 10 comes into play, as it seeks to reduce inequalities within and among countries by addressing issues such as discrimination, exclusion, and unequal access to economic opportunities. (Szen, 2022)

The clash between SDG 8 and SDG 10 can be seen in various scenarios. For example, in countries where economic growth is achieved by exploiting labour, such as through low wages, long working hours, and poor working conditions, as the evidence indicated above, SDG 8 is being prioritized oftentimes at the expense of other SDGs, including SDG 10. This means that while economic growth may be achieved, it is at the cost of exacerbating inequalities and marginalization, particularly for vulnerable and marginalized groups such as women, children, and migrant workers. As far as evidence for this statement is concerned, there have been many studies that have found that economic growth tends to benefit the wealthy more

than the poor. One of the most well-known studies in this area is the "Elephant Curve," which was developed by Branko Milanovic (2013), a former World Bank economist.

The Elephant Curve is a graph that shows how global income growth has been distributed between different income groups over the past few decades. This diagram indicates that while there has been significant income growth for people in the middle of the income distribution, the wealthiest 1% of the population has seen the largest gains in income. At the same time, the poorest 10% of the population has seen very little income growth. (Alvaredo et al, 2018, p. 354) The elephant curve has been widely used to distinguish between “the winners and losers of globalization” and to highlight the growing income inequality both within and between countries. The graph shows that while globalization has lifted millions out of poverty, it has also created winners and losers, with some segments of the global population benefiting much more than others. The elephant curve has been cited as evidence of the need for policies that address income inequality and promote inclusive growth.

### Change in real income between 1998 and 2008

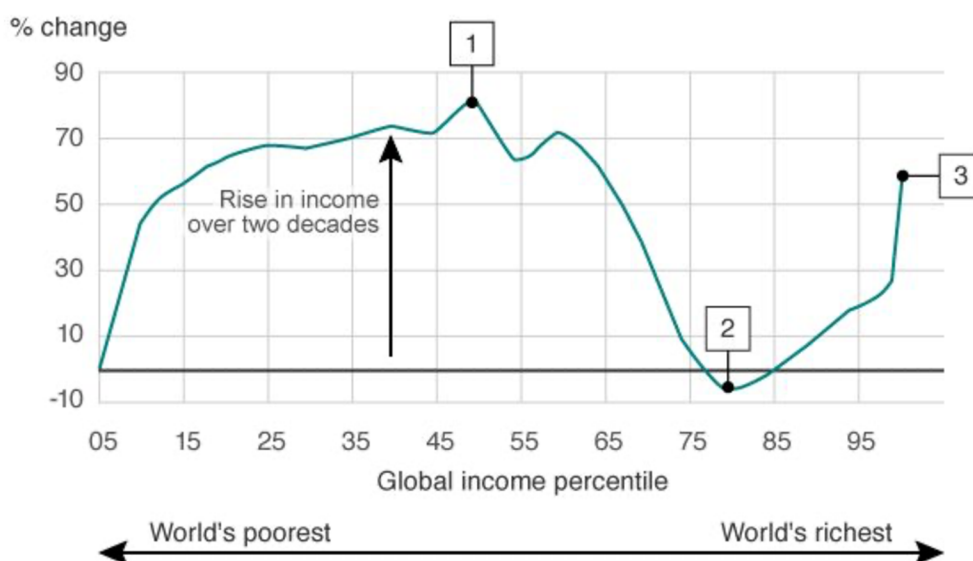


Figure 19 The Elephant Curve (Walker et al., 2018)

In order to avoid the clash between important to pursue economic growth that is inclusive and equitable, and that benefits all members of society, particularly those who are most marginalized and excluded. This requires policies and strategies that prioritize decent work, fair wages, and social protection, and that promote gender equality and non-

discrimination. By integrating both SDG 8 and SDG 10, it is possible to achieve sustained economic growth that benefits everyone, and that contributes to reducing inequalities and promoting social inclusion.

