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The impact of the Sustainable Development Goals on global policies on sustainable consumption and production

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ABSTRACT

While some of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) rely on the support of established international organizations and regimes, others lack strong institutions in their governance areas. This raises the question of whether the SDGs can contribute to strengthening these less institutionalized areas in global governance, which would make these goals important factors in advancing international institutionalization. We study this question with a focus on SDG 12, which targets sustainable consumption and production. By analysing in-depth 49 documents and 19 expert interviews, we trace institutional development (2012–2022) focusing on two initiatives, the 10-Year Framework of Programmes for Sustainable Consumption and Production and the later One Planet Network. We indicate mechanisms through which SDGs have influenced international institutionalization processes and some conditions for this impact. However, while the SDGs might offer a temporary impetus to further institutionalization, they do not provide a lasting solution to the challenge of advancing global institutionalization.

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1. Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly agreed on 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030. These SDGs cover almost all areas of human activity; as a consequence, the global policy domains that these goals seek to influence differ vastly in the extent to which they are institutionalized. For example, while SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth has the International Labour Organization as its global institutional anchor, other issue areas rely on multiple, often weaker organizations and institutions with widely different mandates. Other issue areas again have not even one central international organization or regime to support them, and hence remain poorly institutionalized at the global level.

Given this situation, the question arises whether the 17 SDGs could have an impact on the international institutionalization of the areas that they seek to influence, and if so, through what mechanisms and under what conditions. Has global goalsetting advanced institutionalization in global governance, especially in poorly institutionalized areas? This question is the focus of this article,

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which studies in detail processes of international institutionalization and the potential role of SDGs on advancing such institutionalization. Our case is the policy domain of sustainable consumption and production, which is addressed by SDG 12. This policy domain emerged in 1992 as part of Agenda 21, but its global governance has remained weak (Lorek & Fuchs, 2019). Negotiations for a global mandate on sustainable consumption and production were unsuccessful until 2012, when a ‘10-Year Framework of Programmes for Sustainable Consumption and Production’ was agreed (United Nations, 2012b). The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has since become the coordinating body for this framework, which has also inspired the creation of a global network. And yet, the ‘10-Year Framework of Programmes for Sustainable Consumption and Production’ cannot compare institutionally with powerful international organizations that support other policy areas, such as health or labour. Several proposals have thus been made to further strengthen institutionalization in this domain, including calls for a ‘UN Forum’ or a UN system-wide global flagship initiative on sustainable consumption and production (SEI and CEEW, 2022; Secretariat of the 10YFP on SCP, 2018). And yet, the chance of success of such new proposals remains uncertain.

To trace the impact of the SDGs, and in particular SDG 12, on policies around sustainable consumption and production, we combine here an in-depth analysis of 49 key documents with 19 expert interviews. Based on this investigation over the ten-year period 2012–2022, we find that actors in this policy space have strategically used the global goalsetting process to further international institutionalization. We identify the mechanisms through which this impact occurred, as well as the underlying conditions.

The paper proceeds as follows. In section 2.1 we show the gap in the literature on the relationship between global goalsetting and institutionalization and propose a conceptual framework that consists of three constitutive elements of institutionalization. In section 2.2, we reflect on policy discussions on sustainable consumption and production in relation to our queries, and in section 2.3 we introduce process tracing as our method of enquiry. Section 3 presents our key findings, including the mechanisms and conditions for impact, and in section 4 we conclude.

2. Conceptualization and methodology

2.1. Global goals and institutionalization

International institutionalization is expected to increase the predictability of the engagement between actors by constraining their activities and shaping their expectations, which can increase their joint agency in global governance. Institutionalization also creates persistent and connected sets of rules and specific assignments of roles to individuals and groups in the policy area that is covered, even though strong institutionalization in one area might also cause broader policy fragmentation in overall global governance (e.g. Keohane, 1988; Biermann et al., 2020). It has also been shown that the institutionalization of global norms led to their socialization through embodiment in law, institutions or public discourse (Risse & Ropp, 2007; Bernstein, 2000; Lake et al., 2021).

Institutionalization can materialize through various entities, from formal institutions (Seckinelgin, 2017; Kim et al., 2020) to inter-organizational cooperation (Rhoads, 2016), networks (Mueller, 2010; Reinicke, 1997; Quissell & Walt, 2016), negotiations (Bernstein, 2000), certification schemes or social movements (Betsill et al., 2022). Of course, international institutionalization is not a panacea to resolve complex global policy challenges. Simply establishing a central organization will not guarantee the achievement of desired policy outcomes. More fundamentally, institutionalization

alone is unlikely to resolve the underlying political and economic tensions inherent in a policy area (Mathai et al., 2021). Moreover, what is to be institutionalized needs to be critically scrutinized in the first place (Bengtsson et al., 2018; Bianchi & de Man, 2021). And yet, it is widely assumed that advancing international institutionalization can be important in sustaining global attention to an issue, in increasing overall policy effectiveness, and in creating more equitable global policy platforms (Biermann et al., 2023).

