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Transforming our world? Discursive representation in the negotiations on the Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

Calls to advance the democratization of sustainable development negotiations have recently proliferated. However, the participatory schemes set up by international organizations and governments have fallen short of answering to academic and empirical demands for global democracy, in particular by excluding the most marginalized actors from policymaking. Deliberative democrats argue that discursive representation may, in some contexts, overcome the shortcomings of actor-based representation and advance global democracy. To what extent, then, does discursive representation effectively contribute to the democratization of global policymaking by representing diverse interests, including those of marginalized actors? By performing a qualitative–quantitative discourse analysis of 122 primary documents issued during the formal sessions of negotiations of the Open Working Group on the Sustainable Development Goals, this article explores the extent to which different sustainability discourses that evolve in the public space got represented within authoritative circles of decision-making. While the negotiations on the Sustainable Development Goals involved more than ten million civil society voices and resulted in an agreement that claims to "transform our world" and "leave no-one behind," the study shows that discursive representation was biased toward a progressive sustainability discourse, depicting a state-centric orientation of equity and responsibilities to address global sustainable development challenges. Besides, the coalitions that emerged between state and non-state actors on alternative sustainability discourses failed to increase the saliency of the interests of marginalized actors in the shaping of the goals. As the understandings of transformation and inclusiveness conveyed in the negotiations were biased toward the interests of the most represented actors in the Open Working Group, the article reveals that in the context of the negotiations on the Sustainable Development Goals the effectiveness of discursive representation in democratizing global policymaking was eventually limited.

Keywords Discursive representation · Global democracy · Sustainable Development Goals · Inclusiveness · Civil society · Discourse analysis

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Abbreviations

CBDR	Common but differentiated responsibilities
IGO	Intergovernmental organization
ILO	International labor organization
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OWG	Open working group
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations

1 Introduction

The prospects for global democracy are increasingly receiving attention from scholars and political reformers alike. While communitarians (Dahl 1999; Kymlicka 1999), realists (Cerny 2009), and radicals (Cox 1996; Burbach et al. 1997) question the relevance, the possibility, and even the desirability of democratizing global governance on theoretical, institutional, historical, and ethical grounds, other theories have provided different models of how democracy ought to be realized at the global level. Cosmopolitans, for instance, envision a global parliament directly elected by world citizens and to which all global institutions would be accountable (Held 1995; Falk and Strauss 2011; Monbiot 2003). Proponents of democratic intergovernmentalism argue that democratic legitimacy in the global arena is derived from intergovernmental negotiations among democratic sovereign states, based, for instance, on an international law of peoples (Rawls 1999). Deliberative democrats consider that political decisions are legitimate expressions of the collective will of the people when they result from public deliberation, free from the distortions caused by differences in power, resources, and capabilities (Dingwerth 2007; Dryzek 2006, 2010). While based on different tenets, all include some degree of representation. Conventionally defined as "substantive acting for others" (Pitkin 1967), representation may be captured in terms of the actors or the discourses to which they subscribe. To date, empirical materializations of global democracy are often based on actor representation and include an institutionalized involvement of non-state actors (Biermann and Gupta 2011).

However, actor-based representation falls short of achieving global democracy as envisioned in democratic intergovernmentalism and cosmopolitan democracy. First, scholars question the efficiency of democratic intergovernmentalism in ameliorating the global democratic deficit as this model provides civil society with a limited, passive role in achieving global democracy, with participation often biased toward powerful civil society organizations based in the Global North (Dingwerth 2007; Scholte 2002; Sénit et al. 2017). As for cosmopolitan democracy, which is grounded on the representation of citizens in a global parliament, its critics argue that it could eventually alienate citizen from world politics, especially if the global institutions that cosmopolitans call for only have a consultative power (Bray and Slaughter 2015). A representative "politics of presence" is therefore an imperfect fit to advance democratization in world politics (Phillips 1998).

