

ARTS Lecture, 14 June 2018, University of Bonn

SDG 16: Sustainability and peace – a disparate relationship?

Dr. Corinna Hauswedell, Conflict Analysis and Dialogue (CoAD), Bonn; Research associate at Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC)

With the adoption of the UN Agenda 2030 in September 2015 the SDG 16 (for peace, justice and strong institutions) proved the most contentious issue. In my presentation I am going to discuss questions such as:

Why is it that the „Peace SDG“ has proved to be less peaceful, i.e. more contentious than other goals of the Agenda 2030?

What may be productive links between the agendas of sustainability and peace?

How can cooperative handling of diverging (and common) interests, for example in the area of climate and environmental protection, contribute to a fairer and more just world economic order, and by that promote a more reflective approach to violent conflicts and their causes?

I will try to approach these questions via the following five routes:

I. Cooperative (and multilateral) concepts in difficult times:

The surprise of the UN Agenda 2030 and the Paris climate agreement, both of 2015

Both agendas were hailed as major successes, since they demonstrated the ability and determination of the community of nations to acknowledge that the securing of life-sustaining conditions for all and the promotion of peace in the world constituted a joint task of all nations, North and South. Of course, the fact that this took place in a world marked by growing crises, uncertainty and wars could arouse suspicion that the consensus of 2015 was more a matter of symbolic politics, with the purpose of concealing the behavior of countries intent on securing their own advantage.

Undoubtedly, it would be naive to close our eyes to the embeddedness of the SDGs and climate negotiations in a self-interested political context. However, in view of the stagnation of international negotiations in other areas of significance for world politics (for example in the context of the WTO, in connection with development finance, or in the area of arms control and non-proliferation) it comes close to a miracle that the updating and expansion of the MDG program of the early 2000s and especially the Paris climate agreement have come into existence at all.

The Paris agreement of December 2015 is generally recognized as a breakthrough in global climate policy. Thanks to the leading role initially played by the US and China, it came into effect in record time, only a year after the conference was held in Paris. The main goal of the agreement is limiting global warming to well below 2°C. To achieve this goal, net global emissions of greenhouse gases should be reduced to zero by the middle of the century. It is assumed that it will be possible to deal with problems resulting from climate warming if at the same time the capacity of all societies to

adapt to the remaining climate changes is increased, in other words their resilience. To achieve this (and to provide weaker states with the capacity to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions), it is expected that the industrialized nations will make \$US100 billion available each year from 2020 to 2025. This plan, however, has been seriously drawn into question since the withdrawal from the agreement by US President Donald Trump, in June 2017.

Therefore, it seems justifiable to ask: How robust are these multilateral alternatives, based on the mutual recognition of interests? What can a preoccupation with “soft” cooperation agendas such as the one for sustainability achieve in view of the crises and conflicts of today? What may become more relevant, from the point of view of peace policy, to satisfy NATO’s 2 percent arms expenditure goal or the 2°C target set in climate policy?

II. What is new about the SDGs ?

Starting from the MDGs experience, the SDGs were expanded and environment and development policies were linked in a much more comprehensive sustainability concept, and also new: Agenda 2030 no longer focuses mainly on the needs of less industrialized nations. Instead, the SDGs agenda formulated 17 goals to which also the industrialized nations committed themselves (and many of which have previously been topics here during earlier ARTS lectures) . Combating poverty, for example, as well as other MDGs still play a central role in the SDGs, but are integrated into a global sustainability agenda. This includes “reduced inequalities within and among countries” (SDG 10), taking action to combat climate change (SDG 13) and not the least, the promotion of “peace, justice and strong institutions” (SDG 16). These goals can be understood as constituting a political-ecological-social triangle of sustainability.

Germany has, early on, tried to play a prominent role in helping to conceptualise and formulate the goals for sustainability. With its „Charter for the Future” bthe Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), for instance, committed itself to a transformative and inclusive approach and identified the need for a coherent overall policy based on this approach. The topic “coherence” is a long-running issue for any policy that intends to contribute to the production of global public goods, but it is true in particular with respect to the SDGs, since the interrelatedness of the different goals – in terms of concept and implementation - is the explicit programmatic expectation of the 17 goals.

III. The controversial SDG 16: Political and practical aspects of a dilemma

The general definition of SDG 16:

„Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.“

SDG 16 is broken down in 10 detailed targets, two subchapters A and B, and 23 indicators to measure the goals achievements.¹

In spite of the fact that peace is one of the five core topics mentioned in the preamble to the 2030 Agenda, and prevention of conflict being a declared top issue of the UN-Secretary General Antonio Guterres, the adoption of the goal of peace, justice and strong institutions was particularly contentious. This controversy almost caused the entire undertaking of the SDGs to fail.

