

# The Role of Transnational Networks and Professional Exchanges in Supporting an Integrated Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals

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## Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer an ambitious and integrated strategy for emerging and developed countries to address familiar yet complex sustainable development challenges. The interconnected nature of the SDGs requires a comprehensive and holistic approach which depends on, among other factors, the participation and collaboration of different stakeholders to enhance institutional integration and policy coherence in their implementation.

Transnational networks and professional exchanges, involving practitioners, civil servants, and representatives from academia, civil society, the private sector, and non-governmental organizations, are an important resource to support an integrated implementation of the SDGs. Networks facilitate the development of mutual and collaborative responses, as members are encouraged to identify and characterize common challenges, to find solutions, and to discuss policy alternatives to address global issues. These forums represent a fruitful locus to advance technical discussions, support the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and good practices, and promote innovation in SDG implementation.

This contribution examines how transnational networks and international professional exchanges can help foster sustainable development. It builds on the example of a network for sustainable development that brings together young professionals from different countries. This case highlights the importance of supporting accessible and inclusive approaches to capacity-building and collaboration, especially at the crucial midpoint of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, where insufficient progress and a complex context call for strengthening the integrated implementation of the SDGs.

## Networks as catalysts for change

With the increasing complexity of society's challenges—including the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and migration—networks are becoming more important. Global and complex issues demand collaborative solutions as they cannot be tackled by one nation or independent actors. Communities and societies need to cooperate to collectively define problems and agree on possible solutions; broad collaboration allows a variety of perspectives to be shared and

considered and increases the legitimacy and local suitability of policy alternatives.

*The Oxford Handbook of Public Policy* defines policy networks as “sets of formal institutional and informal linkages between governmental and other actors structured around shared if endlessly negotiated beliefs and interests in public policy making and implementation. These actors are interdependent, and policy emerges from the interactions between them.”<sup>2</sup>

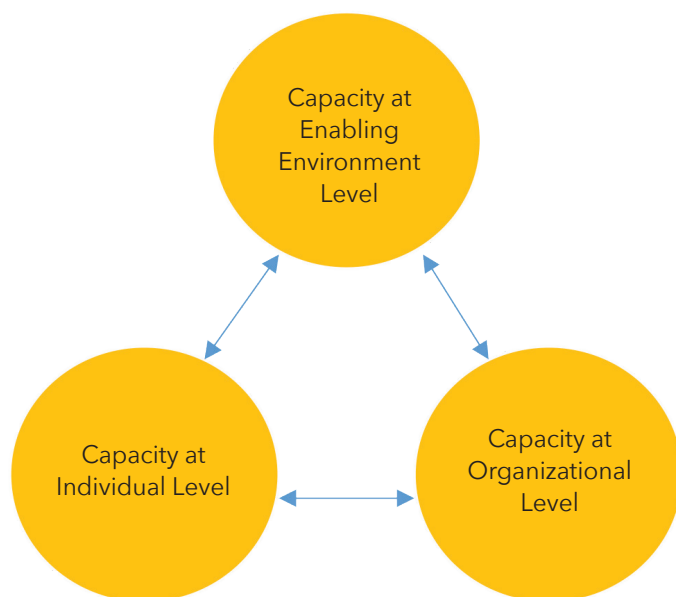
Networks facilitate cooperation, enable collaboration and create space for mutual dialogue.<sup>3</sup> They have the potential to work as connectors between researchers and policymakers.<sup>4</sup> This is extremely relevant to the development of evidence-based policies, especially in times where social phenomena such as “fake news” and misinformation may impact policy processes and undermine their legitimacy. Networks not only connect actors and knowledge but can also support the legitimization of governmental policies and programmes.

Furthermore, with the ultimate objective of advancing international cooperation on sustainable development and supporting the implementation of the SDGs, particularly in the present context of high uncertainty, it is imperative to ascertain the channels through which those networks may influence the design and implementation of policies to advance the SDGs, as well as any evidence of their benefits and results.

Networks can contribute to the building and sharing of capabilities at three interconnected levels:<sup>5</sup>

- *Individual*: improving individual skills, knowledge and performance through training, experiences, motivation and incentives;
- *Organizational*: improving organizational performance by optimizing and leveraging strategies, plans, rules and regulations, partnerships, leadership, and organizational politics and power structures, and by strengthening organizational systems, processes, roles and responsibilities;
- *Environmental*: creating an enabling environment for improving the policy framework to address economic, political, environmental and social factors, including economic growth, financing, labour markets, the political context, the policy and legislative environment, class structures, and cultural dynamics, in a coherent and mutually reinforcing fashion.

