When international sustainability frameworks encounter domestic politics: The Sustainable Development Goals and agri-food governance in South America

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Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been heralded as a landmark achievement and a major opportunity for transformative and inclusive change towards sustainability. This promise, however, remains largely unverified. To help fill this gap, we examine how the SDGs have been taken up in the domestic politics of agri-food governance – a salient and contested policy area - in three South American countries: Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. Our empirical assessment is based on a scoping of the institutions set up for domestic SDG governance, document analysis of the first voluntary national reviews on the SDGs, and 63 key-informant interviews. The analysis shows that the ability of the SDGs to strengthen inclusiveness is largely shaped by domestic politics, preexisting institutions and power relations, as well as the resources, capacities and prior experiences of civil society and subnational governments. In practice, the SDGs' emphasis on inclusion does not necessarily mean that a wider range of perspectives are taken into account in domestic contexts. In Paraguay, the implementation of the SDGs so far mirrors the patterns of marginalization evident also in other policy processes. In Uruguay and Brazil, the SDGs have offered possibilities for at least drawing attention to a variety of perspectives by strengthening the already existing, fairly open political institutions in the case of Uruguay, and by opening up a space for contestation by civil society organizations and subnational governments in the case of Brazil. The SDGs may then be an opportunity for change, but there is also a risk that they become a justification for business as usual. Actors now employ metonymy as a tactic, cherry-picking preferred goals or targets as a sign of supposed adherence to the whole 2030 Agenda. Further research is needed with more ex-post analyses of the SDGs beyond the praising of their nominal transformative potential.

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1. Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015, has become an overarching international framework for sustainability policy. Its substance is in its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which continue the work of the earlier Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) but with increased attention to the interlinkages between the various dimensions of sustainability and with a greater emphasis on inclusiveness. While the MDGs focused exclusively on countries of the Global South, with Northern countries being involved mostly as donors, the SDGs apply globally. Moreover, the very process of setting the new goals already aimed to be more inclusive than previously. The SDGs have been the outcome of a large-scale multi-stakeholder consultation and over two years of intergovernmental negotiations, which resulted in the formulation of 17 goals with 169 targets drawing on a variety of perspectives (Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2019, pp. 9–10; Kanie, Bernstein, Biermann, & Haas, 2017, p. 3; Stevens & Kanie, 2016). Inclusiveness is also stressed in the Agenda's overall guiding principle to "Leave no one behind". As such, the SDGs have been praised as a "normative shift" (Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2019, p. 6) and as "a truly transformative agenda" (Caballero, 2019, p. 138).

However, despite the SDGs' emphasis on inclusion and the broad participatory process that led to their formulation, there are no specific mechanisms to also ensure inclusiveness in the domestic-level processes on which actual impact ultimately depends. The SDGs are a form of "governing through goals" (Kanie et al., 2017). Rather than setting legally binding obligations (as for example in the cases of both the Montreal and Kyoto Protocols), the SDGs rely on countries outlining how they will pursue each of the goals and voluntarily reporting on this. This approach means that countries have ample room in implementing the SDGs. The uptake of the SDGs may then lead to changes in approaches to development or sustainability, but it may also serve to legitimize pre-existing goals and policies (Horn & Grugel, 2018). Actual transformations, therefore, depend on how the SDGs are interpreted, prioritized and implemented in domestic contexts. Inclusiveness as a flagship aim of the 2030 Agenda can only be achieved if different perspectives are taken on board, particularly ones that are frequently marginalized in other policy processes.

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We use the term "SDG politics" to refer to the processes of contestation over how the goals and targets are interpreted, institutionalized, and implemented (or not) in different country contexts. To empirically assess the extent to which those processes offer opportunities to include different perspectives in policy debates, we examine the contested area of agri-food governance in three countries of South America's Southern Cone: Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. What constitutes sustainable development in relation to food, agriculture, and land use has long been contested, with some favoring large-scale industrial agriculture and others advocating alternative approaches that are based on more diverse smallholder farming and agroecology (McMichael & Schneider, 2011). These are particularly salient issues in the Southern Cone, where agriculture is a leading economic sector with significant weight in domestic politics, but also heavily criticized due to the negative social and environmental impacts of agribusiness expansion. Such debates and contestations are poised to play out also in the implementation of the related SDGs.

We have analyzed the voluntary national reviews (VNRs) on implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the institutional build-up for that end, and have conducted a total of 63 semi-structured interviews in the three case studies. Key informants included representatives from government agencies, civil society organizations (CSOs), international organizations, and the private sector. Our findings show that the SDGs may promote the inclusion of a relatively wide range of perspectives in policy debates by strengthening already existing and relatively inclusive domestic institutions (as in Uruguay), or by lending further legitimacy and visibility to subnational governments or CSOs that seek to challenge exclusive agendas of national governments (as in Brazil). However, the Paraguayan case shows that there is also a risk that the implementation of the SDGs further entrenches existing patterns of marginalization present in other policy processes. Therefore, efforts to "localize the SDGs" need to take the pre-existing political conditions into account and seek ways not to reinforce, but rather to address inequalities and exclusion.

The article is structured as follows. The next section develops our conceptual framework based on the literature on sustainability politics, power and institutions, and agri-food governance, with particular attention to the issue of inclusiveness. Section 3 then presents our methods and case studies against the backdrop of agri-food governance in South America, an important but also challenging area for inclusiveness. Section 4 analyzes each of the empirical cases. This is followed in Section 5 by a comparative assessment of SDG politics and lessons from the

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Southern Cone. Lastly, Section 6 concludes the article with key findings and their broader relevance for further research and policy-making around the SDGs and sustainable agri-food governance.

2. International agendas in domestic hands: Analyzing SDG politics

Since the 1992 Rio Summit, sustainable development has become increasingly institutionalized as a policy paradigm. However, despite occasionally simple formulations, sustainable development is a broad, complex, and heavily contested concept. "Development" itself was already regarded as a "shapeless" concept, one that provides "common ground, a ground on which right and left, elites and grassroots fight their battles" (Sachs, 1992, p. 4). Likewise, sustainability has displayed similar flexibility, capable of being stretched to meet different preferences or interests. During the 1990s, the concept of sustainable development became a key guiding principle to bridge North-South divisions (Vogler, 2007). It has also been argued that it provided a way to fit environmental concerns into neoliberal policy agendas and keep business on board (Bernstein, 2002; Clapp, 2005). Some have thus come to regard the adjective "sustainable" as a floating signifier, a seemingly consensual qualifier whose precise meaning is somewhat vague and indeed sometimes disputed (Mert, 2015, pp. 150–159).

The SDGs reflect many of these long-standing contestations over the meaning of sustainable development. At the global level, such disputes were present when each goal had to be translated into more specific targets and indicators (Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2019). Nevertheless, the 2030 Agenda differs from previous approaches in that it places considerably more emphasis on inclusiveness. Besides the overarching principle to "Leave no one behind", the Agenda explicitly aims to "reach the furthest behind first" (UN General Assembly, 2015, p. 3) and SDG 16.7 specifically strives to ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels.

Sustainability as a global norm that sets out standards of appropriate behavior (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 891) now clearly includes an explicit commitment to inclusiveness. However, inclusiveness is a complex concept that can be put into practice in very different ways, and there is no blueprint for how to do this (Ros-Tonen et al., 2019). While there is an understanding that inclusive governance needs to include in particular those perspectives that are frequently marginalized in other policy processes (Brondizio & Le Tourneau, 2016; Gupta & Vegelin,

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2016, p. 438), how to achieve this in practice is not so straightforward. Much emphasis is placed on participation as a means to achieve inclusiveness, yet there are different levels of participation, ranging from passive tokenism to genuine exercise of influence (Arnstein, 1969). Meaningful participation entails the sharing of power and the ability to affect process outcomes, including the allocation of budgets and resources (UNRISD, 2016). Doing so, however, requires attention to who is included and in what ways.