In turn, some deliberative democrats advance that discursive representation has the potential to redeem the promise of global democracy when the participation or representation of all affected by a collective decision is infeasible (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008: 481). It is not the types of individuals that need to be represented, but instead the discourses that frame perspectives and positions on complex issues. Hajer and Versteeg (2005: 175) define a discourse as "an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to social and political phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices." Deliberative democrats argue that free and unconstrained deliberation is capable of integrating the interests and perspectives of diverse actors (delegates, activists, scientists, and others) concerned with different aspects of complex sustainability issues, and enlarging the perspectives of participants by bringing to mind those not physically present, such as civil society actors from the Global South, the global poor, future generations, and non-humans (Goodin 1996; Schlosberg 2014). To what extent, then, does discursive representation effectively contribute to the democratization of global policymaking by representing diverse interests, including those of marginalized actors? This article explores the extent to which different sustainability discourses that evolve in the public space got represented within authoritative circles of decision-making and by whom. This is important because by tracing whether a linguistic regularity can be found in these circles, discourse analysis is expected to deepen our understanding of the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion from global policymaking.

This article analyzes discursive representation in the negotiations that resulted in a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), aiming at nothing less than "transforming our world," for mainly two reasons. First, these negotiations have been hailed as the largest democratic experiment ever conducted in a global framework with extensive provisions for non-state participation that eventually involved ten million voices (Kamau et al. 2018). And yet, recent research has shown that such participation was skewed toward powerful actors and inconsequential (Gellers 2016; Sénit et al. 2017; Sénit 2020). Second, the indivisibility and the universality of the SDGs might instigate a more radical revisioning of development as a transformative project of global sustainability (Death and Gabay 2015). As deliberative democrats advance that free and unconstrained deliberation is capable of bringing to mind marginalized people and disrupting structural historical forces by changing the relative weight of different discourses (Dryzek and Pickering 2018), SDG negotiations are therefore a good test case to assess whether discursive representation has the potential to redeem the promise of global democracy.

I have organized the article as follows. The next section introduces the SDGs negotiations and my methodology, including the variables operationalizing discursive representation. In the sections thereafter, I empirically evaluate discursive representation in the SDGs negotiations. The final section concludes the analysis.

2 The negotiations on the Sustainable Development Goals

The SDGs negotiations started in the run-up to the 2012 United Nations (UN) Conference on Sustainable Development, where governments agreed to launch "an inclusive and transparent intergovernmental process open to the involvement of all relevant stakeholders" (UN 2012). To this end, the UN General Assembly established in January 2013 an Open Working Group on SDGs (the OWG) composed of 30 seats, most of which were shared by groups from two to four countries called "troikas." Co-chaired by the Ambassadors of Kenya and Hungary to the UN, the OWG's work was divided into two phases: a stock-taking phase between March 2013 and February 2014, where governments focused on content generation, and a negotiating phase between March and July 2014. The Group submitted in 2014 a proposal containing 17 SDGs that were eventually adopted by governments in September 2015 (Kanie and Biermann 2017).

This article analyzes discourses in official documents issued during formal OWG sessions. Rather than studying how discursive representation evolved throughout the negotiations, I focus on the stock-taking phase of the OWG. Arguably, studying the extent to which each of the discourses is eventually represented in the final agreement of the SDGs negotiations would shed light on the democratic quality of global politics. However, I am less interested in this article in studying the outcome of deliberation. Instead, I focus on the process that leads to the outcome to study whether global politics are able to represent differences, as expressed in the variety of discourses present in policymaking. As democratic quality is to be found in contestations that derive from the exchange of arguments based on the rational-communicative ideal of deliberation, I argue that different discourses in the OWG negotiations are most likely to be found in the early stock-taking phase, when participants deliberated on issue-framing.

This study targets the OWG sessions that discussed goals with a dominant environmental dimension, including SDG7 on energy (OWG5, 25–27 November 2013), SDG12 on sustainable consumption and production and SDG13 on climate change (OWG7, 6–10 January 2014), and SDG14 and SDG15 on oceans and biodiversity (OWG8, 3–7 February 2014). I selected these SDGs because as the state of the global environment is at the edge of reaching dangerous ecological tipping points (e.g., land-use change, greenhouse gases concentration, biodiversity loss, and ocean acidification) (Steffen et al. 2015), there has been much debate about how to reconcile the environment with social welfare and economic development to successfully operationalize sustainable development (Stevenson 2015). Such debates have produced diverse discourses on environmental sustainability. Although we cannot qualify the SDG process as fully unconstrained and deliberative, I argue that the OWG negotiations still showcased some degree of deliberation and can be analyzed in discursive terms for two reasons. First, the OWG troikas broke down traditional negotiating blocks and forced countries that were not used to work together to develop joint statements, which implied prior deliberation (Kamau et al. 2018: 129). Second, non-state actors were able to give presentations on the issue area discussed on that day, followed by deliberative interaction with governments and observers, which fosters reflection upon different views.