Yet little is known so far about the extent to which global goalsetting, which prioritizes policy work towards certain policy areas, can speed up or shape the institutionalization of such areas, and if so, through what mechanisms and under what conditions. Multiple impacts of global goalsetting on institutionalization are conceivable. Global goalsetting might advance institutionalization by easing constraints for actors involved (Sorensen, 2022), by directly leading to novel outcomes (Sorensen, 2018), or by steering institutionalization in a particular direction. Alternatively, however, global goalsetting might also restrict institutionalization efforts, which would signal the existence of important, yet unidentified barriers to institutionalization.

A central question today is whether the SDGs, launched in 2015, can advance international institutionalization. The SDGs continue the tradition of goalsetting by the UN, which includes initiatives such as the four Development Decades (1961–2000), the Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997–2006), and the Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015) (Fukuda-Parr, 2014). Spanning from 2015 to 2030, the SDGs are the most comprehensive and ambitious set of such goals to date, covering both high-income and low-income countries (Biermann et al., 2017). Previous research has shown that global goalsetting may lead to the establishment of new institutional structures at global, regional and national levels. These structures include new global coordinating bodies such as the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (Qerimi, 2022), as well as national units, departments and inter-agency collaborations (Morita et al., 2020; Yunita et al., 2022; Biermann et al., 2022). For instance, the first UN Development Decade (1961–1971) coincided with the creation of several still existing international institutions, such as the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (Stokke 2009; Jackson 2022).

A substantial body of recent research has investigated the impact of global goalsetting on existing institutional configurations. This research examines factors like (inter-)organizational alignment with the SDGs and efforts towards policy integration to achieve these goals (e.g. Office of Internal Oversight Service, 2019; Rantala et al., 2020; Breitmeier et al., 2021; Watson et al., 2021; Beisheim et al., 2022; Bogers et al., 2022; Smallwood et al., 2023; van Driel et al., 2022). However, while global goalsetting can help create new institutions and influence existing ones, its broader impact on the institutionalization of policy areas is still unclear (Beisheim et al., 2022; van Driel et al., 2023; Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2019).

In this paper, we seek to address this knowledge gap. To empirically investigate the impact of global goalsetting on international institutionalization, we draw here on key insights from the international relations literature and advance a conceptual framework that defines institutionalization as a combination of three elements: *authority*, *procedures*, and *resources*. All three elements move policymaking on an issue from ad hoc to being more structured and predictable, and hence institutionalized.

First, more or less institutionalization can be assessed by increases or decreases in authority, that is, the quality of the core mandates international actors receive or establish in a particular domain. This can be expressed in legal texts, but also through revised strategy documents, a new common

agenda, a list of key themes, a mission statement, or a novel programme. Because even highly institutionalized governance structures will have some remaining conflicts about underlying norms, authority is unlikely to amount to full norm convergence (Wiener, 2008; Shaffer & Trachtman, 2011).

Second, more or less institutionalization can be assessed by changing procedures, that is, the rules that actors use to shape their interactions. Procedures can cover who is allowed or able to participate, in what way, how decisions are made and how benefits are generated and distributed (Mueller, 2010). Actors might be held increasingly accountable to such procedures, which can occur through terms of reference, partnership agreements or more formal agreements that indicate the ‘rules of the game’ for interactions.

Third, institutionalization can be measured by differences in the availability of resources through which actors exert their authority. Resources can be material, like financial means or human resources, but also ideational, such as normative influence, agenda-setting power, or scientific evidence.

These three elements of institutionalization are connected and might overlap in practice. Authority and resources might be extended after procedures are agreed that can increase external legitimacy. The resources available might inform the breath of the domain around which interaction can take place. Also, the constitutive elements do not necessarily appear in a particular order. Interactions might start around a set of resources; procedures might occur as the last step when actors consider (financial) contributions to an effort, and authority might change over time as new actors are allowed to join.

Furthermore, this conceptual framework of authority, procedures and resources recognizes that institutionalization can emerge through different entities. In formal international organizations, for example, institutionalization can increase when new topics or principles become better reflected in revised policy documents, operating procedures and formal agreements (Rhoads, 2016). Within more informal global policy networks, institutionalization can imply that parties accept new norms and conventions and formulate rules governing their interactions through partnership frameworks with stronger administrative and governance structures (Mueller, 2010; Quissell & Walt, 2016; but see also Reinicke, 1997). Also certification schemes or social movements can result in international institutionalization by establishing an arena that brings actors into routine contact around an at least partially shared project, including ideas about how governance should be carried out (Betsill et al., 2022). Our conceptual framework also recognizes that institutionalization occurs through multiple tools, methods and processes, ranging from formal negotiations and international public law to new strategy documents, policy declarations or simply increased funding (Lake et al., 2021; Bernstein, 2000; Keohane, 1988, p. 384).