It is important therefore to examine critically the diversity of non-state actors in a given domestic context and the structural inequalities amongst them, including different levels of access to and collaboration with the government, or of support by dominant institutions (Cheyns, 2011). Such structural power imbalances can limit the range of issues, actors, views, perspectives and choices considered, and can thus heavily influence agenda setting (Clapp & Fuchs, 2009, pp. 8–9). Some issues and perspectives may be rendered practically invisible with governance directed towards certain outcomes, approaches and courses of action whilst overlooking or downplaying alternatives (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962). Weaker actors may suffer "poverty of power" and become unable to properly influence the environmental or socio-economic change processes that affect them (Kuik, Bastos Lima, & Gupta, 2011; UN ESCAP, UNDP, & ADB, 2007, p. 29).

Because structural power operates at the agenda-setting stage, the initial steps of interpreting, prioritizing, and setting up domestic institutions for the implementation of the SDGs may already reveal inclusiveness or inequality patterns, even if much of the allocation of budgets and resources is yet to unfold. If exclusion happens already at this formative stage, meaningful participation and inclusive processes at later stages may be prevented. It is therefore critical to understand how countries are dealing with the commitment to inclusiveness as a newly emphasized element of sustainability.

The ways in which international norms are taken up in different country contexts depend mainly on domestic factors, particularly on how the international institutions motivate domestic political actors (Cortell & Davis, 1996). This includes not only how governments respond, but also how non-state actors appeal to the institutions to provide legitimacy or to further their specific interests. Social movement leaders, for instance, frequently refer to international norms when making demands (Cortell & Davis, 2000, p. 77). Formal country commitments can therefore be a powerful tool for non-state actors to hold their governments to account, in what

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Keck and Sikkink call "accountability politics" (1998, p. 16). According to Cortell and Davis, two elements are critical to determining how international norms play out within countries: the "domestic structural context" and the domestic "salience" of those international institutions (1996, p. 452). The first element refers to the country's political organization and state-societal relations. They compare centralised political systems to decentralised ones and closed systems to those that are open to the participation of non-state actors. Salience, in turn, depends on how much those international institutions suit domestic interests, culture, and prevalent political discourses (Cortell & Davis, 2000).

Agri-food governance, our focus of attention, is one of the most hotly contested fields of sustainability, one where power politics has figured prominently (Clapp & Fuchs, 2009). Agri-food governance relates to how food is produced, exchanged, and consumed in agri-food systems – as well as, increasingly, how sustainability is defined, understood and pursued in that domain (Béné et al., 2019; Oosterveer, 2007; Thompson & Scoones, 2009). It involves questions on the meaning of sustainable agriculture as well as on how to deliver food and nutritional security for all (Candel, 2014). "Unhealthy and unsustainably produced food" has been described as a major global concern (Willett et al., 2019, p. 448), and one observably linked to actor conflicts and the lack of frameworks to accommodate different perspectives and needs (Díaz-Méndez & Lozano-Cabedo, 2019; L. Pereira & Drimie, 2016).

There are very different approaches to agri-food sustainability, with some favoring "(eco)efficient" large-scale agriculture to feed a growing global population and others arguing for more diverse smaller-scale systems, often based on agroecology (Altieri & Toledo, 2011; Béné et al., 2019; McMichael & Schneider, 2011). In this context, inclusiveness has also become a growing concern, with some arguing that it is essential for a transition to greater sustainability (Bui et al., 2019). Others warn that, under biased institutional conditions, powerful non-state actors may gain even further leverage through inclusiveness and entrench the marginalization of weaker ones (Cheyns, 2011).

There remains, however, a limited understanding of how such politics of agri-food governance have or have not changed under the institutional framework of the 2030 Agenda. While the MDGs addressed agri-food governance mainly through the goal of halving hunger (MDG 1, target 1C), the SDGs broaden the challenges. SDG 2 aims to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, while also promoting sustainable agriculture and support to small-scale

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farmers. Tensions already surfaced in the international discussions on how to define the indicators associated with SDG 2, but these were glossed over in the definition of the goal and its targets (McNeill, 2019). Such tensions are also likely to remain in domestic agri-food governance but influenced now by a greater normative emphasis on inclusiveness and the mandate to implement SDG 2.

3. Agri-food governance in the Southern Cone of South America: a hard case for inclusiveness

3.1 Unequal agricultural development and contestation

The Southern Cone, the southern half of South America, is a region rich in agricultural lands encompassing Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina, much of Brazil, and the southern part of Bolivia. These countries have witnessed many similar major changes in agriculture and land use over the past decades. In the 1990s, they all adopted neoliberal reform agendas to promote free trade, attract foreign investment, and encourage export-oriented agricultural production. This process accelerated in the 2000s when soaring demand from China helped drive commodity prices up and fostered further agribusiness expansion. Soybean production, in particular, became increasingly attractive and a powerful driver of land-use change, from small-scale farming and native vegetation to industrial monocultures. The historical presence of cattle ranching has thus been met by a booming soybean business based on "green revolution" technology packages, including agrochemicals and genetically modified (GM) seeds. Due to the spread of similar patterns and the integration of agribusiness across national borders this has led some to refer to the Southern Cone as a unified "Soybean Republic" (Turzi, 2011).

This agribusiness bonanza supported economic growth, which some governments used as a basis for social programs (Vergara-Camus & Kay, 2017). Conditional cash transfer programs became successful in reducing poverty and extreme poverty, though this trend started to be reversed in 2015 (ECLAC, 2019, pp. 115–117), coinciding with the end of the commodity boom. Despite its economic prowess, however, large-scale agribusiness has been criticized for displacing small-scale farmers and indigenous communities while offering few employment opportunities, eroding rural communities, and contributing to urban sprawl. The expansion of soy and other industrial monocultures has also been associated with health impacts (due to the intensive use and aerial spraying of pesticides across large areas), biodiversity loss,

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deterioration of soil and water quality, desertification, and climate change, given that land-use change and agriculture are the primary sources of greenhouse gas emissions in South America (ECLAC, 2019, pp. 155–157; Edwards & Roberts, 2015, p. 9; Oliveira & Hecht, 2016).

Agribusiness has thus become increasingly influential in political debates and land-use policy in the Southern Cone. While technologies have been updated, historically skewed patterns of land access and ownership in the region – intertwined with economic and political power – have become further entrenched. With the legalization of GM varieties in 1995 in Argentina and in the early 2000s in Brazil, Paraguay and Bolivia, a few transnational agrochemical companies have come to dominate the soybean seed, fertilizer and pesticide markets, while processing and exports are controlled mainly by the same few traders across the region.

Support policies for small-scale farmers do exist in some of the countries, but these actors remain some of the poorest and most marginalized (ECLAC, 2019, p. 157). It is worth noting that South America produces increasingly more food, currently more than enough to feed its population, yet hunger and malnutrition are on the rise in the continent (ECLAC, 2019, pp. 119–120). Rural social movements have therefore been vocal in the region, advocating agroecology and food sovereignty to claim greater local control over agri-food systems (Altieri & Toledo, 2011). Contestations play out at different levels and venues, from parliamentary and legislative debates to street protests and in direct confrontations over access to land. Generally, however, smallholders, landless peasants and indigenous communities remain in a much weaker political position (Cáceres, 2015, p. 17; Ezquerro-Cañete & Fogel, 2017, p. 289; Newell, 2009; Oliveira & Hecht, 2016; Rivera-Quiñones, 2014, pp. 77–82).