#### 4.5 Access to safe drinking water and no hunger

Whilst the section above analysed the clash between environmental SDGs and economic growth, this section will investigate another conflict, the one between SDG 6 which is ensuring access to clean water and sanitation for all with the SDG of 2 aiming to eradicate hunger and promoting sustainable agriculture. If one targeted to entirely fulfil SDG 2 related to hunger, the responsible and sustainable agricultural production would be needed. According to the Data by World Food and Agriculture Organisation (2017), for agricultural purposes, globally humankind uses 70 percent of freshwater withdrawals. (FAO, 2017) Accompanied by the data from the World Bank (2017), the highest rank of freshwater withdrawal occurs in South Asia and reaches 92 percent. The second highest rank takes place in the Middle East getting as far as 85 percent of total water withdrawal. (World Bank, 2017) In these regions, water scarcity can make it difficult for farmers to irrigate their crops, leading to lower crop yields and decreased food production. (Jagermeyir, 2020) In such cases, efforts to ensure access to clean water for domestic and industrial uses may compete with the needs of agriculture for irrigation water, creating a potential conflict between SDG 6 and SDG 2. In fact, the nexus between water as a tool for irrigation for farmers to grow their crops make these two SDGs either inherently interconnected or extremely conflictual. (Su, 2022) To put the two goals together, it is important to walk through the aforementioned goals. Target 2.3 calls for “increasing agricultural productivity and income of small-scale food producers.” Although the goal could be highly efficient when fulfilled in effort to combat hunger, the achievement of this goal would require a significant increase in water usage for irrigation, which could put a strain on water resources and potentially conflict with the objectives of SDG 6, especially given the fact that water is becoming every day more and more valuable asset given its decreasing availability and soaring importance in humankind’s lives and dependency on it for agricultural purposes. The water situation is also being exacerbated by the negative effects of climate change and extreme temperatures leading to dry periods, oftentimes triggering climate migration. In contrast to Target 2.3, the essential message of SDG 6 is to ensure universal access to safe and affordable drinking water for all. Achieving this goal requires sustainable water management practices, including reducing water usage in agriculture and other sectors.

(Kai, 2021) If SDG 2 targets are achieved without considering the sustainable use of water resources, it could potentially conflict with the objectives of SDG 6. One could argue that Target 2.4 hints towards the direction of environmental sustainability in the food production as it states the following:

“By 2030, ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, that help maintain ecosystems, that strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding and other disasters and that progressively improve land and soil quality.” (SDGs, 2023)

Notwithstanding the aforementioned statement, its vague nature again, does not provide sufficient base for linking the problematic to the water sector, due to fact that it is not being explicitly mentioned and therefore, such omission leads towards likelihood of overlooking this important synergy. There is a room for improvement of these aspect, which lies in higher extent of integration of these two goals and their targets.

In effort to address this contradictory issue, it is important to adopt integrated approaches that take into account the interconnections between water resources, food production, and human well-being. This can involve promoting sustainable agricultural practices that minimize water use and reduce the impact of agriculture on water quality. It can also involve investing in technologies and infrastructure that help to conserve and manage water resources, such as improved irrigation systems and water treatment facilities. Kroll (2019) distinguishes this practice as “transforming from trade-off to a synergy,” (Kroll, 2019) and such approach could become an efficient tool how to make potential trade-off more efficiently implemented. Prospective solution for this problematic could be found in translating the conflicts into additional indicators which would create the link much more visible and therefore, would effectively guide the policy makers and states to focus their attention on the inherent, mutually reinforcing link, rather than perceiving these two elements as competing priorities.

## CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATIONS

Attempting to rethink SDGs in effort to make them more efficient, this chapter is making some recommendations. At the same time, it is essential to highlight that the

recommendation might not be applied on SDGs as it might be too late and it extremely complicated to rethink the well-established system. Instead, this master thesis attempts to comprise the criticism and to re-model the SDGs for the purposes of SDG's successor after 2030. This part of the research will be divided according to the structuring of this master thesis.

## 5.1 Recommendations linked to the SDGs as framework (essence of SDGs)

### 5.1.1 Legal framework

The first part of the first chapter of this master thesis investigated the lack of legal codification of SDGs in the international legal system. Although to some extent the SDGs are represented in the international law, such as via different treaties or case law, they are not legally binding as such. Considering the system of international law, and the lack of upper and efficient authority over the states, it is questionable whether their legal creation would be effective. It was stressed that since the nature of international law is rather consensual, unlike “automatic” under national laws, one would not be certain whether the states would be willing to become parties to the legal framework, especially since the current hegemony along with other great-powers showed numerous times their reluctance towards any obligations towards the potential treaty or legislative framework as in some aspects they are not willing to take any concessions that could affect their economic growth. Whilst acknowledging these issues and analysing the risk linked to its implementation, one very specific solution occurs to be in a spotlight and possesses incredibly important and somewhat special place in the international community, *jus cogens* norm, a peremptory norm that is accepted by the international community as a norm from which no derogation is permitted. *Jus cogens* norms are considered to be non derogable and non-voidable by any state, regardless of their consent or recognition. Therefore, if each of the goals were somehow translated into the SDGs and accepted by the international community, states would not be able to avoid the accountability arising from the peremptory norms and hence, would be actively motivated to truly follow the SDG agenda.

For the aforementioned reasons, the recommendation linked to current non-binding nature of the SDG is as follows: **Translate all the SDGs into *jus cogens* norms, ensuring the international community follows the agenda.**

### 5.1.2 Accountability and monitoring mechanism

When it comes to the SDG monitoring and accountability, the research highlighted the lack of thereof and inefficient monitoring as a threat leading to hampering the SDGs fulfilment as whole. This arises from the reality that there is no accountability nor transparent monitoring procedure that would give states a chance to increase their extent of collaboration on one hand and participation in innovation exchange on another. The chapter suggested that creating a “soft law framework” for sustainable development goals with an independent investigative body could be a solution to monitor and enforce goals, similar to the Universal Periodic Review used for human rights. The process would involve regular reviews, participation from non-state actors, and the submission of national reports. The UPR process has been successful in promoting human rights, and a similar process could be implemented for SDGs. However, establishing such a system would require significant effort and participation from various stakeholders.