Participation of non-state actors in the United Nations is organized through the Major Group system, which facilitates the representation of nine constituency groups in global sustainability negotiations, ranging from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and women to business actors and local authorities. In this article, I understand non-state actors as comprising civil society groups on the one hand, and business entities on the other hand. Civil society actors include the following seven Major Groups: children and youth, farmers, indigenous peoples, NGOs, scientific community, women, and workers and trade unions. Admittedly, these groups are diverse and may express different concerns. However, I merged these actors into one civil society category as the preferences of these Major Groups are often aligned and even grouped into one joint civil society statement. Business entities are defined as a separate category: the private sectors, as well as Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs), national, subnational, and local governments, are the established circles of power and authority, whereas civil society actors, denied of such authority, claim rights to these authoritative circles. Acknowledging that the democratization of global politics can be achieved through various means, such as a balanced representation of state and non-state actors, or a balanced representation of the Global North and Global South, I mainly focus in this article on the capacity of civil society actors, who are partly marginalized and struggle to preserve their participatory space, to act as “discourse entrepreneurs” and form coalitions with state actors to advance the standing of particular discourses from the public space to authoritative circles of decision-making (Dryzek and Pickering 2018).

I assess discursive representation in the SDGs negotiations with empirical data drawn out from primary documents. These include the briefs issued by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs to frame the negotiations, the statements and position papers delivered by governments, civil society, and business during the OWG sessions, and the summaries of the OWG sessions prepared by the co-chairs. I retrieved 122 documents (also referred to as *texts*) from the UN website (UN 2014), originating from six groups of actors: the OWG co-chairs (4 texts), IGOs (9 texts), developed countries (40 texts), developing countries (44 texts), civil society (22 texts), and the business sector (3 texts).[1] Acknowledging that a comprehensive discursive analysis of the SDGs negotiations should include other sources of qualitative data to increase the validity of the results (i.e., field observation, interviews with key actors), the analysis of primary documents still provides relevant insights on discursive representation in these negotiations.

Building on the work of deliberative democrats, I operationalize discursive representation into two variables. First, discursive diversity refers to the extent to which negotiations expressed competing viewpoints about sustainability. Second, inter-discourse engagement indicates the extent to which an actor engaged in multiple discourses to ensure the representation of the many subjectivities of its constituency. I discuss their precise operationalization below.

2.1 Discursive diversity

The variable of discursive diversity refers to the relative representation of competing sustainability discourses in the negotiations. Sustainability means different things to different people, and the concept of sustainable development has led to a diversity of discourses that legitimize competing sociopolitical projects. Although they may label them differently, global environmental governance scholars have identified a comprehensive set of discourses within the public space that mostly convey four sustainability frames (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand 2006; Clapp and Dauvergne 2011; Hajer 1995; Stevenson and Dryzek 2014). Building on Stevenson and Dryzek, this article labels those framings as mainstream sustainability, progressive sustainability, a limits discourse, and radical sustainability. I argue that these discourses should also be represented in authoritative spaces of decision-making to advance global democracy. While intergovernmental negotiations are only one space where different framings of sustainability interact, assessing discursive diversity in formal decision-making is important for evaluating the democratic character of global policymaking, and in particular the permeability of authoritative spaces of decision-making to the discourses that evolve in the public space (Hajer and Versteeg 2005; Stevenson and Dryzek 2012). I expect the more diverse and competing the substance of the negotiations, the more inclusive the negotiations (Dryzek 2000).