In a region so marked by inequality and various forms of social exclusion, inclusiveness in SDG implementation becomes particularly important and challenging. As noted in the April 2019 report of the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) on regional progress and obstacles concerning the 2030 Agenda, the “culture of privilege is central to the reproduction of inequalities” (ECLAC, 2019, p. 115). That includes access to privileged positions in business, finance, political decision-making, as well as in various fora where ideas, ideologies and political agendas are conveyed. In “the world’s most unequal region” (ECLAC, 2019, p. 114), political inequality and skewed agenda-setting processes thus make inclusive agri-food governance especially challenging to achieve. Conversely, however, this also makes

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the Southern Cone particularly relevant for assessing the transformative potential of the 2030 Agenda.

3.2 Case studies and methods

Beyond these shared regional features and trends in the Southern Cone countries, there are nevertheless important and often-overlooked differences between them. A comparison uncovers how different domestic political institutions and contexts shape SDG politics within similar but distinct regional settings. This can also help to understand to what extent and under which conditions the 2030 Agenda may promote inclusiveness.

We examine SDG politics with respect to agri-food governance in three case studies: Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. Brazil is the largest country of South America, with significant regional influence. Uruguay and Paraguay are smaller nations with very different domestic politics, and both are often overlooked in analyses that typically focus on their larger neighbors. Although the three belong to the same economic bloc (the Mercosur) and have been subject to similar development trends, there are important differences between them not only in terms of size but also of political institutions, levels of inequality, and democracy indexes (see Table 1).

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Table 1: The contrasting socio-economic and political settings of Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay

	Brazil	Paraguay	Uruguay
Population in 2019 [a]	212 million	6.9 million	3.4 million
Land area (in Km^2) [a]	8,358,140	397,300	175,020
GDP per capita in 2018 (in USD) [b]	8,920.8	5,871.5	17,278.0
Income inequality (Gini coefficient) in 2017 [c]	53.3	48.8	39.5
Political structure	Federal	Unitary	Unitary
Level of democracy in 2018 [d]	6.97	6.24	8.38
Corruption perceptions index in 2019 [e]	35 (*106th*)	28 (*137th*)	71 (*21st*)

[a] Worldometers, 2019 [b]World Bank, 2019a [c]World Bank, 2017 [d]The Economist, 2019

[e]Transparency International, 2020

For each country, we have examined the domestic institutional setup to coordinate SDG implementation as well as the VNRs published so far. We have then triangulated these policy and document analyses with semi-structured field interviews with a total of 63 stakeholders. We conducted all interviews in person, in Portuguese or Spanish, between March 2018 and March 2019, and translated any quotations ourselves. Stakeholders were selected based on their involvement with SDG implementation or agri-food governance, first through the identification of key organizations working on these issues and then using a snowball sampling technique. We sought to interview a variety of stakeholders, including representatives of civil society, international organizations, government agencies, and the private sector (see Table 2). Given Brazil's much larger size and its federal system (which leads to important subnational variations), we have interviewed more people there to get a fuller picture of the country. In all

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cases, while we aimed at interviewing stakeholders from all sectors, the numbers of people interviewed in each category also reflect response rates.

Table 2: Number of people interviewed by sector and country

	Government	Civil society	Private sector	International organizations	Academia
Brazil	11	17	8	-	2
Paraguay	1	8	2	2	3
Uruguay	5	2	1	1	-

We asked interviewees to comment on how they understand the concept of sustainable development in relation to agriculture and land use, whether and for which purposes they use the SDGs in their work, and to what extent they have participated in initiatives on the SDGs. It is important to note that agriculture and land use are sensitive and highly politicized topics across the region. In Paraguay, disagreements over agri-food governance were an important aspect in the impeachment of former president Fernando Lugo in 2012 (Lambert, 2012), while in Brazil the assassination of environmental and indigenous activists is rampant. Therefore, we have ensured the full anonymity of all interviewees and their organizations. To preserve individual perspectives and respect confidentiality, the recorded words of stakeholders are used as much as possible and without attribution.

4. Three contrasting cases of SDG politics

4.1 Uruguay: Acknowledging trade-offs between different pillars of sustainable development

With a high level of income per capita, a sizeable middle class, a stable social democracy, and low levels of poverty and inequality, Uruguay stands out in the region in several respects. The country also scores very well on the corruption perceptions index, where in 2020 it was ranked just above France and the United States (Transparency International, 2020, p. 2). Economically, Uruguay is one of the few South American countries classified as high-income by the World

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Bank since 2013[1]. Still, despite significant advances in poverty reduction since the early 2000s, the 2017 VNR on the SDGs acknowledges that issues of exclusion and inequality remain and, therefore, promoting further inclusiveness continues to be relevant (Presidencia de la República Oriental del Uruguay, 2017, p. 51).

Uruguay has shown a high level of commitment to the 2030 Agenda, and it is one of the few countries worldwide that presented VNRs both in 2017 and 2018, each covering a different set of SDGs. A strong engagement with the 2030 Agenda is also reflected in the country's efforts to finance the implementation of the SDGs and commitment to budget transparency (ECLAC, 2019, pp. 62, 64–65). Institutionally, the Planning and Budget Office, which reports directly to the Office of the President of the Republic, is responsible for the overall monitoring and coordination of activities related to the SDGs. The Uruguayan International Cooperation Agency deals with international collaboration on the SDGs, and the National Institute for Statistics is in charge of the development and survey of indicators (Presidencia de la República Oriental del Uruguay, 2017, p. 21).

Implementation of the SDGs in Uruguay builds on a previously structured, large-scale multi-stakeholder dialogue that was already ongoing. The country's domestic structural context and state-society relations have been relatively open and already reasonably inclusive. The government of the left-wing *Frente Amplio* coalition, in power from 2005 until 2020, launched a nationwide consultation process called "Social Dialogue". More than 665 institutions from the public sector, international agencies, CSOs, trade and business representatives, academia and religious groups participated in discussions on the future of the country in a series of multi-stakeholder meetings in 2016. That process initially covered ten topics but later became linked to the SDGs (Presidencia de la República Oriental del Uruguay, 2018, pp. 52–53). Moreover, many of Uruguay's public policies already have participation mechanisms and institutions with formal non-state actor representation that provides a basis for the implementation of the SDGs (Presidencia de la República Oriental del Uruguay, 2018, pp. 32–33).

In Uruguay's first two VNRs, two contrasting perspectives – sustainable intensification and agroecology – are noted as pathways to sustainable development. This reflects different

[1] This classification has not been uncontested in Uruguay. The 2018 VNR criticizes the World Bank's choice of GDP per capita as the index of development and the application of arbitrary thresholds for the country classifications (Presidencia de la República Oriental del Uruguay, 2018, p. 27).

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perspectives that are also evident in other policy documents and debates in the country. As outlined in the 2017 VNR with respect to SDG 2, the Ministry of Livestock, Agriculture and Fisheries seeks to achieve sustainable intensification through better regulation and management of intensive agricultural production. Measures include, for example, mandatory management plans and good practices for farmers to control erosion and water pollution, satellite monitoring to control the use of agrochemicals, and regulatory adjustments for their responsible use (Ministerio de Ganadería Agricultura y Pesca, 2017, pp. 56–70). This intensification approach is also supported by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), as set out in its strategic framework for cooperation with Uruguay (FAO, 2016).