Overall, the aforementioned section of this master thesis proposes a transparent and participatory manner for states to interact and exchange good practices to increase the fulfilment of SDGs. Hence, the research leads to the following recommendation: **Create an independent investigative body and reviewing procedure of the SDG which would analyse the SDG’s progress on every second year basis and which would create a platform for states to provide recommendations to each other leading to policy advice, innovation exchange and which would contribute towards global enabling environment for the SDGs, enabling states to use participatory and transparent approaches actively promoting collaboration and partnerships for sustainable development.**

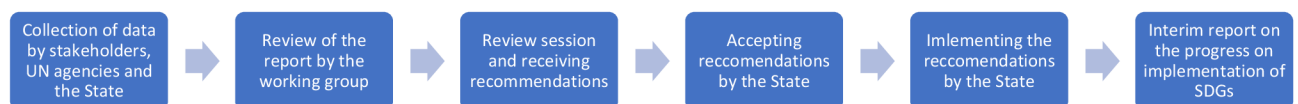


Figure 20 Proposed structure of review session on SDGs

### 5.1.3 Integration within the goals



The findings of data analysis of this master thesis reveal that the SDG framework significantly suffers from lack of synergies. If analyzed one by one and indicator by indicator, one can notice that the SDGs tend to be separated from each other, and only limited number contains some cross-cutting issues, and what is more, solely to some extent. Furthermore, some of the goals might be too vague with its content and the linkages thusly disappear behind the veil of unclarity. Again, in ideal world, and using liberalist assumptions, the ambiguity would not be such a major issue, as all the states would be understanding the problematics of deep tangledness of all the SDGs as a framework. Unfortunately, this in real world would not be possible, considering the current international system where states are driven and internal as well as foreign policy prospects are dependent on numerous realities, oftentimes overlooking the important contextual backgrounds and linkages of drivers potential issues impeding numerous SDGs to be fulfilled. It is important to stress that the linkages put directly into the SDGs could lead to a great opportunity for making new cross-sectorial partnerships and new links for new investments which could maximalise the fulfilment of numerous SDGs. Withal, numerous scholars highlighted the need to interlink the SDGs and called for higher extent of their integration and synergy.

This could be certainly accomplished by integrating cross-cutting and major sectoral elements into the framework. For example, by adding more gender-inclusive dimension to the goals, features that consider more climate-resilient solutions, make allowances of migration and its effects on SDGs, and likewise, include also some other salient factors that are paramount for each SDG, such as the wastewater in regard to achievement of SDG 6. That being the case, the recommendation would proceed as follows: **Ensure the cross-cutting issues including important elements for fulfilment of a specific sustainable development goal is integrated into the indicators in effort to ensure a solid base for implementation of these interlinkages, including the creation of essential partnerships.**

#### 5.1.4 Highlighting upper salience of specific SDGs

Whilst all of the SDGs provide a comprehensive framework for sustainable development and are conceptualised by having the same value, and there is no indication whatsoever which SDGs reach upper importance, in reality some might be more important than others. This occurs because different goals may have different levels of urgency or impact on achieving sustainable development. As the research of the thesis implies, numerous scholars and institution, such as the Stockholm Centre for Resilience, emphasise the role climate change

plays in undermining the rest of the SDG framework. This statement can be demonstrated further on the case studies that were distinguished in this master thesis, such as climate change directly undermining SDG 6 (access to water) as its natural hazards heavily contribute to water stress in most of arid countries, as well as SDG 3 (health and well-being) where the climate induced natural hazards enable spreading water-borne and create convenient conditions for spread of viruses and diseases. And at the same time, this master thesis highlighted the role of climate change and deepening gender inequality. Contrarily, different school of academics give the higher importance to SDG 16 whose unfulfillment strongly hampers the fulfilment of the rest of SDGs as in an environment affected by high rate of corruption is it tremendously difficult to be able to fulfil any other SDG agenda.

To put the section above in a nutshell, two schools of paradigms viewed either SDG 13 or SDG 16 as a paramount goal which must be to at least some extent fulfilled in order to provide better enabling environment for the fulfilment of all the SDGs. That being the case, the recommendation would be the following: **Restructure the hierarchy of SDGs where SDG 13 and SDG 16 will be above the rest of the SDGs, because the fulfilment of all the 17 goals are dependent on the above-mentioned SDGs.** This could be done via direct restructuring or recreation in case of post-2030 SDGs, as well as by adding a protocol about informing about the value of these two SDGs. The second option, is, however, less likely to be efficient as it does not provide the main source of motivation and is based on liberalist approach to global governance.