Based on this conceptual framework, we find that some policy areas covered by the 17 SDG are more strongly institutionalized than others. Two prominent examples are good health and well-being, covered by SDG 3; and decent work, which is addressed by SDG 8; both are well anchored in international organizations, that is, the World Health Organization and the International Labour Organization, respectively. Their constitutional documents demarcate their central authority and formalized rules of procedure, conventions as well as agreements on actor engagement and funding. The theme of clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), as a less institutionalized example, relies on the much weaker multi-agency initiative ‘UN Water’, while climate action (covered in SDG 13) depends on the 2015 Paris Agreement and the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. However, for the policy area of reducing inequality, covered by SDG 10, there is no central actor at all (see e.g. van Driel et al., 2022).

2.2. SDG 12 on sustainable consumption and production

Like SDG 10, also SDG 12 on sustainable consumption and production – the empirical focus of this study – is an area that is poorly institutionalized globally. Whether global goalsetting, and the process surrounding SDG 12 especially, had any impact here to advance institutionalization, is thus the focus of this study, and will be assessed around the elements of authority, procedures, and resources.

It is important to recognize that SDG 12 itself has been critically evaluated in the scholarly literature (e.g. Bengtsson et al., 2018). A key point of criticism is the gap between the ambitious transformation implied by the goal's core headline and the actual targets and indicators that were adopted. More fundamentally, the goal is criticized for its emphasis on efficiency measures, such as reducing food waste and increasing energy efficiency, while neglecting broader economic and social arrangements that contribute to unsustainable outcomes (Bengtsson et al., 2018; see also Bianchi & de Man, 2021 in relation to target 12.b on sustainable tourism; Mathai et al., 2021 for a broader reflection on the political economy dimensions of sustainable consumption and production). Critics also note that many indicators under SDG 12 focus on intermediate outputs such as national policy instruments (target 12.1), corporate reporting practices (target 12.6) and sustainable public procurement policies (target 12.7). The goal is further criticized for lacking clear reduction targets and timebound means of implementation (Bengtsson et al., 2018). Scholars of sustainable consumption and production emphasize that SDG 12 does not pay sufficient attention to what has been called the 'elephant in the room': the need to address global power imbalances that underpin current consumption and production systems (as set out by Mathai et al., 2021). They point out that the underlying focus on efficiency tends to ignore differences in the distribution of consumptive abilities, without consideration of patterns of financialization, debt expansion, rent seeking, and market liberalization. Therefore, many would doubt whether international institutionalization of SDG 12 – our empirical focus here – alone will lead to the necessary policy impact; yet stronger institutionalization might be an important factor in advancing this policy issue.

2.3. Methods

To investigate the impact of SDG 12 on the institutionalization of global policies on sustainable consumption and production, we used process tracing as our method. Process tracing is a within-case analysis of trajectories of change based on qualitative data, where diagnostic evidence is selected and analysed based on research questions and hypotheses posed by the investigator (Collier, 2011).

We took a deductive, *explaining-outcome* approach (Beach & Pedersen, 2019; Patterson et al., 2019). This means that deductively, we based ourselves on the analytical framework presented in section 2.1 above to identify and link evidence about our dependent variable, international institutionalization (Collier, 2011). As process tracing relies on the proper description of a phenomenon (Mahoney, 2010), we first identified key points in time where activity occurred in the three constitutive elements of institutionalization. We used a timeline of ten years (2012–2022) that starts with the begin of the SDG negotiations and the establishment of the 10 Year Framework of Programmes for Sustainable Consumption and Production (10YFP). Our investigation subsequently focused on investigating the impact of one specific factor, namely global goalsetting and the processes around SDG 12, on the observed outcomes on institutionalization. The identification of specific moments in time where impact could be observed allowed us to find the mechanisms through which impact occurred and the necessary conditions for these mechanisms to emerge.

We studied a set of 49 key documents of in total 1,499 pages published by the secretariat of the 10YFP and the broader 10YFP and the later One Planet Network, along with numerous webpages and articles. Documents that we used include, among others, annual reports and magazines (available for the period of 2012–2017 and the years of 2018 and 2019); yearly reports to the High-Level Political Forum (available yearly between 2014 and 2022); meeting minutes from the Executive, Programme and Programme desk meetings (2017–2021) of the network; meetings from the Group of Friends on Sustainable Consumption and Production (2020–2022); and a number of consultative meetings held towards a renewed Global Strategy on Sustainable Consumption and Production (2023–2030). These documents include summaries of discussions about ongoing work, ways to increase impact, and overall updates and opportunities for collaboration.

