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Task Force 06
STRENGTHENING MULTILATERALISM AND GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

Multi-Responsiveness Governance in the SGDs: Unveiling the Role of Subnational Governments

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Abstract

The deepening of international cooperation within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) faces the challenge of addressing the diversity that resonates in the effort to achieve common objectives. This involves recognizing the particularities of social demands and the various factors that inform the actors involved in global governance. Moreover, it requires acknowledging that the SDGs were conceived globally to ensure a dignified threshold for human life. Our goal is to understand how to reconcile responsiveness to the proposals and actions of the G20 with social demands that are constructed and presented in a heterogeneous manner around the globe concerning the SDGs. We hypothesize that, while social diversity poses a challenge to reconciling responsiveness to proposals and actions on the theme, recognizing the essential role of subnational governments in the G20's actions would be a fundamental path to ensure that the bloc promotes the SDGs through mechanisms that acknowledge diversity. This policy brief aims to analyze how subnational governments can serve as foundations for multi responsive governance within the G20. To achieve this, we discuss the international role of subnational governments as a democratic and inclusive mechanism of global governance. By examining their role in the creation, implementation, and evaluation of proposals and actions within the SDGs, we can systematize replicable practices within the G20. We aim to compile and analyze data from case studies to develop a set of guidelines, informing the proposals and actions of the G20. This process will be done in collaboration with engagement groups, including those at the subnational level, such as the U20. The expected result is the composition of a repertoire regarding the role of subnational governments in the global governance of sustainable development, demonstrating a link between the local/regional and the global.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals; Subnational Governments; Multi Responsiveness Governance

Diagnosis of the Issue

Coordination among G20 states involves major economies in promoting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and faces a clear challenge due to the heterogeneity both among these countries and within them, which impacts the effectiveness of projects. In this context, instruments that summon subnational governments to more substantive participation in decision-making processes related to the construction and implementation of activities aimed at meeting the SDGs are fundamental to circumvent the risk of working with generalist and inefficient political recommendations. Moreover, creating an informational environment within the bloc that facilitates the exchange of experiences regarding subnational participation in decision-making processes can transform the challenge of heterogeneity into opportunity. This approach can promote good practices that lead to a more substantive realization of the SDGs.

A methodology was designed to access the degree of subnational government participation in the SDGs, supported by primary data, starting with the following systematization: selection of the country; identification of a database on policies related to the SDGs; apprehension of an SDG strongly linked to the perspective of multilevel governance; analysis of the outcomes of policies implemented from this SDG. Brazil was considered a relevant example due to its particular way of territorially articulating the distribution of competences – a tripartite federation, albeit quite centralized – potentially engaging with other experiences regarding the organization of power and resonating with the scenario of other countries. The database of the United Nations, which aggregates the projects funded by the institution under the SDGs, was the starting point. SDG 16.7 – ensuring responsive, inclusive, participative, and representative decision-making at all

levels – materializes the demand for participation by different levels of public power and civil society in policy formulation and implementation, serving as the lens through which the participation of subnational governments was accessed. The methodology developed in this policy brief can be replicated for other G20 countries.

Starting from the official United Nations database in Brazil, a total of 113 subnational activities—State Governments and Municipalities—and 30 national activities—Union—were gathered in progress. Of the total of 143 current activities, only 9% (13 activities) are related to SDG 16.7 and denote actions related to responsive, inclusive, participative, and/or representative decision-making. The low number of activities related to the theme indicates the relative marginality of structured actions for sharing good practices. Most activities occur at the national level (5 activities), while subnational actions related to SDG 16.7 are concentrated in the Southeast (3 activities) and North (3 activities) regions. Almost all subnational actions are projects carried out by state governments (6 activities), with the exception of two initiatives that include the participation of the Municipality of Mariana (Minas Gerais) and the capital of Rio de Janeiro. There is a concentration of projects involving the democratization of decision-making on the SDGs at the national level, followed by the almost exclusive participation of state governments. Table 1 summarizes the findings.