## 5.2 Recommendations linked to the internal conflicts

### 5.2.1 Environmental goals v. economic growth

The most frequent clash that was pointed out by the academic community was the internal contradictions between environmental goals and economic growth. This section explained how the goal 8 itself clashes with the environmental side of SDGs while using Rostow's curve on economic growth and the environmental damage in limited extent of planetary boundaries. Afterwards, this section looked into the concept of de-growth where less emphasis is put on economic growth, rather than prioritizing the growth over environment, however the critics argue that degrowth theory is unrealistic and would lead to economic stagnation, unemployment, and decreased innovation. Furthermore, this section also analysed green growth theory which offers an alternative approach and emphasizes investing in ecosystem restoration and protection, sustainable land use practices, and sustainable management of natural resources. A potential solution in practice is to integrate carbon intensity targets into the SDGs and environmental friendly alternatives to prioritize environmentally friendly goals as integrating economic growth with environmental goals is key to achieving sustainable development. Therefore, the recommendation would be the following: **In order to interconnect the economic growth with the environmental SDGs and to avoid promoting environmentally unsustainable goals, add a carbon footprint target along with alternative green policies to each indicator, this will lead the governments to rethink their policies at stake of the limited planetary boundaries.**

### 5.2.2 Economic growth v. inequalities

SDG 8 and SDG 10 may clash because pursuing economic growth can exacerbate inequalities and marginalization, while SDG 10 aims to reduce inequalities within and among countries. Furthermore, economic growth achieved through exploiting labour can prioritize SDG 8 at the expense of SDG 10, as prioritising SDG over other SDGs is a trend used by countries. Such reality, however, contribute to exacerbating inequalities and marginalization, particularly for vulnerable groups. Studies, such as the Elephant Curve by Brankovic (2016), have found that economic growth tends to benefit the wealthy more than the poor, with the wealthiest 1% seeing the largest gains in income, while the poorest 10% see very little income growth. Therefore, this section depicted the problematic of two concepts clashing, however the solution could be found in higher extent of integration of these two goals. Hence, the recommendation for this section would be the following: integrate **more sufficiently the**

**main concepts of SDG 8 and SDG 10 and ensure the emphasis on the means of inclusive economic growth.**

### 5.2.3 No hunger v. access to safe and clean water

This section explored the potential conflict between Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6, which focuses on ensuring access to clean water and sanitation, and SDG 2, which aims to eradicate hunger and promote sustainable agriculture. In fact, agriculture uses 70% of global freshwater withdrawals, with South Asia and the Middle East being the regions with the highest rates of withdrawal. In areas where water scarcity is an issue, efforts to ensure access to clean water for domestic and industrial purposes can compete with the needs of agriculture for irrigation water, potentially creating a conflict between SDG 6 and SDG 2. Achieving SDG 2's goal of increasing agricultural productivity and income would require a significant increase in water usage for irrigation, potentially straining water resources and conflicting with the objectives of SDG 6.

To tackle the conflict between SDG 6 and SDG 2, it is necessary to implement integrated approaches that recognize the interconnections between water resources, food production, and human well-being. This involves promoting sustainable agricultural practices that reduce water usage and minimize agriculture's impact on water quality, as well as investing in technologies and infrastructure that aid in conserving and managing water resources. One solution to this issue is to create additional SDG indicators that make the link between the two SDGs more visible, allowing policymakers to focus on the mutually reinforcing link between them rather than seeing them as competing priorities as it is critical to ensure the sustainability of water resources while pursuing goals related to agriculture and food production, to align with the objectives of SDG 6. Hence, this section gave birth to the following recommendation: **Translate the conflictual relationship between SDG 2 and SDG 6 into translators ensuring their reinforcing and synergic relationship. Both aspects should be added in both goals, confirming the paramount interconnection leading to higher likelihood of their fulfilment.**

## CONCLUSION

The Sustainable Development Goals agenda was established in 2015 and set up a programmatic framework for the international community to focus on and implement by 2030 in effort to reach higher extent of sustainable development in three pillars, economic, social and environmental dimensions. Sustainable Development Goals widened its predecessor the Millennium Development Goals which were much narrower and more focused solely on developing countries rather than on the whole international community. Albeit being widely accepted and integrated in policies on global, regional and national level, the SDGs became recipient of a wave of scholarly and institutional criticisms, emphasising their conceptual and systemic limitations, stressing the international community will never be able to fully fulfil their ambitious agenda.

Whilst acknowledging the predominant value of the SDGs and the conceptual importance thereof, this Master Thesis attempted to critically examine the central points of the loud criticism, delivering structural recommendations in effort to enhance the system, and highlighting profound inconsistencies for future, subsequent goals that will follow the SDGs in post-2030 era.

Firstly, an academic journal analysis for conducted in order to be able to summarise the approaches towards the criticism of SDG of the academic community. In this section, in total 107 articles were investigated. These articles appeared on various academic databases such as the Web of Science, Scopus, JSTOR or Science Direct after inserting relevant key words. Afterwards the data was analysed. The findings revealed that from the collected data, the academic community tend to express their criticism towards SDGs as a framework, primarily in focus on internal clashes between economic growth and environmental goals, leading to trade-offs that undermine environmental goals, as well as criticism of a lack of integration between goals and inefficient indicators. Throughout the data analysis chapter, more parallels were made in regard to articles' quartile and the year of their release.