In contrast, networks of CSOs, researchers, and some farmers who seek to develop alternative systems of agricultural production based on native seeds and fewer external inputs have been promoting an agroecological approach. In 2015, these actors developed a proposal for a National Plan of Agroecology that subsequently informed the drafting of a new law debated in the national parliament. Accounting for 7 percent of the surface area, organic production is significant in Uruguay even though conventional agriculture remains dominant (Gazzano & Gómez Perazzoli, 2017, p. 383).

Taken together, the two VNRs represent both perspectives on agri-food sustainability, but the emphasis differs depending on the SDG discussed. The 2017 report includes a chapter on SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), developed with FAO support, highlighting Uruguay's contribution to achieving global targets by feeding a growing world population through the sustainable intensification of agricultural production. Sustainable intensification is noted as a pathway to implementing SDG 2 in several places, whereas the National Plan for Agroecology is mentioned only once as an example of public policy for greater agri-food sustainability. In the 2018 report the National Plan for Agroecology is mentioned in several places, and both – agroecology and strategies for making large-scale agriculture more sustainable – are noted as pathways for achieving SDG 12 (Sustainable Consumption and Production) (Presidencia de la República Oriental del Uruguay, 2018, pp. 37, 179).

Arguably, the recognition of different perspectives is due to the involvement of diverse stakeholders in the preparation of the reports. The Uruguayan reports present clear and relatively detailed information in this respect. The 2017 report includes a detailed annex naming the different organizations that participated in the consultation on each SDG covered in the

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report, as well as organizations to be possibly included in the future. For instance, there is transparency on the fact that no CSOs participated in the roundtables on agriculture and land use in relation to SDG 2, covered in the 2017 report. Nevertheless, CSOs such as the Agroecology Network (*Red de Agroecología del Uruguay*) are suggested as participants for future debates (Presidencia de la República Oriental del Uruguay, 2017, p. 306). In contrast, the chapter on SDG 15 (Life on Land) in the 2018 report was based on a consultation with several NGOs and networks working on agroecology, the preservation of native seeds and other environmental concerns (Presidencia de la República Oriental del Uruguay, 2018, p. 215).

Perhaps as a result of this openness to multi-stakeholder participation, out of the three countries examined, Uruguay is the only one that openly acknowledges that there are tensions between different dimensions of sustainability. In the 2018 report, the chapter on SDG 15 – which, like the one on SDG 12, was led by the Ministry of Housing, Territorial Planning and Environment – explicitly recognizes the trade-offs and challenges of reconciling different pillars of sustainable development, as well as the tensions within the country between the economic growth associated with the intensification of productive activities and environmental concerns:

> *"In the last decade and a half, the country has experienced a very important process of intensification of its productive activities, linked to major transformations in land use. Although this has resulted in economic growth necessary to improve the quality of life of the population, it is clear that it also implies a series of costs in the form of environmental problems. The advance of the agricultural frontier, for example, has been accompanied by a constant increase in the use of inputs (fertilizers and agrochemicals), which has caused a decrease in water quality, even in strategic watersheds for the production of drinking water, which adds to an already historical problem of soil erosion and/or loss of fertility." (Presidencia de la República Oriental del Uruguay, 2018, p. 213, authors' translation from Spanish)*

The concern with trade-offs has also been echoed by non-state actors in interviews. They include not only NGOs critical of conventional agricultural production but also some farmer associations concerned about the ecological sustainability of intensive agriculture in the medium to long term, even though they see the benefit of the economic growth of the sector. If the discussion on the thorny and unpopular issue of trade-offs is thoughtfully developed in more depth by including different perspectives and also reflected in the allocation of resources, this

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may hold potential for meaningful change in agri-food governance with more attention to ecological and health impacts.

However, in terms of inclusiveness, because the implementation of the SDGs in Uruguay builds on already existing participatory institutions and processes, the goals do not add much that other channels do not already offer. In interviews, it was predominantly government officials who noted the benefits of the SDGs. They outlined that the SDGs have helped strengthen institutional capacities, improve coordination and dialogue between different government agencies and with non-state actors, create a space for discussion, define priorities, and embed practices within the whole country and not just in the government of the moment. As one government official put it:

> "*What the reports on the SDGs allowed us to do is to systematize, to share and discuss everything that is being done between all of us and also to make it visible. But these projects, let's say, they have a life of their own, independent of these reports and these were policy lines that had already been incorporated in the country."*

Over the coming years, it will be interesting to follow how the implementation of the SDGs continues to unfold following the change of government towards a center-right coalition in early 2020.

4.2 Brazil: Creating a space for contestation

Brazil's political context has been very different from Uruguay's. The country has experienced a radical political transition in recent years, from more socially oriented to pro-business governments that have significantly backtracked on inclusiveness and civil society participation. As a result, SDG politics has also shifted remarkably in a short time.

As an upper-middle-income country, Brazil not long ago surged onto the global stage both as an agricultural powerhouse and as a success case for combating poverty and promoting sustainable land use. Domestically, civil society participation became institutionalized through several thematic multi-stakeholder councils, such as on food security or the environment. Implementation of the 2030 Agenda followed suit, and from 2015 a robust framework was put in place to coordinate the creation of national targets and indicators as well as to articulate domestic uptake of the SDGs, with substantive participation from non-state actors. The

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Presidential Decree 8.892/2016 created a National Commission for the SDGs (*Comissão Nacional para os Objetivos do Desenvolvimento Sustentável*), with eight state actors and eight rotating non-state members. The commission rapidly approved a first Multi-Year Plan for 2017-2019, and its format was to be replicated at the subnational level in each of Brazil's 26 states.

After 2016, however, the country experienced a rapid right-wing turn that saw, amongst others, the dismantling of many institutions aimed at inclusion. The impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in that year replaced her by the much more business-oriented Temer administration. Brazil's first VNR, published in 2017 already under the new government, is a short document that merely provides a snapshot of Brazil's socio-economic and environmental indicators, outlining achievements of some of the very policies that were being dismantled at the time (Presidência da República do Brasil, 2017). That prompted a strong reaction from an umbrella group of Brazilian civil society, including various human rights, social and environmental organizations. They had formed the Civil Society Working Group for the 2030 Agenda (GT Agenda 2030 in Portuguese), with international funding support, already during the global consultation process to formulate the SDGs. This group reacted to Brazil's first (and so far only) official VNR by publishing a shadow report – deftly named "spotlight report" – to expose the governmental dismantling of social policies despite its official lip-service to the SDGs. Such spotlight reports have been published every year since then, also with versions in English for an international audience. For instance, while the official report showcased the governmental Food Acquisition Program, which supports smallholder agriculture through institutional purchases, civil society would later note how through budgetary cuts the new administration had slashed the number of smallholder beneficiaries from 180,000 families in 2012 to only 25,000 families in 2017 (GT Agenda 2030, 2018, p. 10).

In 2019, Temer was, in turn, replaced by the far-right president Bolsonaro, elected on a scathing anti-environmental and anti-rights national-populist campaign. While Temer had undone much of his predecessors' institutional build-up and support for small-scale agriculture (notably by downgrading the smallholder-oriented Ministry of Agrarian Development to a secretariat within the agribusiness-dominated Ministry of Agriculture), Bolsonaro attempted to abolish also the Ministry of Environment to give agribusiness *carte blanche* in Brazil (J. C. Pereira & Viola, 2019). Although the ministry has remained in place, its work has been severely undermined. Under crumbling environmental law enforcement, deforestation again went on the rise, and protected areas became increasingly targeted in a "downgrading, downsizing, and

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degazettement"[2] strategy to make way for agribusiness expansion (Bernard, Penna, & Araújo, 2014; GT Agenda 2030, 2019, p. 70). Through Presidential Decree 9.759/2019, Bolsonaro then eliminated most institutionalized forms of civil society participation and abolished the National Commission for the SDGs. Brazil was expected to publish a second VNR in 2019, when the government made public there would be no further submissions.