An additional source of data for our process-tracing approach were 19 semi-structured expert interviews. Interviewees included actors in the 10YFP and the One Planet Network, including (past) members of its secretariat, participating international organizations, business actors, scholars and thinktanks. We also included actors who worked on sustainable consumption and production but were not directly active in the emerging network structure. These interviewees put the network in perspective and gave an indication of the context in which institutionalization occurs. Interviewees were primarily questioned about the key institutional developments identified and their perspectives on the most crucial factors contributing to these developments, including the role of global goalsetting therein.

3. The impact of global goalsetting on institutionalization

We now elaborate on the impacts observed for the constitutive elements of authority, procedures and resources. We outline the mechanisms through which impact occurred and the enabling conditions.

3.1. Increased authority

First, we find that SDG 12 has indeed impacted authority as it allowed actors from the 10YFP to fortify, further clarify and eventually ensure the extension of a mandate on sustainable consumption and production beyond 2022 (see [Table 1](#) below).

The process before the launch of the SDGs is the so-called Marrakech negotiation process on sustainable consumption and production, which lasted from 2003 to 2011. This process resulted in the agreement of a non-legally binding global mandate on Sustainable Consumption and Production. The later Ten-Year Framework (2012–2022) on Programmes for Sustainable Consumption and Production (hereafter 10YFP) was adopted during the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (‘Rio + 20’) and later endorsed by the UN General Assembly (United Nations, 2012a; 2012b). The 10YFP established a common vision on sustainable consumption and production. It stated that

‘fundamental changes in the way societies produce and consume are indispensable for achieving global sustainable development. All countries should promote sustainable consumption and production, with the developed countries taking the lead and with all countries benefiting from the process, taking into account the Rio principles, including, inter alia, the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities [...]. Governments, relevant international organizations, the private sector and all major groups should play an active role in changing unsustainable consumption and production patterns’ (United Nations, 2012b, p. 3).

Table 1. Overview of results.

	Year	Key developments	Impact of global goalsetting	Mechanisms of impact
Authority	2012	Ten-Year Framework on Programmes for Sustainable Consumption and production (2012–2022)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10YFP organizes side-events at and submits reports to OWG-SDGs (2014) 10YFP recognized by Open Working Group on the SDGs (10th session) Standalone SDG on Sustainable Consumption and Production, with 10YFP as first target (2015) 	Fortification of an existing mandate
	2018	One Plan for One Planet, mid-term strategy (2018–2022)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> First objective to become an effective SDG 12 implementation mechanism Presented during High-level Political Forum 2018 	Further clarification of an existing mandate
	2020	Start of consultative process towards mandate renewal	Aligning with 2030 Agenda and maintaining integrity of SDG 12 presented as one of two potential scenarios for mandate renewal	Ensuring the proliferation of a mandate
	2021	Ten-Year Framework mandate renewal (2023–2030)	Aligning with 2030 Agenda and maintaining integrity of SDG 12 chosen as key scenario for mandate extension	Ensuring the proliferation of a mandate
	2022	Global Strategy on Sustainable Consumption and Production (2023–2030)	Sustainable consumption and production positioned as ‘key factor underpinning planetary crises and advancing entire 2030 Agenda’	Further clarification of an existing mandate
Procedures	2012–2013	Establishment of roles: Board, Inter-Agency Coordination Group, Focal Points	First global meeting 10YFP held back-to-back with SDG negotiations (14/15 May 2015)	Publicity
	2012–2016	Establishment of venues for interaction: multi-stakeholder Programmes	Several Programmes are launched during High-level Political Forum meetings	Publicity
	2017–2018	Repurposing of governance structure	2030 Agenda noted as rationale for national level focus, stronger focus on inter-agency collaboration and a (cross-cutting) systems approach (2018→)	Legitimation for chosen direction
Resources	2013 → 2014–2017 2016–2017	Accumulation of tools and practices 10YFP Trust Fund Monitoring framework	Built on indicators from SDG 12, and ten other SDGs	Source for monitoring indicators
	2018	SDG 12 Multi-Partner Trust Fund	Explicitly linked to SDG 12, multi-partner trust funds promoted as tool for the SDGs	Basis for novel funding mechanism
	2019	Science-based policy tool SCP-HAT		

It thus identified a domain and a set of actors that would continue to engage in it.

