Way Forward towards Sustainability in 21ˢᵗ CE

New (global) vision of sustainable development governance

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Although the institutional framework for sustainable development has been the subject of decades' worth of scholarly and political debate, the process has yet to demonstrate signs of expectations coming together.

The issues and political dynamics in the twenty-first century are different from those of 1945, when the United Nations system was developed. Today's problems are more intense and more diverse, characterised by temporal, spatial and sectoral interdependencies, and complexity, as well as uncertainty.

Some advancements toward sustainability have been made possible via incremental changes. However, given the quantity, significance, interconnection, and complexity of issues related to climate change, the framework now in place for controlling sustainable development is insufficient. A radical reform of sustainable development governance is necessary.

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Aspirations

Non-linear, sudden, and irreversible changes are not only possible but also probable in the highly dynamic, human-dominated earth system in which we live. Objectives, underlying values and norms, as well as knowledge and uncertainty, must be clarified and operationalised for governance for sustainability in the "anthropocene" age, a new geological era in which human behaviour significantly alters the earth system.

Since the establishment of the post-World War II institutions, governance objectives have evolved dramatically, necessitating modifications to governance frameworks. The priorities, strategies, and normative as well as qualitative sustainability goals should be discussed by the global community.

Regarding this, the growing conversation on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which align with and complement the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), could evolve into a significant political goal, giving it impetus and bringing it to public notice. How the SDGs might be positioned alongside the successful MDGs, which remain of great relevance and importance, needs to be carefully considered.

Additionally, it has become clear that strategies for sustainability governance based on economic principles are inadequate and contribute to unsustainable development. When gauging development, there is an obvious need to look beyond GDP and market values. Considerations of ecological services, human well-being, and quality of life are significant additional values, as are the non-anthropocentric values of other living things.

There are also alternative measures to GDP, such as the Human Development Index (HDI). A small suite of indices that must be pursued simultaneously and without making compromises could be produced as a result of further development of the objectives of sustainable development and methodologies. This indicator would combine variables from each of the three pillars of sustainable development. If institutional and financial support is given, this has the potential to be a helpful and pertinent policy tool.

Actors

Sustainable governance requires that individuals participate meaningfully and responsibly and provide solutions that benefit people. The evolving nature of governance and the problems of global change have engaged a wide variety and large number of non-State actors. While admirable, the UN's intergovernmental system's non-State actor inclusion mechanisms fall short and are not really inclusive (thus often leading to misrepresentation).

Given this, adding a mechanism of checks and balances (between Governments and non-State entities) that may be motivated by the example of the EU Parliament in relation to the EU Council could be one method to improve representation in the current intergovernmental system. Consideration should also be given to the possibility of paralysis while designing such a device. Sustainability governance requires mechanisms that allow for the meaningful participation of other actors, such as highly regarded individuals or organisations, cities, communities, and social movements.

Information technologies, particularly social media, also have the potential to help with sustainable governance by giving those who have been excluded from decision-making a voice and by promoting and facilitating cross-border contact and debate. The legitimacy and accountability of decentralised participation, such as referendums, remain contentious, partly because these technologies are not widely accessible and affordable.

Thus, a governance structure with a wider variety of tools is required due to the rise of new actors. Even if States are the main players, accountable and efficient governance is essential for sustainability. Public-private partnerships and greater private governance are options. Safeguards must be in place to guarantee the legitimacy and responsibility of non-State actors.

Architecture

It is necessary to redesign the sustainability governance architecture to include improved institutions, decision-making processes, and levels of integration. A number of factors, such as the following, must be taken into consideration when evaluating proposals for the necessary revolutionary changes in the architecture of governance for sustainability:

1. Membership: significant participatory methods that take into account power imbalances between nation-States, non-State actors, and other social groups;
2. Funding: Suitable and consistent financing levels;
3. Mandate: Suitable authority and effectiveness;
4. Compliance and Implementation: Sufficient ability to deal with compliance and implementation;

5. Adaptability: Effective, adaptable strategies include network strategies, dynamic criteria for all selection and decision-making procedures to reflect changes in social and natural systems, and sunset clauses and scheduled re-chartering periods in agreements; and

6. Accountability: strong accountability and transparency safeguards

The absence of suitable arrangements for one or more of these criteria will jeopardise prospects for transformative change.

Conclusion

A reorganised institutional framework for sustainable development that would enhance governance, such as an SDG Council, is proposed, drawing on the debate of ambitions, actors, and architecture. This should comprise rotating member States (those most impacted by specific concerns), non-State (civil society) players, and primary member States (countries with strong potential to contribute), chosen based on a set of criteria such as GDP.

The SDG Council might establish a dual-chamber arrangement, with governments on one side and issue-specific members from non-State players on the other, taking into consideration the evolving nature of governance gradually and over the medium to long term.

The necessary strengthening of the environmental pillar of sustainable development (such as upgrading UNEP) should not be left out of the intellectual and political concerns and formation of an SDG Council. Additionally, it needs to happen in a setting where economic governance is strengthened, and participants are engaged meaningfully.

Importantly, for sustainability, transformative governance reform is required in addition to fundamental changes to the economic system. In this sense, the institutional framework for sustainable development should be connected with the green economy. And finally, establishing a constitution of governance for sustainable development that better reflects the problems of the twenty-first century could be a structured solution.