### Three interconnected levels of capacity



By convening multiple stakeholders, networks enable capacity-building and sharing, the dissemination of knowledge, and collaboration. Some key elements through which transnational networks and their activities can support multi-stakeholder collaboration for an integrated implementation of the SDGs include continuous communication, mutually reinforcing activities, shared purposes, and a common agenda. Furthermore, transnational networks contribute to the identification of similar problems, shared understandings and aspirations, and the identification of blind spots among the broad spectrum of stakeholders, including scholars or institutions that are working on similar topics or dealing with similar issues.

Networks can facilitate growth and development at different levels (including the individual, organizational and environmental levels) over time. The impact of networks is typically linked to the progress made towards their stated objectives, which vary across networks. For example, a network that aims mainly to facilitate information exchange may not be expected to generate collective action but can nonetheless have a demonstrable impact on policy outcomes downstream.<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, the effectiveness of policy networks for sustainable development would depend on whether Governments changed policies or policymaking in response to the networks' efforts. For example, countries would act differently on the implementation of a health policy depending on whether they were or were not signatories to a certain international treaty.<sup>7</sup> For the SDGs, an effective network could contribute to more integrated, coherent and inclusive implementation because of the effects of the network on its members' capacities, skills and practices (including collaboration).

Given the challenge of measuring the impact of networks, less demanding forms of monitoring and evaluation could consider intermediate indicators and focus on the deliverables or outputs expected depending on different networks' goals and evaluation criteria as well as the competency effects on their members. Some of the indicators that could be used would entail curating or implementing joint projects, the adoption of new or improved practices, and more inclusive representation and participation in decision-making processes.<sup>8</sup> These indicators could be intertwined with different levels of capacities and competencies.

### Moving from theory to practice

The effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda requires a rich ecosystem that involves multiple stakeholders. While there are several examples<sup>9</sup> of global networks for sustainable development, this section highlights the experience of the Managing Global Governance (MGG) Academy and how it contributes to SDG implementation by mobilizing, connecting, and enhancing global expertise and promoting practical solutions for sustainable development.

The MGG Academy is a training programme that has been organized annually by the German Institute of Development and Sustainability since 2007. It brings together young professionals with diverse backgrounds from Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, South Africa, and the European Union to collectively address global challenges. Currently, the MGG network includes more than 100 institutions and approximately 380 alumni that interact through an online platform, national meetings, and global conferences.

The main objective of the MGG Academy is to foster "an innovative platform for multi-stakeholder collaboration" on global sustainable development. The programme was built with insights from behavioural sciences, investing in the idea of building transnational cooperation for primarily relational rather than transactional or instrumental purposes.<sup>10</sup>

The MGG Academy also aims to prepare future change-makers for a professional and personal life dedicated to sustainable development. Participants take part in a four-month training programme that combines a broad range of working methods, including practical experience and participatory approaches, training, lectures, discussions with experts, study trips, and peer coaching through academic and leadership modules and a change-maker project.

For the change-maker projects (CMPs), the participants have to develop a prototype incorporating a practical solution to a real-world challenge. The CMP process essentially involves deep navigation through the challenge or problem, assessment of its causes and effects, consideration of alternative perspectives, and the development of possible solutions. It encourages

participants to use holistic approaches and apply analytical tools, including systems-thinking methodology, to tackle complex sustainable development challenges in innovative ways.

The challenges considered for the CMPs are very diverse and relate to different SDGs. Past projects have focused on, for example, the use of green and sustainable packaging (SDG 12); expanding branchless banking to improve the digital and financial inclusion of low-income populations, especially women (SDGs 1, 2 and 5, among others); and leveraging the voices of small civil society organizations (CSOs) to promote more efficient cooperation with local governments around the 2030 Agenda (SDGs 11 and 16).

The development of such prototypes contributes to enhancing different types of competencies and capacities at the individual, organizational and environmental levels. For instance, the project aimed at leveraging the voices of small CSOs introduced an initiative called “BW4SD” (Be Wise for Sustainable Development) to empower a network of CSOs while opening avenues for potential collaboration with other stakeholders. It envisioned the organization of a change-maker fair to provide a space for CSOs to draw attention to their projects’ unique value and share objectives and results. Additionally, it aimed to leverage partnerships on common agendas with other stakeholders. Such an initiative could provide opportunities for CSOs to address common

challenges and conduct new research and case studies to open doors for new partnerships.