The first impact of SDG 12 on authority occurred during the SDG negotiations in 2012–2015, when 10YFP actors used this process to fortify their newly established mandate on sustainable consumption and production. The 10YFP mandate was as universal and non-legally binding as the SDGs. Still, the inclusion of SDG 12 in the 2030 Agenda was seen as furthering the legitimacy and awareness of the 10YFP, since all sorts of frameworks, projects and decisions are adopted by the General Assembly. The SDGs were expected to ‘gain much more awareness from a public point of view’ (Interview 1).¹ 10YFP actors worked to ensure sustainable consumption and production was taken up in the SDG framework, for example through the publication of reports (May and June of 2014) and the organization of side-events during the 7th and 11th sessions of the Open Working Group on the SDGs (Secretariat of the 10YFP on SCP, 2014). The 10th session of the Open Working Group recognized the 10YFP, and in 2015, SDG 12 became a standalone goal on sustainable consumption and production, of which the 10YFP became itself the first target. The inclusion of sustainable consumption and production in the SDG framework was later described as ‘a paradigm shift’ for the 10YFP, ‘renewing and further enhancing’ its mandate, giving it a ‘strong socio-political sustainability’ (Rouhban, 2018, p. 6).

The second impact of the SDGs occurred in 2017–2018 around the mid-term review of the 10YFP when SDG 12 was used to further clarify the mandate of the emerging 10YFP network. This mid-term review noted that the 10YFP had remained abstract and not led to a clear strategy, compass or common roadmap (Rouhban, 2018, p. 23). Partners in the 10YFP thus started to develop a mid-term strategy (2018–2022) that would not modify the 10YFP but further specify ‘a common vision, objectives and strategic principles’ for actors working on sustainable consumption and production. In developing the strategy, SDG 12 was highlighted as a ‘a key opportunity to leverage’ to ‘consolidate and enhance the 10YFP’s relevance’ (Rouhban, 2018, p. 5). SDG 12 was also considered attractive from a communications point of view, as it provided one goal with a manageable number of targets to address and attain (Interview 2).² In the final strategy *One Plan for One Planet* (2018–2022), actors involved in the 10YFP decided to focus on implementing SDG 12. The first strategic objective thus became to make the 10YFP network ‘an effective SDG 12 implementation mechanism’ (The One Planet Network, 2018, p. 2). The 2018 High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development was used to launch the strategy.

The third impact of global goalsetting occurred in 2020–2022 towards the end of the 10YFP mandate, when 10YFP members used SDG 12 to ensure a continued global mandate on sustainable consumption and production, which was otherwise scheduled to expire in January 2023. In 2017, it was already noted that the *One Plan One Planet* Strategy might allow to ‘prepare ground for [...] possible [mandate] extension beyond 2022’ (Rouhban, 2018, p. 5). To guide the process towards mandate extension, the ‘Group of Friends of Sustainable Consumption and Production’, initiated by two member states of the 10YFP board, brought together governments committed to implementing the 10YFP. During the second meeting of this group in March 2021, the 10YFP secretariat presented two scenarios for a mandate extension. The first scenario was to extend this mandate ‘to align with the 2030 agenda and maintain the integrity of SDG 12’. The second scenario was the negotiation of a ‘new mandate, establishing a framework for multilateral cooperation on Sustainable Consumption and Production’. A majority of governments preferred the first scenario, as the second scenario would require an intergovernmental body to conduct negotiations, significant time and resources, and could not guarantee an outcome. Secretariat members had already considered during the SDG negotiations that in due time, having a goal on SCP might ensure the extension of the 10YFP mandate beyond 2022 (Interview 2). Using the argument that the work on sustainable

consumption and production was not yet finished, the mandate of the 10YFP was then indeed extended, based on a decision of the UN General Assembly in 2021 (United Nations, 2022a). The mandate extension was followed by a Global Strategy on Sustainable Consumption and Production (2023–2030) presented in the run-up to the 2022 ‘Stockholm + 50’ conference and adopted by 10YFP board on 19 October 2022 (United Nations, 2022b, p. 3). This strategy specifies how work on sustainable consumption and production will be steered. The strategy still focuses on SDG 12, but the link between sustainable consumption and production and other SDGs is given a more prominent role, as sustainable consumption and production is now posited as the key factor underpinning the so-called triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution.

In sum, although the initial establishment of a mandate on sustainable consumption and production was not linked to the SDGs, we observe three periods where we could observe an impact of global goalsetting and of SDG 12. Actors used SDG 12 to fortify an existing mandate (2012–2015), then to further clarify an existing mandate (2017–2018), and finally to ensure the extension of this mandate beyond 2022 (2020–2022). Especially for the mandate extension, the existence of a global goal such as SDG 12 seemed to have been particularly impactful.