In terms of state-societal relations, the country has gradually moved from a relatively open and inclusive domestic structural context to a much more closed one. Similarly, the domestic salience of the SDGs has been significantly eroded as anti-conservationist interests gained ground and the official rhetoric became increasingly antagonistic to international norms on sustainable development. This change of heart was perhaps most evident in Bolsonaro's decision to cancel the climate Conference of the Parties (COP) scheduled to take place in Brazil in 2019. While disengaging from international institutions on sustainability and dismantling formal channels for civil society participation, agribusiness' political leverage has in turn increased – leading some in the sector to report "renewed self-esteem" from having Bolsonaro in power (Jornal do Brasil, 2019). However, this form of selective openness to a few privileged actors, while abolishing institutionalized means of participation, may augment political inequality and exclusion rather than diminish it. Linked to such increased obscurity in governance, Brazil's corruption perceptions index has continuously deteriorated. Brazil has been consecutively falling on that ranking, occupying in 2019 the 106th position out of 180 countries worldwide (Transparency International, 2020).

An increasingly influential Brazilian agribusiness sector, however, has only limited interest in the 2030 Agenda. Interviewed stakeholders in the powerful soy sector have suggested the SDGs play little to no role in their work. Many admitted that reference to the goals had come primarily from their headquarters in the Global North. Some multinationals, exposed to international scrutiny, seem to have started a tactic of cherry-picking selected targets (especially Zero Hunger, under SDG 2) to claim support for the 2030 Agenda and secure more legitimacy. In the words of a soy trader representative in Brazil, "*We have started linking [the SDGs] to our practices, especially food and nutritional security*." This selective reading of the SDGs framework is put another way by a representative of a different trading company: "*I think the SDGs help us diagnose what we already have, what we do not yet have, and assess what makes*

[2] This refers, respectively, to the reduction in the level of protection, in the size of protected areas, or to their outright removal from being categorized as protected areas at all.

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sense for our business." While such a diagnosis phase may be a legitimate first step, there is no evidence that the agribusiness sector is willing to go beyond it and change practices. As a political science professor in a Brazilian university put it, "*I have not seen companies use [the SDGs] in any meaningful way, but simply cherry-pick what is interesting for what they already do*".

Brazilian CSOs, in turn, have broadly used the SDGs framework as a shared reference point for international collaboration and, increasingly, as a space for contestation. In interviews, NGOs working on sustainability in Brazil have highlighted how the SDGs have helpfully worked as an overarching structuring narrative that has also made their work easier to communicate to international audiences. This more effective communication has allegedly resulted not only in greater visibility but also better prospects when applying for foreign funding. Many NGOs have claimed that their demands are now more often treated as being "reasonable" thanks to using the framework and language of the SDGs. The SDGs have also created an opportunity for Brazilian NGOs to publish information that differs from the official reporting, drawing attention to a broader range of perspectives in the country. As increasingly restrictive governments take hold in Brazil and clamp down on spaces for civil society participation, the internationally supported 2030 Agenda has thus become a valuable space for contestation and accountability politics.

Finally, Brazil's federal structure has allowed its 26 states to continue embracing the SDGs as a framework (possibly with international support) even if the national government disengages. For example, the State of Maranhão, the first one to set up a subnational SDGs Commission, maintains this governance space regardless of the changes at the national level. It has increasingly used the SDGs as an overarching framework for public policy (e.g., in the *Mais IDH* program). Indeed, as interviewees have noted, states such as Maranhão have been able to use the 2030 Agenda as a tool to expose and challenge national-level decisions with an increased sense of legitimacy. The space for contestation offered by the SDGs in Brazil, therefore, is not limited to civil society but also includes subnational governments.

4.3 Paraguay: Risk of entrenching marginalization?

Paraguay presents yet another scenario, linked in part to a particularly aggressive expansion of soybean. From 1954 to 1989, the Stroessner dictatorship promoted the expansion of the rural

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economy and migration to rural areas even if essential elements of rural development, such as schools, water, electricity and health were neglected. By the 1980s, the country had developed a wide variety of crops and large numbers of livestock (Weisskoff, 1992). However, this radically changed when GM soybean became increasingly lucrative, and by 2013 Paraguay came to be described as the "world's most soybean-reliant economy" (Ezquerro-Cañete, 2016, p. 702).

While it has generated substantial economic growth, this development strategy has also had significant adverse consequences for Paraguay's rural population, which is high compared to other countries in the region, making up about 40 percent of the country's total (World Bank, 2019b). Land concentration has further increased, and access to land is highly unequal even when compared to other countries in the region (Ezquerro-Cañete, 2016; Lambert, 2011, p. 185). New technologies have significantly reduced the demand for rural labor, resulting in unemployment in the countryside (Ezquerro-Cañete, 2016; Lambert, 2011, p. 185). Rural poverty, as well as inequality between rural and urban areas, are serious concerns and also recognized in Paraguay's 2030 National Development Plan. In 2013, 70 percent of the people living in extreme poverty were in rural areas (Gobierno Nacional, 2014, p. 30).

Agri-food governance in Paraguay is closely intertwined with existing patterns of marginalization and weak democratic institutions. In addition to regular elections, democracy also means that subordinated social groups have sufficient access to the state, with the state acting on their behalf rather than merely serving to protect the interests of dominant elites (Grugel, 2001, p. 92). In contrast, when institutions are weak, elite networks are often strong and they have command over key resources, notably money, means of force, information and ideas and ideology (Bull, 2014). In Paraguay, transfers of power to a different political party have been rare, and except for the Lugo administration from 2008-2012, the dominant Colorado Party has been in power since the transition to democracy in 1989. Moreover, corruption is a long-standing problem in Paraguay, with the country currently ranked 137th out of 180 countries worldwide on the corruption perceptions index (Transparency International, 2020). Marginalization is reflected in highly unequal access to policy-making, which then leads to unequal policy decisions and outcomes. At the same time, the state struggles to enforce legislation protecting weaker social groups, which is also evident in agri-food governance.

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While more progressive governments in the region have used revenues from the commodity boom to fund social programs (Vergara-Camus & Kay, 2017), in Paraguay proposals to introduce taxes on soybean exports have been blocked by the strong opposition of Congress members with support from the agribusiness lobby. Consequently, the majority of the population has not benefitted much from the soy boom (Lambert, 2011). On the contrary, the dominant GM-soy monocultures rely on pesticides that are frequently applied through aerial spraying without respecting environmental regulations – as noted by a World Bank representative visiting the country in March 2019 (Ultima Hora, 2019). That has led to the contamination of food crops, water and air. There are also significant impacts on human health, such as headaches and nausea as immediate effects, and concerns about cancer and congenital malformations in the medium and longer term. These have become a displacement mechanism, driving rural communities from the land (Ezquerro-Cañete, 2016, p. 706; Hetherington, 2011, p. 63). In this context of high economic and political inequality, issues of agri-food governance such as access to land and the sustainability of agricultural practices are highly – and sometimes violently – contested issues. Ensuring that no one is left behind in the implementation of the SDGs is, therefore, particularly important and challenging in Paraguay.