Secondly, as for its legally non-binding nature, this Master Thesis examines the absence of legal codification of the SDGs in the international legal system. Although the SDGs are reflected in international law to some extent, they are not legally binding. Due to the consensual nature of international law, it is uncertain whether states would be willing to become parties to the legal framework. However, the concept of jus cogens norms, peremptory norms that are accepted by the international community as non-derogable and non-voidable, could provide a solution. If each SDG were translated into a jus cogens norm and accepted by the international community, states would be unable to avoid accountability and would be motivated to follow the SDG agenda.

Thirdly, the next section discusses potential methods to improve the accountability mechanisms for states' compliance with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The section mentions the weakness of the current accountability mechanisms and the need for a more efficient and independent mechanism to encourage states to comply with the SDGs. The idea of replicating the international human rights system, specifically the Universal Periodic Review, is proposed as a potential solution. This system would involve creating a sustainable development goals soft law framework with its independent investigative body that would monitor and enforce the goals, pushing on governments and local non-state actors via means of a regular review procedure. The section outlines the steps of the UPR process, which could potentially be replicated for the SDGs review process. The section also emphasizes the need for transparency, participation, and exchange of good practices and recommendations between states and non-state actors to increase the future fulfillment of the SDGs. Moreover, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are monitored and measured using indicators that represent specific sub-fields of change for each goal, developed through consultation with various stakeholders to ensure their relevance and reliability. The SDGs are also measured using the Sustainable Development Index, which visually represents progress towards goals in three phases: green for on track, orange for significant challenges, and red for major challenges. However, there are issues with the current monitoring system, including the uneven value of social targets over environmental and economic ones, significant gaps in environmental targets, and deficiencies in data collection. Some experts suggest reforming the SDG reporting system by creating more indicators to better depict complexities and interlinkages and changing the narrative to describe specific policy improvements and societal changes integral to SDG fulfillment. Another issue is national reporting, which can allow states to sway data to their advantage. To address this, an independent unit or UN agency should be established to unbiasedly monitor compliance and performance.

Fourthly, the following section discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly the high degree of ambiguity in their goals. On the one hand, the ambiguity allows for interpretive flexibility and customisation of the goals, which can be useful for states with different sustainable development levels. The flexibility also promotes inclusivity, as various stakeholders can participate in achieving the goals. However, critics argue that the vagueness of the SDGs undermines accountability, as there is no consistent interpretation or prioritisation of the goals among different countries and organisations. The lack of accountability also hampers progress monitoring and data and technology use. The vagueness creates confusion and makes the agenda “everyone's-but-

nobody's business", which impedes action towards the SDGs. To overcome these weaknesses, the article suggests harmonising all possible means of agendas into one common SDG language to increase efficiency and accountability. In summary, while the ambiguity of the SDGs has both positive and negative aspects, a more consistent interpretation and prioritisation of the goals is needed for effective progress towards sustainable development.

Fifthly, the next section discusses the issue of prioritization among the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and how states, NGOs, businesses, and governments tend to focus on certain goals more than others. It is argued that SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) is excessively prioritized over other SDGs, despite the fact that all goals have equal value. Additionally, the author highlights that different regions have different priorities when it comes to achieving the SDGs. The article points out that the issue with the SDGs having equal value is that it does not reflect the reality of the interconnectedness of the goals and the trade-offs that may be required to achieve them. Some goals may require more resources and attention than others, and prioritization and trade-offs may be necessary to achieve sustainable development. This Master Thesis also emphasises the integral value of addressing SDG 13 and SDG 16.

Finally, the last section was analysing the internal clashes of SDGs, linked to primarily the SDG 8 (economic growth), more precisely clash between economic growth (SDG 8) and the environment, economic growth and rise of inequalities (SDG 10). In both cases, an integrated approach was recommended. Additionally, a further clash could be found between SDG 2 (No Hunger) and SDG 6 (Access to water) as the agricultural sector which is essential for tackling the abovementioned SDG 2 is extremely dependent on water and its efficient use. This is particularly problematic in countries affected by water scarcity. Therefore, more integrated approach was recommended as well ensuring fulfilment of both SDGs.

It is apparent that whilst SDGs are tremendously important framework for Sustainable Development Goals and its undeniable importance reaches high dimension of driving change globally, it is equally important to address the aforementioned challenges in pursuit of more efficient approach by the international community, as well as other actors, such as businesses or international institutions. This could indeed maximalise the added value of SDGs.