3.2. Strengthened procedures

Global goalsetting, and particularly SDG 12, also influenced the procedures in this policy area. Procedures that emerged already before the launch of the SDGs were the establishment of the 10YFP secretariat and a 10YFP board. The board consisted of ten governments (United Nations, 2013); an inter-agency group of 19 UN entities chaired by UNEP and co-chaired by UN DESA; and a group of national and stakeholder focal points. The board was tasked with promoting the framework, guiding the 10YFP secretariat, assisting in securing funding, ensuring reporting and the convening of international and regional meetings. UN representatives were called upon to coordinate and to support implementation, increase visibility of the framework and to enhance information sharing (10YFP Inter-Agency Coordination Group, 2016). To structure engagement within the network, six voluntary thematic programmes were later established (2012–2016) to bring together existing initiatives, scaling up and replicating successful policies and generating and supporting new projects in response to priorities and needs as they emerged (ECOSOC, 2015, p. 6).³ Any entity supporting the 10YFP could participate. Participants that gave resources for implementation became network partners, and those with ‘recognized competencies’ in an area could position themselves as programme leads. Each programme was governed by at most one lead and three co-leads, a coordination desk and a multi-stakeholder advisory committee of up to 25 organizations. In 2018, over 611 partners engaged with the programmes (ECOSOC, 2018, p. 10).

The influence of SDG 12 and the broader 2030 Agenda is notable around the mid-term evaluation of the 10YFP in 2017–2018, when both were referred to as a rationale for the redirection of activities towards reducing fragmentation, promoting a systems perspective and focusing on national level implementation (see Table 1 below). The SDGs were also noted repeatedly in the lead-up to the mid-term strategy that flowed from the evaluation (2018–2022), where the 10YFP network was renamed as ‘One Planet Network’. SDG 12 itself even became the first priority of this strategy. The mid-term review had noted that the 10YFP should link to the national level because SDGs are geared to the national level (Rouhban, 2018, p. 68). The network has subsequently focused on better understanding the national conditions for sustainable consumption and production, establishing stronger communication between national focal points and programmes, and establishing tools for countries to identify priority sectors and intervention areas

(ECOSOC, 2019, p. 8). The number of countries acting on sustainable consumption and production and receiving support from, or using resources or practices of, the network was introduced as a measure of effectiveness (The One Planet Network, 2018).

Additionally, a UN Development System report on the SDGs noted that efforts around SDG 12 were ‘fragmented and piecemeal’, providing an impetus for more concerted UN System efforts (Dalberg, 2017). During the review of SDG 12 at the High-level Political Forum, UN entities subsequently presented the *One UN for One Planet* document (2018, p. 5), in which they noted that ‘the magnitude of the task set out through SDG 12 called for a strengthened and concerted UN System’. The novel role of SDG ‘indicator custodianship’ was noted here as a way to strengthen coordination among agencies, such as UNEP, FAO and UNESCO, led by the 10YFP secretariat (UNEP Evaluation Office, 2021, p. 59). The idea to introduce crosscutting themes to promote a systems approach within the network itself was presented to capitalize on the High-level Political Forum and the UN Environment Assembly (ECOSOC, 2019, p. 21). Inter-programme collaboration meetings were held; and starting with the 2018–2019 cycle, the network worked on overarching themes to focus its activities (ECOSOC, 2019, p. 21).

However, although this reorientation mentions the 2030 Agenda, the mid-term review itself also warranted some of these changes. Firstly, the review indicated that the network was not properly geared towards national level implementation, which was the eventual aim of the 10YFP. Between 2012 and 2017, most activities had been global (38%) in scope, with national (30%), regional (21%) and local (11%) activities being less significant (ECOSOC, 2018, p. 6). Programmes often lacked a clear entry point at the country level and had limited time to engage with national focal points beyond co-leads or governments. In turn, national focal points often lacked the knowledge to engage with (all six) network programmes. The relation between programmes and focal points was therefore often considered weak (UNEP Evaluation Office, 2021, p. 57). Furthermore, only 12 percent of reported network activities had focused on implementation.

Secondly, the review indicated that UNEP’s coordination of the implementation of the 10YFP did not prevent a ‘siloe approach’ in countries that had policies on sustainable consumption and production in place. In 2019, 90 percent of policies on sustainable consumption and production had been placed within environmental ministries, with only 10 percent being led by the more central ministries of economy, finance, planning, trade and industry or a high-level political body (UNEP Evaluation Office, 2021, p. 109). The important economic and social dimensions of sustainable development were thus not (sufficiently) reflected in the targets and impacts of the reported policies at national level. All this offered a strong argument for a fortified multi-actor approach.

These changes have been broadly linked to the SDGs, and SDG 12 served as a key vehicle to extend the 10YFP mandate. A further impetus to refer to the SDG framework was created when in 2017 the key reporting venue for the 10YFP was changed from ECOSOC to the High-level Political Forum.