To implement the SDGs, Paraguay created a new institutional mechanism, the Interinstitutional Coordination Commission. It operates through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and brings together representatives from this ministry, the Ministry of Finance, the Technical Planning Secretariat for Economic and Social Development (STP), and the Social Cabinet of the Presidency (Comisión ODS Paraguay 2030, 2018, p. 6). However, older institutional mechanisms working in similar areas also continue to exist. In particular, the STP is charged with the follow-up and evaluation of policies, programs, projects and public interventions regarding the National Development Plan, with inter-institutional coordination from the Council of Ministers and specialized teams in various areas (Gobierno Nacional, 2014, pp. 83–86). Paraguay's current 2030 National Development Plan was adopted in 2014, a year before the formal adoption of the SDGs, and the two processes were never merged. Significant challenges for the implementation of the SDGs in Paraguay include institutional weaknesses and inadequate coordination capacity as well as insufficient financing and social accountability mechanisms (Serafini Geoghegan, 2017, pp. v, 15, 17).

As of early 2020, Paraguay had published one VNR, much of which is dedicated to outlining how the objectives of the 2030 National Development Plan relate to the SDGs. However, while

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the objectives in the National Development Plan are to a large extent also reflected in the SDGs, the reverse is not the case. According to a report by the Southern Voice network of think-tanks from Africa, Asia and Latin America examining the implementation of the SDGs in Paraguay, only three of the 17 SDGs are significantly addressed in the National Development Plan (SDG 1 No Poverty; SDG 6 Clean Water and Sanitation; SDG 9 Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), and three are not covered (SDG 5 Gender Equality; SDG 15 Life on Land; SDG 17 Partnership for the Goals), leaving the remaining ten SDGs only weakly or partially covered.[3] Moreover, targets 2.4 – 2.8 (of SDG 2 Zero Hunger), which include sustainable food production systems, genetic diversity and equal access to benefits are not addressed (Serafini Geoghegan, 2017, pp. 2–3, 23). This limited coverage of the SDGs is all the more concerning given that the National Development Plan informs the allocation of resources in the national budget.

On the whole, Paraguay's first VNR does not provide much evidence of broad stakeholder involvement or inclusion of a diversity of perspectives. While most of the information provided on participation is relatively vague, one development stands out: the report notes that the government so far has signed one memorandum of understanding (MoU) with a private sector organization to support SDG implementation. This MoU is particularly interesting in relation to agri-food governance, as it was signed with the Paraguayan Chamber of Oilseed and Cereal Industries. The chamber represents 11 companies, including some of the most influential multinational commodity traders, such as Bunge, ADM, Cargill, and Louis Dreyfus. This suggests that cooperation with non-state actors predominantly takes place in the form of activities with agribusiness companies. These companies, in turn, have focused on maintaining intensive large-scale agriculture while addressing a subset of six SDGs considered particularly relevant for their production chain: SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 15 (Life on Land). However, there is little specific information in the chamber's sustainability report (CAPPRO, 2017).

Paraguayan CSOs working on matters of agri-food governance, in turn, have engaged relatively little with the SDGs. Although some interviewees have noted that the SDGs may be a helpful tool for cooperation and the instigation of projects with external funders, or to remind

[3] As Paraguay is a landlocked country, SDG 14 "Life below Water" has not been taken into account.

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governments of their international obligations, these potential benefits are diminished by a sense that the SDGs do not address the deep-rooted problems of weak institutions and exclusion, while participation of non-state actors remains selective and heavily mediated by the government. Such a skepticism towards the SDGs is particularly present amongst organizations that are critical of the country's reliance on intensive soybean production for development. Interviewees repeatedly highlighted that the current development model based on intensive soybean production is not sustainable in either ecological or social terms. Yet the actors promoting the SDGs (notably the government and the UN) will not challenge this model, but rather operate within the same logic. As one CSO interviewee noted:

> "*So we have an agenda, we have a discourse, we have public documents, but we don't have concrete actions that modify in some way a model which is not sustainable…In Paraguay development is based on an unsustainable model, aggressive and not even inclusive in social terms… the government does not take on a sustainable agenda or economic or political changes that could really lead us in this direction…There is a lot of discourse, but very little innovation towards sustainable development*."

Interviewees have also noted that the SDGs are not a helpful instrument when faced with repression and criminalization of CSOs or social movements questioning the dominant development model. As Paraguayan CSOs often lack resources, they need to prioritize and there is little time to engage with the SDGs if they are not seen as helpful to address the most urgent issues. As one researcher pointed out:

> "*There is repression. This means that there is fear. There are very few people for all the problems that there are, and so civil society organizations…with all the problems that there are, they don't have the capacity to get involved in everything. … So at this moment, if they have to choose, do we discuss the SDGs or what do we do about the criminalization…"*

As such, neither the formal government-led reporting nor the broader SDG politics have served to make a wider range of perspectives visible in Paraguay, or have provided avenues for meaningful participation of marginalized actors. In this context, there is a high risk that the implementation of the SDGs will entrench the same patterns of marginalization that are already evident in the country's policy- and decision-making processes.

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5. SDG politics compared: Lessons from the Southern Cone

5.1 Contrasting SDG pathways: Leaving no-one's perspective behind?

A comparison of the three cases reveals important differences in the institutional setups and formal reporting on the SDGs (see Table 3), as well as in wider SDG politics. It shows how the same international framework has been taken up very differently in distinct domestic political contexts, and how the former ultimately depends on the latter despite its formally agreed norms, level of detail, and ambition. In the particular case of agri-food governance, the comparison also shows that, in the Southern Cone, the more structured the participation of civil society, the more regard there has been for alternative agri-food systems and broader questions of agri-food sustainability, including acknowledgment of trade-offs. In contrast, limited or obscure participation – i.e., closed state-society relations – have facilitated disproportionate private sector influence in SDG politics and the continuation of business as usual in agri-food governance, including the perpetuation of inequalities.

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Table 3: Overview of information provided in VNRs with regards to institutional setup, the participation of non-state actors and subnational actors

	Institutional setup	Participation of non-state actors	Participation of subnational actors
BRAZIL **VNR: 2017 (41pp); 2019 (withdrawn)**	Public institutes set the technical basis and provide continuous technical support: the Applied Economics Research Institute adapted SDG targets to Brazil; the National Institute of Geography and Statistics prepared the indicators. A multi-stakeholder National SDGs Commission (CNODS) with "thematic chambers" was created to produce Multi-Year Action Plans, collect best practices from civil society, and articulate overall SDGs implementation.	Half of CNODS's 16 members are non-state actors, divided into three stakeholder groups: non-profit organizations, the private sector, and academia. Non-members can collaborate in thematic chambers. Reports produced by State agencies, led by the Secretariat of Government, in the President's Office.	Half of CNODS's state actors are associations of subnational entities: two from the state level and two from municipalities. Each state to create its State-Level SDGs Commission, suggested (though not mandated) to replicate the same structure.
PARAGUAY **VNR: 2018 (100pp)**	An Interinstitutional Coordination Commission (ICC) has been created for SDG implementation, led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance, the Technical Planning Secretariat for Economic and Social Development (STP), and the Social Cabinet of the Presidency. VNR outlines the plan to establish three working groups led by the Ministry of Finance, the Secretariat for Social Action, and the Environment Secretariat, respectively, each covering a pillar of sustainable development.	Presence in workshops and seminars about the SDGs organized by different government agencies, often with the support of UN agencies; information provided on dates, hosting organization and topics, but not on participating CSOs. The three working groups are to establish sub-groups to coordinate SDG implementation with the participation of strategic partners, including civil society and the private sector.	VNR provides information on the participation of subnational actors in implementing the National Development Plan, linked to SDGs implementation. The three working groups are to establish sub-groups to coordinate the implementation of the SDGs with the participation of strategic partners, including local governments.
URUGUAY **VNRs: 2017 (390pp); 2018 (245pp)**	Planning and Budget Office (OPP) to monitor and coordinate actions associated with the SDGs, reporting to the Office of the President of the Republic. Uruguayan International Cooperation Agency (AUCI) responsible for international cooperation on the SDGs. National Institute for Statistics responsible for development and survey of indicators.	Consultation carried out for each SDG; VNRs set out consultation mechanisms and an overview of which non-state actors participated. Integration of SDGs into Social Dialogue process of citizen participation. Coordination with existing institutions with formal representation of non-state actors.	Public exhibitions of the SDGs and consultative workshops for civil society and private sector across the country. Workshops to align SDGs with subnational governments; VNRs set out progress and details.