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# ANNEXES

## 1. COLLECTED DATA

Article Name	Author and Institution	SDG Criticism	Q	Date	Country	Criticism	Link	Source
Hot Air or Comprehensive Progress?	Joachim H. Spangenberg   ISERI Sustainable Europe Research Institute Germany	All of them	2	2017	High income	Inefficient nature; no obligations on states	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2017.05.001">https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2017.05.001</a>	Web of Science
Sustainable Disclosure: A Critical Analysis of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development	Alaa Uddin; Asia Pacific Media Educator	All of them	3	2019	High income	This article problematizes the notion and theoretical underpinning of sustainable disclosure	<a href="https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1875651619300011">https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1875651619300011</a>	Google Scholar
Are SDGs Counting (Not) Women's? Feminist Analysis of Agenda 2030 Policy Shrinkage	Novic; Global Governance	5, All of them	2	2021	High income	SDG inefficient. They prioritize growth over other possible models, such as	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14747033.2021.1911111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14747033.2021.1911111</a>	Emerald
Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Caribbean: Unrealizable promises?	Brisson Non; Progress in Development Studies	All of them	2	2017	High income	Failure to demonstrate a measure of realization that challenges Western notions	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/09654259.2017.1371111">https://doi.org/10.1080/09654259.2017.1371111</a>	Web of Science
For function or transformation? A critical discourse analysis of education under the Sustainable Development	Brisson Miller Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies	All of them	4	2017	High income	Our findings show that despite transformative language used throughout the	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17513758.2017.1371111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17513758.2017.1371111</a>	Web of Science
Urban equality and the SDGs: three provocations for a national agenda	Butcher S; International Development and Planning Review	All of them	2	2022	High income	Internal contradictions and shallow policy targets least not overlook the	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111</a>	Web of Science
The Sustainable Development Goals: Brilliant Pappasages?	Poppe T; Analetta Universitatil Bucuressti Sinte Politice	All of them	4	2015	High income	The most important criticism is, that in the case of the Millennium Dev	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2015.1081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2015.1081111</a>	Web of Science
SDGs: the analysis of outcomes	Kyriakides	All of them	2	2019	High income	This pattern also revealed that the efforts are still spotty and that the systemic synergy has not yet taken pl	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2019.1681111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2019.1681111</a>	Web of Science
Agenda 2030: systemic interrelationships between the Sustainable Development Goals	Centro de Estudos do Desenvolvimento do Ser Humano	All of them	2	2022	High income	It is essential that the barriers of sectoralism and fragmented vision are	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111</a>	Web of Science
Leaving No One Behind: A human rights assessment of the WASH targets in the SDGs	Linka Gopyy; Sustainability Science	All of them	6	2018	High income	Human rights assessment of the	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2018.1581111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2018.1581111</a>	Web of Science
Global SDGs Assessments: Helping or Confusing Indicators?	Jankovic; Sustainability Science	All of them	1	2017	High income	Confusing indicators. We demonstrate and argue that without a procedurally	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2017.1371111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2017.1371111</a>	Web of Science
Unheard voices: a critical discourse analysis of the Millennium Development Goals' evolution into the Sustai	Janet Carant Third World Quarterly	5, All of them	1	2015	High income	Problems with implementation as the global governance works differently	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2015.1081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2015.1081111</a>	Web of Science
The sustainable development goal: quantifying and modelling the incompatibility of sustainable developme	SPASER; International Journal of International Development and World Ecology	All of them	1	2017	High income	We measure the extent of inconsistency and conclude that the SDG agent	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2017.1371111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2017.1371111</a>	Web of Science
Consensus-based Sub-indicator Weighting Approach: Constructing Composite Indicators Compatible with Ex	MP Liberto; Social Indicators Research	All of them	1	2022	Middle	Sub-indicators: Merely, the assessments occur when the number of	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111</a>	Scopus
Leave No One Behind: how systemic racism impacts Sustainable Development Goals	Kufusa; International Journal of Public Leadership	All of them	2	2023	High income	Prevailing inequalities hamper the SDGs	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2023.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2023.2081111</a>	Scopus
Replacing Sustainable Development: Potential Frameworks for International Cooperation in an Era of Increas	Bendjel J; SUSTAINABILITY	All of them	14	2022	High income	Consequently, inequalities critiquing the conceptual framework behind the	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111</a>	Scopus
Reformulating the sustainable development goals to achieve sustainable development in the Anthropocene—a v	Susan Baker; Marine Policy	All of them	1	2023	High income	Clash between social and environmental goals: Oceans	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2023.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2023.2081111</a>	Scopus
Sustainable Development Goals and their Fit with Good Governance	Massey; GLOBAL POLICY	All of them	6	2022	High income	It argues one of the other 15 SDGs can be achieved without the coordinat	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111</a>	Scopus
The role of wastewater treatment in achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs) and sustainability g	Enayeh; Environmental Science and Pollution Research	All of them	6	2022	High income	Wastewater SDG that will help with their fulfillment in missing	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111</a>	Web of Science
Reconciling and trade-offs between sustainable development goals and targets: innovative approaches and ne	Renard; Sustainability Science	All of them	1	2022	High income	Tradeoffs and synergies amongst the SDGs	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111</a>	Scopus