What was, and still is, behind the controversies surrounding SDG 16? What kind of 'explosive stuff' triggered the especially tough debates about SDG 16?

There was, first of all, a political dilemma expressed in contrasting view points of states with a more „Western“ or „Northern“ perspective, and those more expressed by „Southern“ voices and those from emerging powers. While some representatives of the West called for a slimmed down agenda (and leave out the complex peace issue), to avoid watering down of its goals, some countries from the Global South feared that in the name of peace and good governance the practice of external intervention would now be added to the sustainability agenda. This fear was most strongly expressed in connection with the wording in goal 16a: “Strengthen relevant national institutions, including through international cooperation, for building capacity at all levels, in particular in developing countries, to prevent violence and combat terrorism and crime.”² Critics saw in this the danger that a narrow military related understanding of security could be at work and that the promotion of peace could be reduced to an anti-terrorism agenda. There is even more relevance to these concerns if you regard the fact that nowhere in the long list of subissues of SDG 16 the crucial need for new international initiatives in the areas of disarmament, arms control and arms export restrictions has been mentioned.

The SDG 16 debate in Germany reflected these international controversies, as well, but a more positive stance was taken: “Through the inclusion of SDG 16, the 2030 Agenda now acknowledges that global sustainable development is not possible without progress in the areas of good governance and peace.”³ In the revised edition of the German government’s sustainability strategy published in January 2017, this view was reinforced: “SDG 16 is one of the basic prerequisites for achieving many additional SDGs. Wherever war and violence rule, where citizens are denied basic rights, state funds wasted and people subjected to discrimination, where administration functions badly and participatory decision making in which all participate is suppressed, for example sustainably combatting poverty (Goal 1), health (Goal 3), education (Goal 4), gender equality (Goal

¹ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg16>

² General Assembly: Transforming our World. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, New York: UN A/Res/70/1.

³ DIE, Die aktuelle Kolumne, 12.10.2015, <http://tinyurl.com/n5unjgr>.

5) or the protection of our natural resources (Goals 13 to 15) are not possible.”⁴

This cannot be dismissed, but it ignores the experience of many developing nations that cooperation is often directed by the security (and regulatory policy) interests of donors. The security interests of donors, in turn, can be used by the political elites in the developing nations involved to pursue their own interests. This underlines all the more explicitly the problems associated with combining sustainability and peace issues as policy, especially when the latter – as is usually the case – are discussed in terms of security. The differing security interests of local populations, states and international corporations, even when they seem to converge in the short term, are not unreservedly supportive of sustainable development. This has been shown in the wake of military interventions in Afghanistan or Iraq, and today is showing signs of happening again in Mali.

Depending on whose perspective is taken, the nexus between peace and sustainability as set out in Goal 16 can be regarded positively or with skepticism. For one group peace is a prerequisite for everything else, but for the other everything else is a prerequisite for peace. The Western industrial nations regard maintenance of minimum standards of government as an essential part of the claim to state sovereignty. Many countries of the Global South, however, see their sovereignty as potentially restricted by the political fusing on peace and development.

Apart from the political backgrounds of the described mentioned controversies, there are a number of very practical or say pragmatic reasons which contribute to difficulties or at least ambiguities in dealing with SDG 16. The audit of SDG 16 taken in the Progress Report of September 2017⁵ stressed the fact that the international community is still struggling with the attempts to create appropriate indicators which do justice to the complexity of the SDGs, especially SDG 16, and the strive for coherence mentioned earlier.

This complexity of the Peace Goal together with the obviously often conflicting economic and political interests at work put the linking of sustainability and peace often on shaky grounds, as becomes especially obvious also in climate policy.

IV. For example: Climate change, violent conflicts and the decline of liberalism

In the 1990s the relationship between environmental degradation and violent conflict was investigated in several large-scale research projects.⁶ The findings largely concurred that, although environmental degradation (including the scarcity of resources resulting from it) can intensify existing conflicts, in itself climate change is only one single factor among many which lead to

⁴ Die Bundesregierung (ed.): Deutsche Nachhaltigkeitsstrategie, Neuauflage 2016, Berlin, p. 207.

⁵ <http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2017/09/SDG16-Progress-Report-2017.pdf>

⁶ See among others Jürgen Scheffran/Michael Brzoska/Hans Günter Brauch/P.M. Link/J. Schilling (eds.): Climate Change, Human Security and Violent Conflict, Berlin 2012.

outbreaks of violence. What is decisive is the institutional and societal setting in which the conflicts develop. This finding is important for countering the argument of “essentializing” resource depletion resulting from climate/environmental degradation as the cause of violence, which was often followed by an inappropriate “securitization” of the environment as a problem area. Most studies show that resource depletion can just as easily lead to cooperation as to confrontation. Thus, there is always room for cooperation, and it is a matter of using or extending this maneuvering room.