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Three key interrelated observations emerge from this comparative assessment. First, the SDGs can strengthen inclusiveness norms where they are already salient, as in Uruguay. Years of governments committed to inclusive policy processes, in a country of low inequality and high democracy indexes, have made it fertile ground for embracing the 2030 Agenda's commitment to inclusiveness. The country's comprehensive VNRs are illustrative of that, not only acknowledging multiple stakeholder perspectives but also recognizing that there are trade-offs between different dimensions of sustainable development. Compared to the other two countries, Uruguay also provides much more information regarding the participation of non-state actors and subnational actors, building on pre-existing institutions where multiple stakeholders already had formal representation. Transparency, in turn, becomes essential to assess whether the reporting has been based on inclusive processes, and it makes the formal commitment to participation more credible. The SDGs, in such a case, foster ongoing efforts towards inclusiveness, and this arguably helps increase its domestic salience.

Second, as the contrasting case of Paraguay makes clear, in domestic contexts where inclusiveness norms are not salient amongst political and economic elites, the SDGs per se are insufficient to materialize them. Although the Paraguayan VNR notes the need for non-state actor participation, there is little detailed information on proposed mechanisms for it and not much transparency on which CSOs have participated so far. That contrasts with the MoU signed with the Chamber of Oilseed and Cereal Industries and suggests unequal access to government. SDG politics in Paraguay so far indicates that the goals can also be captured by elite interests, emptied of their core inclusiveness norms, and used as further justification for business as usual. Given the breadth of the SDGs and their targets, powerful actors who dominate agri-food governance are able to engage selectively and claim conformity to the 2030 Agenda as a whole without truly demonstrating a commitment to inclusiveness. Therefore, in contexts of weak democratic institutions and high inequality, there is a risk that rather than promoting inclusiveness, the SDGs may further entrench existing patterns of marginalization.

Third, the SDGs may still provide helpful assistance in the form of enhanced legitimacy for advocates of inclusion, a common language and framework to bolster international collaboration, and a space for contestation. The case of Brazil shows that both CSOs and subnational entities have been able to rely on the SDGs to leverage up their work and challenge an increasingly reactionary national government. Even as the country's domestic structural context becomes increasingly exclusive and formal spaces of participation (such as the National

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Commission for the SDGs) are eliminated, civil society has been able to come together and utilize the SDGs as an internationally regarded framework with which to expose and critique the federal government. In the face of the aggressive and anti-CSO Bolsonaro administration, the SDGs have thus provided a useful lifeline to those increasingly excluded actors.

5.2 The SDGs and civil society inclusiveness: Make it or break it

Neither the ability nor the willingness of CSOs and subnational entities to engage in SDG politics and to eventually use the goals for contestation can be taken for granted. For one, subnational entities are more likely to use the SDGs differently from the national government when subnational actors are already relatively strong and well-resourced (Horn & Grugel, 2018, p. 74). CSO resourcefulness and capacity for contestation also vary significantly, and this is a crucial aspect in terms of the extent to which SDG politics will indeed include a range of perspectives and particularly marginalized ones. This reflects patterns also identified in other studies that have found important differences in the ability of different types of CSOs to shape regional environmental cooperation in South America (Siegel, 2017, pp. 156–162).

Concerning agri-food governance, a comparison between Brazil and Paraguay is illustrative. Both countries have CSOs seeking to challenge their governments over broadly similar issues, such as land rights, rural poverty, and deforestation linked to agricultural expansion. However, Brazilian CSOs appear to not only be more resourceful and politically stronger, but – critically – also better internationally connected than their Paraguayan counterparts. Brazil has long received substantive international attention on sustainability issues, especially due to Amazon deforestation. Many of its CSOs have for decades received foreign funding, collaborated internationally, and engaged in accountability politics to publicly challenge the government. This contrasts with Paraguay, a country once described as an "island surrounded by land" (Lambert & Nickson, 2013, p. 1), marked by long historical isolation in geographical, cultural, and political terms. For instance, deforestation rates in the Paraguayan Chaco linked to soybean expansion are amongst the highest in the world, and an important source of greenhouse gas emissions and driver of biodiversity loss, but dry forests have received considerably less international attention and also remain less researched (Baumann et al., 2017).

Critically, this marginalization affects the way that CSOs regard the SDGs. Unlike in Brazil, where CSOs have a much clearer sense of how they can use the SDGs for national and

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international coordination, in Paraguay the 2030 Agenda has risked further alienating civil society. Several Paraguayan CSOs acknowledge that the SDGs may be useful for cooperation with external funders. However, this perception remains quite vague and is overshadowed by the concern that the SDGs might come to legitimize and justify the very model of development and agri-food governance that these CSOs seek to change. Moreover, the interviews suggest that there is more skepticism towards mainstream development agendas – including "sustainable development" – in Paraguay than in Brazil. Some Paraguayan CSOs question the idea of development not only epistemologically, but also due to the impacts of the expansion of an agribusiness sector that claims to be sustainable and modern. Table 4 compares some of the key points from those contrasting perceptions.

Table 4: Perceptions of Brazilian and Paraguayan CSOs on the SDGs

Brazil	Paraguay
Useful as a structuring device, an overarching narrative as to where to insert various programs and actions on socio-environmental issues;	Unable to address fundamental problems in Paraguay, such as corruption, weak institutions, lack of law enforcement and of political will to deal with issues such as deforestation;
Help with self-assessment and the identification and filling of gaps in civil society work agendas;	Not a helpful instrument for CSOs questioning dominant development model faced with repression and criminalization; government controls participation of non-state actors;
Harmonize language and standardize parameters across the work of various actors, making it more comparable.	Does not take into account profound limitations of the concept of sustainable development; leaves out groups living in voluntary isolation who do not want to live so-called "modern" lifestyle;
Increased visibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the public opinion, partners and donors, especially those from abroad;	Used to justify unsustainable and exclusive model of agricultural production and development;
More tangibility to otherwise vague notions of sustainability, which can now be assessed, communicated, discussed more effectively and concretely.	However, they may be useful for projects and cooperation with external funders.