Politics of Leaving No One Behind: Contesting the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals Agenda	Weber; Globalisation	All of them	1	2022	High income	The argument I develop demonstrates that the SDG agenda may be am	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111</a>	Web of Science
Oceans Justice: Tradeoffs between Sustainable Development Goals in the Seychelles	Kathia Foreign Policy and Economics	All of them	1	2020	High income	The main conclusions of this analysis are that land and resource tenur	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2020.1781111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2020.1781111</a>	Scopus
Unpacking SDG 15, its targets and indicators: tracing ideas of conservation	Krauss; Globalizations	All of them	15	2022	High income	Contravening the SDGs' stated objective of leaving no one behind, the pap	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111</a>	Scopus
The Sustainable Development Goals and human rights: a critical early review	Winkler; International	All of them	2	2017	High income	SDGs underpin the Human Rights and it loses its potential	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2017.1371111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2017.1371111</a>	Scopus
Reconciling and trade-offs between sustainable development goals and targets: innovative approaches and ne	Saxena; Sustainability	All of them	2	2021	High income	Lack of efficient guidance through strong guiding leadership to develop	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2021.1911111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2021.1911111</a>	Scopus
Striving for the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) what will it take?	Lymn; Sustainability Development	All of them	1	2020	High income	Bad indicators guiding leadership	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2020.1781111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2020.1781111</a>	Google Scholar
Risks of producing and using indicators of sustainable development goals	Hickel; Sustainable Development	All of them	1	2020	High income	Conducts: Nature X Growth	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2020.1781111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2020.1781111</a>	Google Scholar
The contradictions of the sustainable development goals: Growth versus ecology on a finite planet	Nature	All of them	1	2020	High income	Clash between bio capacity and growth after covid	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2020.1781111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2020.1781111</a>	Google Scholar
Time to revise the Sustainable Development Goals	William Easterly; Political Science	All of them	2	2015	High income	Goals are unlikely to be achieved because they require significant change	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2015.1081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2015.1081111</a>	Google Scholar
The Trouble with the Sustainable Development Goals	Bombard; Environmental Science and Policy	All of them	1	2022	High income	Structural obstacles linked to global governance	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111</a>	Scopus
Strongly sustainable development goals: Overcoming obstacles constraining responsible action	Renard; Sustainability Science	All of them	1	2022	High income	SDGs are not sufficiently codified (translated) local human rights legisla	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111</a>	Scopus
A Critical Analysis of the Sustainable Development Goals	Handbook of Sustainability Science and Research (pp.341-355)	All of them	1	2017	High income	The ambitious UN-specified sustainable development goals (SDGs) have b	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2017.1371111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2017.1371111</a>	Scopus
SDG 10: Reducing inequality in and among countries	Worhaga; Sustainability	All of them	1	2017	High income	Partha has argued that the SDGs are too narrow and fail to address the bo	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2017.1371111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2017.1371111</a>	Scopus
Environmental justice and the SDGs: from synergies to gaps and contradictions	Morion; Sustainability Science	All of them	1	2020	High income	We analyze how EU frameworks are, or fail to be, incorporated in the SDG	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2020.1781111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2020.1781111</a>	Scopus
Beyond CockpitLiam: Four Insights to Enhance the Transformative Potential of the Sustainable Development	Hauer; Sustainability	All of them	1	2015	High income	Priority boundaries and the lack of changes in global governance ineffect	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2015.1081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2015.1081111</a>	Google Scholar
The Sustainable Development Goals' emphasis of accountability	Engelbrecht; Lancet	All of them	1	2017	High income	New monitoring system needed (IN THE NOTE)	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2017.1371111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2017.1371111</a>	Scopus
Knowledge and Politics in Setting and Measuring the SDGs: Introduction to Special Issue	Sikavaya; Year Global Policy	All of them	2	2018	High income	Proclamation of specific SDGs over different ones to the goals. The analy	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2018.1581111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2018.1581111</a>	Google Scholar
Through the Blurry Looking Glass—SDGs in the GRI Reports	Srenay; Advances in Natural Resources Economic Policy	All of them	3	2019	High income	Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) indicators linked to the goals. The analy	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2019.1681111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2019.1681111</a>	Google Scholar
Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Feminist Mobilization for the SDGs	SEN; Global Policy	All of them	5	2018	High income	Important unresolved barriers of financing and political opposition to women	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2018.1581111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2018.1581111</a>	Scopus
The Sustainable Development Goals: A critical early review	Katamb Bay; Journal of Public Health Policy	All of them	2	2018	High income	Problem with indicators: But across many goals, there was stagnation in am	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2018.1581111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2018.1581111</a>	Scopus
Contradictions within the SDGs: are six taxes for health improvement at odds with employment and econom	Hangona; Globalisation and Health	All of them	1	2019	Low	Without paying due consideration to important contextual factors, Zambia	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2019.1681111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2019.1681111</a>	Scopus
