

Towards transformative change: polycentric governance as a way to achieve the SDGs more inclusively

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While some progress has been made, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) still need more ambitious and coherent approaches to promote transformative change and achieve ecological integrity, good governance, and inclusive development. With the aim to contribute to this goal, polycentric governance is recognized as a frame to create a more conducive environment for policy coherence. As part of the NWO-funded project on SDG interactions, seven PhD students and a postdoc from Wageningen University and Research (WUR) will work to generate new evidence on governing SDG interactions. During the kick-off event in Wageningen in February, stakeholders convened to discuss the seven PhD proposals and the importance of alignment mechanisms, inclusive development, and good governance. Knowledge translation of their findings will be carried out by a consortium including University of Amsterdam and The Broker.

The NWO-funded research programme [SDG Interactions and Policy Interventions in Developing Countries](#) is made up of four consortia, which will work in an inter- and transdisciplinary manner, internationally and across the entire knowledge chain. On the theme of SDG governance and decision making – *“Beyond cherry”-picking”: aligning development actors and efforts for inclusive and effective governance of trade-offs and synergies between SDGs in East Africa* – researchers led by Prof. Dr Art Dewulf (WUR) will endeavour to align development actors and efforts for the inclusive and effective governance of synergies and trade-offs between SDGs in East Africa. The Broker will contribute to knowledge brokering and synthesis in a consortium led by Dr Nicky Pouw of the University of Amsterdam (UvA), bringing together the work of the three other consortia and ensuring that the research results become more than the sum of their parts.

In February, Prof. Dr Dewulf and Dr Daniel Wiegant (WUR) organized a three-day project meeting with the objective of gathering project researchers and cooperation partners to discuss the research plan for the coming four years. Representatives from the co-applying institutions were present, including from the Water & Land Resource Centre (WLRC) of Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia, the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) in Kenya, and Makerere University in Uganda. The researchers and PhD candidates benefited from the insights shared by international cooperation partners, including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), African Union Peer Review Mechanism (AU-PRM), International Development Law Organization (IDLO), African Research & Impact Network (ARIN) and Public Strategy for Sustainable Development (PS4SD), who attended the meeting to ensure that the project addresses research needs at the international level. In a vibrant discussion, the attendees highlighted several existing challenges related to achieving the SDGs, including implementation and policy coherence between Dutch foreign policy and the development policies of recipient countries.

The ability of the SDGs to generate transformative change was critiqued during the keynote speech by Prof. Frank Biermann of Utrecht University, who focused on the political impact of the SDGs. Although his 2022 meta-analysis found some narrative change in how development actors approach development, it also found that the SDGs are not a transformative force themselves and have not led to a (re-)allocation of funding, institutional realignment, an increase in stringent policies, or a transformative push towards a new economic model. Furthermore, Prof. Biermann found that the legitimizing effects of the SDG ‘branding’ absolves actors from public scrutiny and may actually contribute to demobilization and social

stagnation. This rather bleak portrayal of the impact of SDGs ended with a call for a more progressive agenda including institutionalizing, radicalizing, and legally embedding the SDGs.

The African perspective presented by Sara Tawfik Hamouda of the African Union Peer Review Mechanism represented a more optimistic view. The political impacts of the SDGs in the African context are clearly visible. Countries such as Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya have already aligned their national development policies with the SDGs and translated them into local languages. South-to-South learning is voluntarily taken up and peer review mechanisms are in place, but further support is needed due to conflicts and a lack of data, capacities, and resources. Despite different interpretations of the political impact of Agenda 2030, both Prof. Biermann and Ms Hamouda stressed the need to focus on peace and good governance (SDG 16) and reform institutions in order to promote inclusive development.

The need for researchers to be inclusive in their research design, right from the outset, and to continuously connect to local realities was highlighted by numerous stakeholders. Representatives from the IDLO, OECD, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ILRI, WLRC, and Makerere University convened in a panel to discuss the research needs in the East African context. They highlighted the importance of incorporating women as agents of change, involving local organizations and the private sector, staying grounded in climate and environmental contexts, being mindful of the winners and losers in the political process, as well as considering peaceful and inclusive societies (SDG 16) in all SDG interactions. There is also a need to further unpack and concretize the concept of 'inclusive development'. In order to realize the agenda setting power of the SDGs and their interactions, it was concluded that continued stakeholder engagement must not be overlooked as the research unfolds.

Connected by a cross-cutting comparative research framework on polycentric governance, this research project is structured around three multi-level case studies in East Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda). A cohort of (African) PhD candidates and a (Dutch) postdoc will look at the governance of the water, energy, food nexus in large-scale irrigation systems in Uganda, a climate smart livestock and dairy sector in Kenya, and landscape restoration in the Lake Tana sub-basin in Ethiopia. The case studies in each country will depart from one focal SDG (SDG 2: zero hunger, in Kenya; SDG 6: clean water, in Uganda; and SDG 15: life on land, in Ethiopia) and investigate the synergies and trade-offs with other SDGs from a governance perspective. The research will take an innovative approach, as each case will be studied from a global to local as well as a local to global perspective. These diverse themes will be connected through a study on the shared system of rules and norms that are necessary for polycentric governance and by an alignment mechanisms framework developed by Dr Daniel Wiegant (WUR).

Researcher	Context	Scale	SDG	Alignment
Charles Tonui	Kenya	Global	Rules and norms	
Nishai Moodley	Uganda	Global to local	2, 6, 7	Inter-departmental and inter-donor
Dereje Yiman	Ethiopia	Local to global	2, 13, 15, 17	Inter-departmental and inter-donor
Annita Kirwa	Kenya	Global to local	2, 5, 10, 13	Inter-departmental and inter-donor
Rachel Gitundu	Kenya	Local to global	2, 5, 8, 10, 13	Donor-recipient and public-private
Aytenew Tatek	Ethiopia	Global to local	2, 6, 7, 15	Donor-recipient and public-private
Tony Ssekamatte	Uganda	Local to global	1, 2, 3, 6, 7	Donor-recipient and public-private

Translating SDG governance research into policy action requires an evidence-based approach. With the aim to provide inspiring examples of how this can be done, co-applicants Prof. Woldeamlak Bewket of Addis Ababa University and Dr Richard Mugambe of Makerere University shared valuable experience from Ethiopia and Uganda. They emphasized the importance of co-creating knowledge with government agencies and aligning efforts across sectors and governance levels to maximize synergies and negotiate trade-offs in achieving the SDGs. Implementation was highlighted as a persisting challenge, along with communication and information management. They highlighted the importance of using existing fora to meaningfully engage development communities in learning about governing SDG interactions. Overall, it was made clear that thinking in two directions and fostering mutual exchange between scientists and practitioners is paramount to realizing sustainable development. Here, via the knowledge brokering and synthesis consortium, The Broker will work to build bridges between science, policy and practice, and stimulate closer cooperation and mutual knowledge exchange.



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