Building on Stevenson and Dryzek (2014), I introduce the four discourses below, differentiating them along their conservative or reformist relationship to the global economy and political institutions. A conservative economic orientation indicates that sustainability challenges can be addressed within the existing parameters of the global liberal economic system, whereas a reformist economic orientation seeks an overhaul of these parameters. A conservative political orientation indicates that the solutions to address sustainability challenges can be designed and enacted within existing institutions and power structures, while a reformist approach seeks a redistribution of power within global sustainability governance. Expanding Stevenson and Dryzek's framework, I further qualify discourses according to their relationship to the natural world and to the types of instruments and actors that should lead the transformation toward sustainability.

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[1] Although the set of statements delivered by all stakeholders during the negotiations was not available in its entirety on the UN website (e.g., some troikas did not send their statements to the OWG Secretariat), I could retrieve a broad sample enough to present relevant insights into the discursive representation of the SDGs negotiations. Besides, the retrieved texts were all available in a language in which I am proficient (English, French, and Spanish).

First, *mainstream sustainability* is a conservative approach on both economic and political terms. This discourse accepts that action to reverse environmental degradation is necessary; however, transformation toward sustainability can only be defined within the existing parameters of the global economy by actors and institutions already endowed with power and authority. Values of economic and material growth are central and deemed compatible with environmental sustainability, which can be achieved through decoupling growth from resource use. Action toward environmental sustainability only needs greater political will and economic incentives to fully deliver. Markets are the leading agent of transformation, although governments may also have a role in steering the market toward sustainability. Solutions to steer such transformation include market-based instruments and continued improvements in technology and efficiency to advance industrialization and increase GDP, profits, and jobs. Finally, mainstream sustainability contemplates human and natural worlds as external to one another, whereby nature is commodified to provide economies with services and benefits to sustain growth.

Second, *progressive sustainability* is an economically conservative, yet politically reformist approach. Sustainable development is still centered on economic growth, which is deemed compatible with environmental sustainability. However, human well-being and development can only be achieved through a redistribution of power to even out inequalities between developed and developing countries. In this discourse, both governments and civil society are the leading actors of transformation toward more sustainable and equitable societies, with a mix of policy solutions that include economic incentives and command-and-control measures such as publicly funded technology transfer, direct investments to developing countries, or emissions and energy efficiency standards. Finally, nature is conceived as external to human societies and commodified to sustain growth, while its conservation is deemed essential to secure development gains.

Third, a *limits discourse* is an economically reformist, yet politically conservative approach to sustainability. Here, environmental sustainability is not deemed compatible with existing neoliberal development, unconstrained economic growth, and material consumption. A limits discourse thus calls for a radical reorientation of the economy, yet without requiring a redistribution of power in global politics. Transformative solutions toward environmental sustainability can be implemented by existing authorities or through the voluntary actions of non-state actors toward behavioral change. Like progressive sustainability, governments and civil society are leading transformation toward a more frugal economy. Additionally, human societies are integrated in an overarching natural world, on which they are highly dependent. It recognizes the existence of ecological limits that will necessarily constrain human development, both economically and demographically.

Fourth, *radical sustainability* is a transformative approach seeking to break with existing global economic and political structures. It advocates for an overhaul of current growth-based, environmentally damaging economies and societies, for a reform of distant and marginalizing political institutions, and for small-scale community development that strives for human rights, equity, and justice. This encompasses a redistribution of power from governments and markets to civil society and citizens. Therefore, civil society, specifically social and environmental movements, are considered the leading agents of transformation toward sustainability. Transformative solutions may be rights-based, with a legal framework recognizing human socioeconomic rights and the rights of nature, or encompass collaborative or disruptive grassroots initiatives (e.g., partnerships, boycotts). Radical sustainability recognizes the existence of ecological limits and considers human societies as highly integrated in and interconnected with nature, and personifies nature.

I evaluate discursive diversity with two indicators to determine which of the four sustainability discourses was most (and least) represented in the SDGs negotiations. The first indicator evaluates the respective weight of a conservative or reformist orientation to global economic and political structures in the negotiations. The second indicator counts the occurrences of the most characteristic terminology associated with these orientations.