3.3. Broadening the resource base

When it comes to the resource base in the area of sustainable consumption and production, we note an increase in activity after 2013. In 2013, 10YFP actors started to accumulate existing tools and practices around sustainable consumption and production, which fed into a knowledge management platform, the ‘clearinghouse’ on sustainable consumption and production. In 2017, over 424 initiatives and 438 resources had been collected through this clearinghouse, and over 3,891

members were active on this platform (Rouhban, 2018, p. 28). Analyses of these practices were used to compile 'National Implementation Toolboxes'. After the launch of the SDGs, a link to the global goals was established over time, as the clearinghouse has since been renamed twice and is now called the 'SDG 12 hub' (ECOSOC, 2015, p. 13; UNEP Evaluation Office, 2021, p. 60).

In 2016, the SDGs had their first impact on resources in this area, when they served as a source for new monitoring indicators (see Table 1 below for the overview). The SDG framework was one framework that these indicators built upon. The framework included indicators for SDG 12, but also indicators from other SDGs, including those on climate (SDG 13), life on land (SDG 15), decent work (SDG 8), industry innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9), partnerships (SDG 17), sustainable cities (SDG 11), education (SDG 4), water (SDG 6), energy (SDG 7) and health (SDG 3). The framework further resulted in indicators spread across types of output (such as information exchange), outcome (concrete policies and initiatives) and impact (The One Planet Network, 2020). In line with the 10YFP, impact was defined as changes around resource efficiency, environment and human well-being in the context of sustainable consumption and production. Yet, retrospective reporting for 2013–2016 had indicated that changes in impacts remained few (ECOSOC, 2018), and as a response, civil servants developed new science-based tools to ensure that policy-makers could better operationalize sustainable consumption and production domestically. One example is the 'SCP Hotspot Analysis tool' launched in March 2019, which facilitates decision-making based on data from 171 countries (UNEP Evaluation Office, 2021).

The second impact of global goalsetting occurred in 2017–2018 in the lead-up to the mid-term strategy *One Plan for One Planet* (2018–2022), where SDG 12 was used as an argument for a novel financing mechanism. An earlier '10YFP Trust Fund' had been established in 2014, with total contributions of USD 14,340,574 and 57 funded projects, of which 13.4% were global, 12.2% regional, 34.4% national and 40.2% local activities (UNEP, 2020). After a critical evaluation and as part of the new One Plan for One Planet Strategy, however, a new fund was established, the 'SDG 12 Multi-Partner Trust Fund' (UNEP Evaluation Office, 2021). This fund was now based on a Memorandum of Understanding between a group of UN entities, including UNEP, FAO, UN Habitat, UNWTO, UNOPS and the Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, with UNDP joining shortly thereafter. The steering committee of the fund comprised of high-level representatives of several UN agencies, the chair of the 10YFP board as well as representatives from funding partners.

The move towards a multi-partner trust fund can be linked to the call to reduce fragmentation that has been noted in the UN Development System report on activities for the SDGs. In this context, SDG 12 provided an anchor, but also a legitimation for this novel financing mechanism. The need for a novel approach was apparent from the mid-term evaluation of the first 10YFP Trust Fund, which received contributions from only a few countries and could cover only 2.8 percent of total project proposals received (ECOSOC, 2018, p. 25). Apparently, programmes had spent too much time on writing proposals without receiving funding, which led members to become frustrated and at times disengaging from the 10YFP network. In sum, global goalsetting and SDG 12 contributed to a novel monitoring framework on sustainable consumption and production and provided a means through which a novel funding mechanism could be established.

3.4. Mechanisms of and conditions for SDG impact

Based on these findings, Table 1 now presents an overview of our results. Overall, we find that SDG 12, and the broader SDG process, was strategically used by actors in the 10YFP and One Planet Network to advance an institutionalization process that had started in 2012.

We identified several key mechanisms through which SDG 12 influenced these institutionalization processes. We found that global goalsetting was used to fortify, clarify and extend an existing mandate; that it was used to increase public knowledge of and attention for the issue area and to rationalize and further legitimate strategic choices for actors; and that it helped identify key impact indicators and offered an argument for a novel funding mechanism.