Achieving sustainable development goals: predicaments and strategies	Swain; International Journal of Sustainable Development & World Ecology	All of them	2	2022	High income	There is an inherent conflict between the socio-economic development and	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111</a>	Web of Science
Understanding the implications of the Sustainable Development Goals for health policy and systems resea	Bauman; Lancet	All of them	1	2022	High income	The interlinkages between goals are too complex	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111</a>	Web of Science
Complex interlinkages, key objectives, and reassess among the Sustainable Development Goals and climat	Reinert; Ethics and International Affairs	All of them	1	2020	High income	SDGs are too broad, proposing 7 SDGs	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2020.1781111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2020.1781111</a>	Scopus
From Sustainable Development Goals to Basic Development Goals	Kyriakides; Environmental Science and Policy	All of them	1	2022	High income	Indicators should be more interconnected	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111</a>	Scopus
SDG Implementation, their synergies, and trade-offs in EU countries – A sensitivity analysis-based approach	Zrzenska; ECOLOGICAL INDICATORS	All of them	1	2022	High income	TRADE-OFFS of environmental goals for socio-economic. The only trade-	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111</a>	Scopus
Connecting climate and sustainable development through an SDG lens: The role of development as a st	Jacobs; Social Environmental Change	All of them	13	2022	High income	Lack of a sense of urgency to implement other SDGs. There is an urgent	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111</a>	Scopus
The missing link of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in tourism: An empirical research on Amster	Kaplan; TOURISM MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVES	All of them	5	2022	High income	SDGs does not include anything on LGBT rights	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111</a>	Scopus
SDG 10: Reducing inequality in and among countries	Hauer; Sustainability	All of them	1	2015	High income	Sustainability gap: There is a	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2015.1081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2015.1081111</a>	Web of Science
Economic without ecology: How the SDGs fail to align socioeconomic development with environmental sus	Hamberger; ECOLOGICAL ECONOMICS	All of them	1	2022	High income	Undervaluation of environmental SDGs. The trends in the HDI and the EF	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111</a>	Web of Science
SDG 10: Reducing inequality in and among countries	Worhaga; Sustainability	All of them	1	2017	High income	Partha has argued that the SDGs are too narrow and fail to address the bo	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2017.1371111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2017.1371111</a>	Scopus
Is SDG 10 reducing inequality in and among countries? An examination of controversial and environmentally sensitive ind	Jacobs; JOURNAL FOR CLEANER PRODUCTION	All of them	1	2022	High income	Problems with SDG implementation in private sector only relevant for bu	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111</a>	Scopus
SDG 10: Reducing inequality in and among countries	Worhaga; Sustainability	All of them	1	2015	High income	Sustainability gap: There is a	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2015.1081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2015.1081111</a>	Web of Science
Consideration of culture is vital if we are to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals	Jacobs; JOURNAL FOR CLEANER PRODUCTION	All of them	1	2022	High income	Assess of culture is represented in the SDGs. Our findings	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111</a>	Scopus
Progress towards SDG 2: Zero hunger in megalasia – a state of data reporting review	Capri; Law, Health, Policy	All of them	11	2021	High income	Lack of efficient indicators of SDGs. UN indicator frameworks do not incor	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2021.1911111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2021.1911111</a>	Scopus
Progress towards SDG 2: Zero hunger in megalasia – a state of data reporting review	Vogelin; Global Food Security	All of them	2	2021	High income	SDG 2 indicator not compatible with small islands and indigenous comm	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2021.1911111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2021.1911111</a>	Scopus
Hunger and environmental goals for Asia: Synergies and trade-offs between the SDGs	Prasad; ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES	All of them	2	2018	High income	Trade-off: Hunger over areas in similar political and economic circum	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2018.1581111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2018.1581111</a>	Scopus
National SDG 2 performance assessment to support achieving sustainable energy for all within planetary limit	Galbraith; Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews	All of them	2	2022	High income	Current SDG 2 targets do not sufficiently address environmental sustain	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111</a>	Scopus
Assessing progress towards the SDG 2 climate policy targets for improved benefits in	Galbraith; ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES	All of them	6	2018	High income	Trade-off: Hunger over areas in similar political and economic circum	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2018.1581111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2018.1581111</a>	Scopus
Developmental Options for Action to Progress on the SDGs Targets in Austria	Worhaga; JOURNAL OF ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT	All of them	1	2022	High income	Current SDG 2 targets do not sufficiently address environmental sustain	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111</a>	Scopus
The Sustainable Development Goals: A universal promise for the future	Johnson; FUTURE	All of them	1	2022	High income	SDGs too ambitious	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2022.2081111</a>	Scopus
Connecting climate action with other Sustainable Development Goals	Nelson; Nature Sustainability	All of them	13	2021	High income	SDG 13 should be prioritized because it underpins all the other SDGs	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2021.1911111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2021.1911111</a>	Scopus
Linking Sustainable Development Goals in sub-Saharan Africa: The need to address environmental climat	Keppeler; Environmental Development	All of them	1	2020	High income	Other environmental SDGs should be prioritized	<a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2020.1781111">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09654259.2020.1781111</a>	Scopus
SDG 10:								