The link between climate change and violent conflicts is, hence, not as clear as might seem to be the case at first glance. Whether the Darfur conflict, for example, can be considered the „first climate war in history“ (as UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon did) or the present war in Syria can be attributed to the drought that preceded it, is vigorously debated (and must be doubted for “Syria” in particular). The causes of the wars are much more complex than the climate theory suggests. However, that again does not mean that climate change has no significance for peace in the world.

Today it is assumed that, for instance, environmental degradation, population growth and urbanization are mutually reinforcing.⁷ As a result, increasing social stress must be expected, which manifests itself in many kinds of social conflicts. For climate change, just as for environmental change, it is quite possible and sensible to create the prerequisites for a cooperative response: by restricting the change, by increasing resilience, by expanding the necessary governance structures, and perhaps most of all: through a massive international sharing of the load which takes into account that as a rule the countries most affected by climate change had the smallest share in causing it, and this should be taken into account in the whole matter. This has led to the principle of globally shared but differentiated responsibilities, with industrialized nations clearly bearing their share of the burden.

The Western democracies played the decisive role in setting global environmental and climate policy in motion. However, from a historical perspective they are themselves – including colonialism with all its consequences – to a considerable extent the cause of the global problems and at the same time the prime beneficiaries of the consumption of global resources. This does not devalue their role in global sustainability politics, but draws attention to the fact that the assumption of responsibility was driven by, among other factors, the fear felt by the West that their own practices were being universally adopted by emerging nations. This fact – together with an often willing forgetfulness about the colonial legacy – leads to increasing imbalances and inequalities in the access to peace related resources. Today the question arises whether it is still possible to rely on liberal democracies as the driving force behind sustainability policy. For, apart from the enduring

⁷ Lukas Rüttinger/Dan Smith et al.: A New Climate for Peace. An Independent Report Commissioned by the G7 Members, Adelphi et al. 2015.

resistance of those parts of the economy whose freedom of action is limited by a systematically applied climate policy, the obligation to promote global well-being is rejected by many neo-nationalists. The willingness of the liberal democracies to rigorously support a policy of sustainability is apparently becoming less and less sustainable itself.

V. Germany's and the EU's role in implementing SDG 16 / Conclusions

German policy (similar to most others industrialized countries) is confronted by the implementation of the sustainability agenda in three ways: The SDG catalogue encompasses, *firstly*, goals that involve Germany's internal situation (among other things, halving poverty in Germany, reducing the proportion of young people who do not complete school, phasing out the use of coal). *Secondly*, it involves the external effects of German politics and economy including in relation to the nations of the South (e.g., reducing consumption of resources, the Green Climate Fund, changing non-sustainable types of consumption and production). *Thirdly*, the SDGs involve fulfilling international obligations and willingness to display solidarity (e.g., the 0.7 percent budget goal for development investment, fair trade and finance policies also among industrialized nations, as well as conflict prevention and post-conflict assistance).

Nations like Germany capable of negotiating and (in principle) willing to negotiate must step forward and set a good example with their domestic sustainability policy. At the national level there are significant deficits, such as in the implementation of the timetable for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions adopted in 2010. Instead of a further reduction, the German Federal Environment Agency measured an increase in 2016. In addition, almost nothing has been done in Germany in connection with consumption of resources and consumer behavior since the Rio Conference in 1992. The progressive behavior of the German government during the SDG and climate negotiations stands in contrast with its regressive practice, which is marked by quarrels over every concession, no matter how small, as soon as "interests worthy of protection" are claimed to exist (for example in agriculture, transport or coal mining). But if a country like Germany, which was previously seen as a pioneer in international sustainability policy, itself becomes a blocker, this can only strengthen those who in any case rely on power-based self-assertion and not on global cooperation.

With respect to Goal 16, additional initiatives and negotiations are needed: The basic re-thinking that has long been demanded by peace and conflict researchers and numerous NGOs – latest in the new Friedensgutachten (Peace Report) 2018 only two days ago) – in the area of arms production and export has been making some conceptual progress, but, so far, is not having any effect on export statistics of Germany, or on EU level. Global re-armament and defense spending is

increasing and Germany continues to be one of the largest arms exporters. France's new President suggests to build up the EU's military interventionist capacities. In the discussions on the Agenda 2030 the German government made a commitment in December 2014 to take action not only against illegal weapons supplies but also to reduce its own arms exports. "Meeting these obligations is the litmus test of the coherence of German policy for a sustainable and just world."⁸ The emphasis on arms control in the German government's new guidelines document "Crisis Management and Promotion of Peace", adopted in summer 2017 is still only verbally existent. New legislative initiatives in this area are not yet envisaged. On EU level, an urgent measure would be to make the already existing Code of Conduct on arms exports mandatory and binding to the European Court of Human Rights.