For these impacts to occur, three conditions had to be present. First, any impact depended on an existent set of actors willing and able to activate the strategic potential of global goalsetting. Here, the process leading to the 10YFP (2003–2011) was important, as it created novel interactions among a fragmented set of actors. Second, any impact was conditional on a mandated international institution – the UN Environment Programme – that coordinated the 10YFP network since 2012. Third, any impact was conditional on foregoing alternative pathways of institutionalization. For instance, in 2016, SDG indicators were favoured over other potential outcome-oriented indicators. Towards the mid-term strategy (2018–2022), the One Planet Network positioned itself as an implementation mechanism, as opposed to becoming a less direct mechanism such as a global standard-setter or discussion platform. In 2020, mandate extension was chosen over the negotiation of a novel and more ambitious mandate that might have posited clearer outcome-oriented indicators, a move away from self-regulation towards clearer standard-setting from governments, or some other type of radicalization or legalization.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This study investigated whether and how global goalsetting, especially the SDGs, influenced processes of institutionalization in a poorly institutionalized area of global governance. We focused on the policy domain of sustainable consumption and production, which is targeted by SDG 12.

To analyse institutionalization processes, we developed a framework around the three elements of authority, procedures and resources. We applied this framework to trace key institutional developments in the area of sustainable consumption and production between 2012 and 2022, and to study the impact of global goalsetting, especially by SDG 12. Overall, we think our conceptual framework to assess institutionalization can possibly be useful also in other future research projects on global governance. The framework is broad enough to account for the activities of different types of entities and it conceptualizes institutionalization as a process, while also differentiating three elements that allow for concrete observation.

Using this framework to study sustainable consumption and production policies has led to several insights. We found that the impact of global goals can influence broader institutionalization processes, and we identified several mechanisms through which global goalsetting impacts institutionalization, which led us to postulate hypotheses for future work (for an overview see [Table 1](#)). We also identified conditions for the impact of global goals on institutionalization, which might help explain different impacts across other cases. Three conditions help explain impact in the present case. First, the emergence of links between fragmented sets of actors, willing and able to use the potential of global goalsetting; second, the existence of an international institution with a clear coordination mandate for the issue area; lastly, the foregoing of alternative pathways of institutionalization. Additionally, impact might have been facilitated by the convergence of timelines between the institutionalization and the global goalsetting processes, which both took off in the year 2012. More research is needed, however, to see if and how impact materializes for other issue areas, and to what extent these conditions are necessary or sufficient beyond the present case.

Despite the observed impact of global goalsetting, the transitions towards more sustainable consumption and production continues to face numerous challenges. The One Planet Network will need to become more effective in supporting actions within countries, for which it needs more resources. This might be challenging given that the multi-partner trust fund for SDG 12 has not generated sufficient donations so far, with SDG 12 remaining one of the most underfunded SDGs in the UN System. One reason for this lack of funding might be that investments are often listed under other SDGs (especially as indicators from multiple SDGs informed the One Planet Network results framework), and that global funds and facilities do not include sustainable consumption and production as a specific funding category. However, sustainable consumption and production also remains politically sensitive, as it touches upon the fundamentals of the global economic system, along with the core interests of states, major corporations and even individuals.

Overall, while global goalsetting might lead to further institutionalization of sustainable consumption and production policies in the mid-term, it is unlikely to resolve the long-term challenges of further institutionalization. Even though SDG 12 helped identify global priorities, it did not lead to a set of rules and procedures to guarantee that these priorities will eventually receive the attention and resources necessary for implementation. In line with this finding, the new 2023–2030 Global Strategy on Sustainable Consumption and Production recognizes that to inspire the necessary momentum, political will and political action, the 10YF needs to move beyond the 2030 Agenda to build a broader global movement on sustainable consumption and production. Indeed, the process of building a global movement as part of the new Global Strategy on Sustainable Consumption and Production could broaden the actor base and shift the focus to system changes (see also Bengtsson et al., 2018). There might be an opportunity to better involve representatives of stakeholders who lack means of implementation or recognized competencies but are affected by unsustainable consumption and production patterns, such as those working in precarious jobs, those facing the impacts of a growing global tourism sector, and those dealing with the waste produced by growing global consumption (see also Mathai et al., 2021). This movement could also help inform the discussion on how to address sustainable consumption and production after 2030. In short, despite all achievements over the last decade and the impacts that SDG 12 has had, more, and more impactful, measures remain necessary to reduce unsustainable consumption and production patterns worldwide.

Notes

1. Interview by MvD with Andrew Schmidt, former member of the One Planet Network Secretariat, 1 March 2023, speaking in personal capacity.
2. Interview by MvD with Charles Arden-Clarke, former head of the 10YFP Secretariat, 20 March 2023, speaking in personal capacity.
3. The six programmes established included the Sustainable Public Procurement Programme and Consumer Information Programme (2014); the Sustainable Tourism Programme; the Sustainable Lifestyles Programme and the Sustainable Buildings and Construction Programme (2015); and the Sustainable Food Systems Programme (2016). Most programmes resulted from the taskforces that existed during the Marrakech process (Secretariat of the 10YFP on SCP, 2014).

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