TABLE 1. Agenda and relation to SDG 16.7 of ongoing activities in Brazil – subnational governments

Activity	Scope	Agenda	Responsivity	Inclusion	Participation	Representation
Capacity building opportunities provided for youth population of Rio de Janeiro	Municipal level	Capacity building for young population	Indirect	Direct	Indirect	Indirect
Capacities of communities affected by the dam spill tragedy of Fundão enhanced to promote a culture of peace and dialogue initiatives for the sustainable development	State level	Sustainable development, human rights, historical and cultural heritage, and local biodiversity	Direct	Direct	Direct	Indirect
Pernambuco State's capacities strengthened to address crime and violence through the Crime and	State level	Crime and Violence	Indirect	Direct	Indirect	Indirect

Violence Prevention Programme (UNDP/UN HABITAT)						
Strengthened advocacy, coordination and technical support to collect disaggregated data, studies and analyses on forcibly displaced and stateless persons to enable strong and timely response to protection and humanitarian needs	State level (Amazonas Distrito Federal, Pará, Roraima, São Paulo)	Displaced and stateless people - activism initiatives, technical training for government authorities, research.	Direct	Direct	Direct	Direct

Source: UN 2024

The examination of the participation of Brazilian subnational governments in the SDGs, particularly from the perspective of SDG 16.7, shows that the involvement of these actors remains limited. State governments and, especially, municipalities have had little involvement in SDG-related policies supported by the UN in Brazil, even when the subject is intrinsically related to broadening the inclusion of different levels in policy

formulation, coordination and their competencies. This indicates that multilevel policy coordination still suffers lacks outreach to subnational governments. The findings regarding the Brazilian case echo concerns present in both the political (UCGL 2018) and academic (Charbit 2011; Saner, Saner-Yiiu, Gollub and Sidibé 2017) spheres that the involvement of subnational governments in implementing of the SDGs can be broader and deeper.

Recommendations

The dynamics of international agendas, particularly those touching on international development cooperation, have become progressively complex. Not just in how they are conceived but also in the way their implementation is established, considering the number variables that now come into play, including different decision-making mechanisms within the multilevel dynamic. This happens not only because the understanding of how social development should be conducted, in terms of public policies, has new parameters, but also because new elements are considered in their formulation and execution, creating conditions for new actors to become part of these processes.

The role of subnational governments in creating positive synergies between the SDGs through decision-making processes attentive to contexts, and therefore with significant responsive, inclusive, participative, and representative potential, appears as a plausible path, whether through networks such as C40, U20, or UCLG, or by sharing good practices carried out within G20 states. The subnational level can contribute to maximizing social control over the responsiveness of the G20's involvement as a bloc, as well as the implementing agents contributing to the project. Attention to specificities can ensure the inclusion of a more diverse layer of interests in constructing activities, involve the participation of a broader array of interest groups, and thereby more accurately represent the preferences of a given society against globally agreed goals on sustainable development. After all, although they are potential mobilizers of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, subnational governments are actors with a real impact on daily life and civil society.

Therefore, we suggest two main recommendations focused on involving subnational unities in SDGs-related legislation and policies promoted by G20 debates among its

members (Recommendation I), and on articulating G20 as a space for subnational unities sharing their best practices concerning SDG 16.7 (Recommendation II).

Recommendation I: Expanding the space for subnational units and their networks – for example, C40 and U20 – participate in G20 deliberations on policies related to the SDGs. Subnational units are public management spaces close to local specificities, and, therefore, with great potential to function as an institutional responsiveness apparatus. The local public has had significant experiences with social control mechanisms and responsiveness to public policies, including participatory budgeting (Goulart 2006; Blair 2012), public consultations and hearings (Abas, Arifin, Alia and Khairil 2023), ombudsperson (Sander 2013) community advisory boards (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993), and transparency portals with open data (Krah and Mertens 2020) - an important number of local governments from G20 countries do experiment these instruments of political accountability.

Creating clear and institutionalized synergies between the G20 deliberations on SDG related policies and the local decision-making participation mechanisms of subnational units can contribute to incorporating SDG 16.7 into the bloc's development agenda. Below, are some actions that could be implemented to achieve this.

I.I G20 should recommend its Member States that public policies related to the SDGs stimulated within the bloc that require the establishment of federal legislation must include clear mechanisms of popular appreciation in the subnational units directly affected or in a sample of subnational units that are representative of the local heterogeneities involved to enhance social control of G20 initiatives accountability.

I.II These mechanisms should result in the compilation of information on local expectations of accountability concerning public policies related to the SDGs and stimulated within the scope of the G20 among its Member States, which will serve as a reference parameter for decision-making and the implementation of actions related to them.

I.III The compilation of information on expectations of accountability at the local level can be organized and monitored within networks of subnational units related to the G20 – C40 and U20. These networks can interface with the bloc's intergovernmental debates.