In the wake of what has been regarded as the „refugee crisis“ (since 2015) the German government's policy has become more genuinely interested in a „New Africa policy“ which could if handled with care become an appropriate portfolio for focusing more on the SDG agenda. So far, there is an assumption prevailing of a basic harmony between German or European security interests and the life interests of people in Africa. However, a new Africa policy must also answer the question to what extent such a harmony of interests does actually exist, how durable it is and how perceptible disharmonies or conflicting interests should be handled. Migration and asylum policies, for instance, lie directly at the interface of domestic/national and foreign/international policy and are therefore of elementary significance for the challenge to take action in a sustainable way. The ideas to combat the causes of flight – to which, for example, wars in the Middle East and climate change occurring in the Sahel are contributing for decades – by building reception camps in the countries bordering the southern Mediterranean and using military force to compensate for the fragile statehood of the Sahel countries contradict eminently the spirit of the sustainability agenda. This approach not only has no prospect of success, instead may worsen the problems in a dramatic fashion.

The links between sustainability and peace are touched upon in a critical way by the involvements of the German army to enhance military capacities in so called weak states („Ertüchtigung“), and combine these efforts with development goals. The Ombudsman for the German armed forces, Hans Peter Bartels, and the head of the German Armed Forces Association, André Wüstner, discovered parallels between the German armed forces mission in Mali and in Afghanistan. "In operational terms little can be seen of a comprehensive approach," says Wüstner, who adds, "I am concerned that on an ongoing basis the same mistakes will be made as in Afghanistan: aimless expenditure of development funds, poor coordination between departments, coupled with illusions of what is

⁸ Forum Menschenrechte, Forum Umwelt und Entwicklung, Venro et al.: Noch lange nicht nachhaltig. Deutschland und die UN-Nachhaltigkeitsagenda, 2016, p. 116.

achievable. and exaggerated expectations.”⁹ The credibility of sustainable development is undermined when military action is becoming so dominant. Instead, German and EU foreign policies should reinstate und further develop diplomacy concepts including exploring and investing in new roads for mediation in violent conflicts; that would be considered a appropriate contribution to profile the targets of SDG 16.

Let me conclude on a skeptical but nonetheless optimistic note:

The complexity of the SDGs, and in particular the one formulated with the SDG 16 Goal for Peace, may be a big challenge and in some areas too far reaching, at this point in time. But the fact that such an ambitious agenda for international collaboration was agreed upon in the context of the UN, even in times of increasing crises and use of military force, may indicate the potential of cooperation on common goods against the threatening horizons of egotism and hostility.

I am convinced though that the „soft“ agendas of sustainability need urgently be complemented by the dealing with the „hard ware“ issues sitting in the immense stockpiles of old and new weapons all over the world. With his recent initiative of May 2018, the United Nations chief Antonio Guterres announced a bold new vision for global disarmament, to help eliminate nuclear arsenals and other deadly weapons from a world that is just “one mechanical, electronic and human error away” from destruction.¹⁰ The SDGs need to be put in this context rather than running on a parallel track.

Further reading

Lothar Brock/Corinna Hauswedell, *Between global consensus building and blinkered nationalism: The significance of the UN sustainability agenda for peace*, in: Bruno Schoch/Jochen Hippler/Corinna Hauswedell/Andreas Heinemann-Grüder/ Margret Johannsen (eds.): *Peace Report 2017, A Selection of Texts*, Münster/ Wien/Zürich 2017, pp 82-93

Tobias Debiel/Institut für Entwicklung und Frieden (Ed.), *Entwicklungspolitik in Zeiten der SDGs*, Essays zum 80. Geburtstag von Franz Nuscheler, Duisburg/Bonn 2018

Websites on monitoring SDG 16:

<https://reliefweb.int/report/world/sdg16-progress-report-comprehensive-global-audit-progress-available-sdg16-indicators>

<http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/blog/2017/4/4/Monitoring-implementation-of-SDG16-for-peaceful-just-and-inclusive-societies.html>

⁹ tagesschau.de: “Gefährlichster Einsatz der UN,” December 19, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/zye7ggv>.

¹⁰ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/05/1010551>