In the process of developing these projects, the participants apply and strengthen different competencies for innovation, transformation and cooperation.<sup>11</sup> The groups are composed of young professionals of different nationalities who have to reflect on their own values, communicate their ideas and motivate others, manage conflicts, practise their ability to strategically design interventions for change, apply design thinking to explore the problems in a holistic way, focus on the common good, and apply their knowledge of the SDGs to come up with practical and feasible solutions with the potential to positively impact society.

This experience demonstrates that networks, as a nexus of capacity-building and exchange, can help strengthen soft and hard skills, particularly among young people, to promote positive change in addressing sustainable development challenges. Networks contribute to creating and sustaining more inclusive approaches to knowledge generation and capacity-building for the SDGs by bringing together people with different professional backgrounds from the global South and North and by encouraging genuine collaboration. The MGG network can not only impact individuals’ careers and competencies but can also influence institutional capacity-building, as illustrated in the box below.

### Anecdotal evidence of institutional capacity-building by Managing Global Governance partners

The Managing Global Governance (MGG) programme has supported the formation of multi-stakeholder voluntary sustainability standards (VSS) platforms in Brazil and China. Standards bodies and ministries in Indonesia, Mexico and South Africa are engaged in setting up similar institutions. MGG think tanks have expanded their expertise and provide advice to national VSS platforms and standards bodies in Brazil, India, Indonesia and South Africa. MGG has also facilitated the interaction of national platforms and other actors with the United Nations system.

MGG was instrumental in bringing Southern think tanks into the “Think 20” (T20) process during the 2017 German Group of 20 (G20) presidency. MGG partners assumed roles as co-chairs in five out of ten T20 task forces. This led to the founding of the T20 Africa Standing Group, with the participation of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, which serves as a platform for knowledge institutions from G20 countries and Africa.

The Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS) in India used the MGG Programme to acquire expertise on the development cooperation modalities and experiences of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries. This benefited the institution’s analytical and advisory work on South-South and triangular cooperation. In hosting international forums on this topic, RIS draws widely from partners in the MGG network.

Source: Thomas Fues, *Investing in the Behavioural Dimensions of Transnational Cooperation: A Personal Assessment of the Managing Global Governance (MGG) Programme*, Discussion Paper 12/2018 (Bonn, Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik, 2018), available at [https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/DP\\_12.2018.pdf](https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/DP_12.2018.pdf).

By creating a space for reflection and innovation, networks enable members to identify and frame policy problems, develop common understandings, and comprehend the causes and consequences of present challenges. Networks help disseminate concepts and analytical frameworks to facilitate understanding of complex sustainable development issues (such as trade-offs relating to inequalities in the context of climate justice). They emphasize the importance of holistic and integrated approaches and encourage the use of available tools to support policy coherence. These elements are fundamental for a systemic approach, as called for in the 2030 Agenda.

## Conclusion

Transnational networks constitute an effective mechanism to support Governments and non-State stakeholders in building

their capacities to enhance integrated SDG implementation. Networks can promote an inclusive approach to capacity-building and knowledge generation. These forums should increase the participation of regions, countries and actors historically underrepresented, providing an arena in which all voices can equally contribute to developing practical solutions to global sustainable development challenges. Moreover, global networks can promote the dissemination and adoption of analytical tools and models to support policy coherence and integration and encourage their practical use. Members can learn the value of these tools, offer practical advice, and acquire the skills needed to use them in practice. Finally, networks are a starting point for identifying synergies and mutual interests since they leverage partnerships and common projects with a globally cooperative approach that can impact lives and nations for a more sustainable future.

## Endnotes

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- 5 United Nations Development Group, “UNDAF companion guidance: capacity development”, available at <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/capacity-development-undaf-companion-guidance>.
- 6 Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, “Global governance networks”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Networks*, Jennifer Nicoll Victor, Alexander H. Montgomery and Mark Lubell, eds. (Oxford, United Kingdom, Oxford University Press/Oxford Academic, 2016).
- 7 Thomas W. Valente and others, “Network influences on policy implementation: evidence from a global health treaty”, *Social Science and Medicine*, vol. 222 (February 2019), pp. 188-197, available at doi: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2019.01.008.
- 8 Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, “Global governance networks”.
- 9 Examples of global networks include the Geneva SDG Community (<https://www.sdglab.ch/geneva2030/community>), the SDG Hub (<https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/sdg-hub-global-sdgs-network-innovation-and-impact>), and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (<https://www.unsdsn.org/about-us>).
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