I.IV Special attention to encouraging participation mechanisms in subnational units must be given to agendas related to combating inequality and improving quality of life (SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 10), considering that they are agendas that more directly impact and demand the target population inclusion.

I.V The use of popular participation mechanisms at local level should be especially encouraged within the scope of SDGs 11, 12 and 13, to create synergies with local actions aimed at building and maintaining sustainable cities and communities seeking sustainability solutions within contexts, to promote local partnerships for social control of accountability in actions aimed at waste generation and facilitating multi-level coordination to respond to the climate emergency.

Recommendation II: Promoting synergic connections between G20 subnational units by fostering informational networks and good practices sharing.

The G20's role as a forum for dialogue among diverse political communities from both the North and South enhances its ability to serve as a prime venue for exchanging best practices. This is especially relevant in addressing globally recognized challenges such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The actions below are suggested aimed at taking advantage of the potential that already exists in the nature of the block itself when it comes to foster synergies between subnational unities experiences on promoting better practices for decision making closely related do ODS 16.7 proposal.

II.I G20 should recommend Member States to encourage recording and highlighting of good practices aimed at developing effective, responsive, and transparent actions related to the SDGs within the scope of their subnational units.

II.II Use G20 institutional spaces, in partnership with networks such as C40 and U20, to build and maintain a freely accessible database recording and highlighting good practices from subnational units focused on decision-making responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative that interface with other dimensions of the SDG agenda.

II.III Special highlighting and promoting initiatives G20 national subunits member states aimed at responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making, which have an interface with other dimensions of the SDG agenda, as a basis for exchanging experiences in triangular flows of regional and international cooperation both in the North-South and South-South dimensions.

Scenario of Outcomes

Based on the analysis of primary data showing the low participation of subnational governments in SDG-related policies in Brazil and considering the potential to generalize these results to G20 countries, this policy brief recommends greater inclusion of subnational governments in the formulation and implementation of SDG-related policies. This is essential for building decision-making processes that are truly responsive, inclusive, participative, and representative. One challenge in expanding multilevel governance within the scope of the SDGs is the heterogeneity of state forms in the G20. Among the members of the bloc, there are significant differences in territorial organization, distribution of competencies, and the degree of decentralization of decision making processes and implemented public policies. However, these differences do not invalidate the argument that attention to non-central governments is a fundamental part to the SDGs' effectiveness. On the contrary, the diversity of public power structures among G20 members necessitates careful consideration of how subnational governments can be involved in implementing the SDGs.

A significant challenge for G20 countries on this topic is addressing the vastly different institutional, legal, and political conditions of subnational governments within the already diverse G20 environment. The group includes a range of subnational entities, from global cities and economically developed, dynamic regions with broad agency perspectives, including international engagement, to small localities where implementing of common governance actions can be challenging. Implementing the recommendations suggested here risks benefiting only those actors already positioned to participate in the SDGs, potentially deepening the inequality that characterizes the performance of subnational governments in this area.

The perspective of positive outcomes from implementing of recommendations of this policy brief, however, outweigh the potential negative effects. Practical cases show how involving subnational governments can expand and spread the positive impacts of public policy. An example of such policy that demonstrates the positive synergy resulting from the inclusion of subnational governments in SDG-related policies is Brazil's National Policy on Food and Nutritional Security. Although this policy predates the SDGs, it is intrinsically related to them. The program features a structure of participative governance through the Management Group, Forum, and Local Committees. This structure facilitates social planning, priority settings, agenda and schedule construction, and monitoring and follow-up. It is considered a successful case of multilevel governance, as demonstrated by its indicators and results (CAISAN 2015).

Engaging local authorities in managing SDG-related agendas is crucial as it fosters an environment of governability and governance with diverse stakeholders. This involvement not only enhances the legitimacy of current policies but also strengthens the SDGs by incorporating a nuanced understanding of the specific demands within each territory. Such a process ensures finely tuned intersectorality, thanks to the diversity of involved actors and public agencies. This approach enables the achievement of various SDGs simultaneously.

Although there is low subnational participation in the SDG agenda, considering the focus on the examples cited referring to the Brazilian case, the multilevel perspective has the prerogative of considering subnational governments as active and participating actors. These governments are seen as influencers and implementers of public policies, not merely secondary participants in decision-making processes. Thus, the G20 can become a broad space not only for debate but also for dialogue and exchange of subnational policies, forming new relationships between the local and the global.

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