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5.3 Sustainability metonymy as an emerging engagement tactic

The SDGs may have brought more specificity and concreteness to the concept of "sustainable development", but they have not eliminated room for self-serving interpretations. The fact that the SDGs are so broad has given ample room for cherry-picking and given rise to a form of sustainability metonymy, whereby meeting selected targets of choice (e.g., economic growth, eliminating global hunger) are taken to signify conformity to the whole of the 2030 Agenda, irrespective of other goals and targets disregarded in the process.[4] To an extent, metonymy in the case of sustainable development has long taken place, notably with attention to ecological issues frequently taken to signify the entirety of the concept – in disregard to its social equity pillar. However, this is arguably becoming more pronounced under the 2030 Agenda. In the case studies, sustainability metonymy has emerged to become a usual tactic for engaging with the SDGs without actually transforming practices. Engaged NGOs seem to be mostly giving new clothes to their pre-existing agendas. At the same time, at least some agroindustries have started using SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) to claim alignment to the 2030 Agenda and seek renewed legitimacy for business as usual.

Such sustainability metonymy, however, violates the spirit of the 2030 Agenda, which clearly states that the SDG framework is "indivisible" (UN General Assembly, 2015, para. 55). Yet, our cases suggest this is being broadly overlooked. The political tactic may have shifted, from exploring the vagueness of an adjective ("sustainable") to engaging selectively with preferred elements in the SDG framework, but sustainability continues to be abused in its breadth. Indeed, this perception accounts for much of the reluctance of certain CSOs to even engage with the SDGs in South America.

5.4 International teleconnections and the limits of domestic actions

However much emphasis there may be on national implementation in the 2030 Agenda, key areas such as agri-food governance do not escape the grips of the global political economy. There are inherent limits to domestic actions on sustainability issues that are internationally driven. The Southern Cone has – at significant social and environmental cost – increasingly

[4] The act of taking a part for the whole (*pars pro toto*) is at times more specifically referred to as synecdoche, which can be regarded a specific type of metonymy. We have opted simply for metonymy as the more recognizable term.

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become the world's protein breadbasket, yet international drivers have hardly been acknowledged – let alone addressed – under the SDGs framework, and consumer regions are hardly held accountable for their long-distance impacts. It has to be asked to what extent a country such as Paraguay can implement inclusive governance on agriculture and land use when its economy is heavily dependent on an internationalized and powerful agribusiness sector. As a recent study has noted, "addressing the sustainability of producing internationally traded agricultural commodities…will require multisector collaboration to change some of the most lucrative production systems in the world" (Erbaugh, Bierbaum, Castilleja, da Fonseca, & Hansen, 2019, p. 160).

The 2030 Agenda does ask for concerted multinational efforts, but arguably this has mostly been overlooked so far, including in agri-food governance. As paragraph 21 states, "All of us will work to implement the Agenda within our own countries and at the regional and global levels" (UN General Assembly, 2015, p. 6), a spirit that SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) also encapsulates. This means going beyond cumulative implementation by individual countries. Nevertheless, unequal global economic arrangements that allocate resource-intensive and impacting activities mostly to the Global South are not problematized in the SDGs framework (Gasper, Shah, & Tankha, 2019).

Our cases show that the questions of teleconnections and trade-offs in relation to SDG implementation require much more attention. There may be a need to discuss not only trade-offs between different SDGs within a country but crucially also international trade-offs, such as those that may take place between food-importing and food-exporting countries. That will require global-level analyses of agri-food governance in relation to the SDGs and far more international collaboration to address sustainability issues therein.

Finally, there is a need to understand how the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities – reiterated by the 2030 Agenda – is to be interpreted and applied in SDG implementation (UN General Assembly, 2015, paras. 12; 28). In the words of a diplomat and negotiator from one of our case study countries,

> "*The 2030 Agenda retains the background of respective capabilities, universality with differentiation, as well as historical responsibilities. Developed countries resist keeping that on the agenda, but it remains there*."

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The Agenda still speaks of "developed countries tak[ing] the lead" (UN General Assembly, 2015, para. 28), yet how this is to be done in the case of increasingly integrated agri-food systems and international collaboration on the SDGs remains to be seen.

6. Conclusions

The 2030 Agenda has been hailed as a transformative global framework towards sustainable development and greater inclusiveness. However, despite the international consensus institutionalized as the SDGs, outcomes depend on how different countries actually pursue them. Indeed, our research shows that far from simply being international prescriptions against which to report progress, the goals have entered governance debates in contested policy areas – forming what we have referred to as SDG politics.

Our comparative assessment of Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay has shown that the international participatory process that led to the global adoption of the SDGs does not guarantee the inclusion of different perspectives or meaningful stakeholder participation at national and subnational levels. Our analysis of SDG politics in the agri-food governance of those Southern Cone countries shows that, in reality, the 2030 Agenda may help foster inclusiveness as much as it can entrench marginalization. As such, it is critical that rightful efforts to "localize the SDGs" seek to redress rather than replicate and reinforce pre-existing inequalities. The risk of aggravating marginalization seems particularly pronounced when there are no formal channels for wide-ranging participation and little transparency regarding which actors participate in SDG implementation and in what manner. It is important, therefore, to have a better understanding of the political circumstances under which the SDGs can adequately be localized as an instrument to tackle structural inequalities rather than suffer elite capture.

More broadly, our assessment suggests that there are fundamental limitations in governing through goals without clear accompanying implementation plans, policy instruments, or accountability mechanisms. Crucially, without redress measures, the parachuting of malleable global goals into domestic contexts risks reinforcing inequalities while potentially adding to them a layer of internationally sanctioned legitimacy. The establishment of such goals may thus benefit from much greater emphasis on *process*, i.e., on how global commitments (such as also the 2C or 1.5C targets) can move from agreed-upon aspirations to a multi-level governance process that effectively cascades such agreements into domestic levels and changes practices on the ground. Similar observations have been made about international zero-deforestation

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commitments, which gather broad formal support and yet translate poorly into changed practices (zu Ermgassen et al., 2020), or regarding the global climate targets, which some authors fault for being disembedded from political and socio-economic realities (Morseletto, Biermann, & Pattberg, 2017). This embedding is precisely the work taking place through what we have termed SDG politics, and which should be recognized as being exposed to the vagaries of path dependencies and power relations. In contexts of high pre-existing structural inequalities, localizing the SDGs is therefore a particularly complex political process. Understanding how multi-level governance coordination can optimize such processes towards inclusiveness remains a key global policy challenge and an important research frontier.

There is a clear need for more *ex-post* analyses of the SDGs, including in other locations and sectors, beyond the praising of their nominal transformative potential. Policy science concepts such as path dependency and agenda-setting could also sharpen assessments of their embedding in various contexts. Further research can examine in more detail whether governing through goals is a more or less effective approach to promoting inclusiveness as opposed to strategies that rely on binding targets. Similarly, it is important to understand how such frameworks interact, synergistically or not, with other international institutional mechanisms such as those from the UN conventions (Bastos Lima, Kissinger, Visseren-Hamakers, Braña-Varela, & Gupta, 2017).

Finally, while we have analyzed how SDG politics has developed in those countries, policy outcomes remain to be seen. We recognize that even if the initial stages allow for some level of inclusion, there is no guarantee that they will not be captured by elite interests or turn into mere tokenism at a later stage. The Brazil case also makes clear that such institutional setups are often fragile and can quickly be upturned. Enshrining inclusive governance institutions in law thus could helpfully protect advances in SDG implementation from political volatility, given the Agenda's longer-term perspective than the usual electoral cycles. Developed countries – particularly food-importing countries – might also have to engage more meaningfully with the responsibilities they have over the agri-food governance of faraway places, including through their consumption, agroindustry and financial sectors (Bastos Lima & Persson, 2020). Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, countries and global policy processes should recognize that the starting point for the operation of institutions such as the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs is far from a level playing field. Therefore, policies may need to

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face much more explicitly the issue of inequality redress in their institutional design, if inclusiveness indeed is to become a reality.

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