I drew out this terminology from the existing literature (Dryzek and Stevenson 2011; Stevenson and Dryzek 2014) and from reviewing the different texts delivered in the negotiations. For instance, “economic growth,” “green economy,” “green growth,” and “industrialization” reflect a conservative approach to the global economy and are associated with mainstream or progressive sustainability. Conversely, “environmental justice,” “ecological debt,” and “Mother Earth,” or the concepts of “sufficiency economy” and “Buen Vivir,” which call for an overhaul of current capitalist modes of production and consumption, reflect a reformist approach to the global economy and express discourses of limits or radical sustainability. Finally, “human rights,” “well-being,” and “equity” reflect a reformist approach to the global political order and express progressive or radical sustainability. Although these lists are non-exhaustive, assessing the occurrences of selected words still provides relevant insights into the diversity of sustainability discourses in global policymaking.

I assessed discursive diversity using a two-step qualitative and quantitative approach. First, I read and assessed the 122 texts delivered by governments, IGOs, business, and civil society in the OWG and available on the UN website to determine whether they represented mainstream, progressive, limits, or radical sustainability. Specifically, I attributed codes to different segments of each text, considering whether they expressed a conservative or reformist orientation to the global economic and political order, and I counted the number of text segments that related to either one of these orientations. Depending on which economic and political orientations collected the most text segments, I determined which discourse was most expressed in the text. I systematically used this approach for each text and could eventually count the number of texts that expressed mainstream, progressive, limits, or radical sustainability. To complement and validate the first step, I then processed the texts into a statistical textual analysis software[2] to assess the frequency of the use of specific terminology associated with the four discourses.

2.2 Inter-discourse engagement

The variable of *inter-discourse engagement* seeks to indicate the extent to which an actor or group of actors engages in multiple discourses. Here, I assume that discourses do not only serve as proxies for people: indeed, individuals do not embody a fixed set of discourses but rather a variable set of discourses that can alter over time, including in deliberation across

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[2] The software Iramuteq identifies different lexical clusters in the text database through a statistical study of word frequency and distribution within the corpus (Reinert 1983).

Table 1 Discursive representation in the negotiations on the SDGs

Variables	Results
Discursive diversity	Relationship to the global economy: conservative Relationship to the global political order: reformist, yet with a narrow, state-centric understanding of equity Most represented discourse(s): progressive sustainability (70% of texts) Least represented discourse(s): radical sustainability (6% of texts) and a limits discourse (2% of texts)
Inter-discourse engagement	Uneven to low Mainstream sustainability is specific to business (100% of texts from these actors) and developed countries (55%) Progressive sustainability is specific to developing countries (97%) and IGOs (85%) Radical sustainability and a limits discourse are specific to civil society (36 and 6% of texts, respectively)

discourses. Building on Dryzek and Niemeyer's ontological justification for discursive representation, I argue that holistic representation requires representatives to engage in the multiple discourses that people inhabit (2008: 482–484). If inter-discourse engagement is high and actors engage in different discourses, cross-constituency discourse coalitions are likely to emerge; these discourse coalitions may advance the representation of the ideas and concepts of the most marginalized actors in the negotiations, thus enhancing global democratization in discursive terms. In other words, this variable suggests that by sharing a discourse, actors, including the most marginalized, can become a powerful force in global policymaking.

I used two indicators to document inter-discourse engagement. First, I assessed discursive specificity, that is, whether an actor or group of actors was more likely to advance one discourse in preference to the other discourses. I informed this indicator by counting the number of texts per type of actor relating to the four sustainability discourses. To do so, I tagged the 122 texts included in this study with an actor criterion (e.g., governments, IGOs, the co-chairs of the negotiations, business, and civil society) to disaggregate the number of texts that relate to mainstream, progressive, limits, or radical sustainability by the actors that delivered them in the negotiations. High discursive specificity indicates that inter-discourse engagement is low.

Second, I assessed whether an actor or group of actors was more likely to use specific terminology associated with one or the other discourse. I disaggregated the occurrences of specific terminology associated with the four discourses by actors, before coding each text according to the actor that originated it within the statistical textual analysis software. I then used the Chi-squared level (χ^2), a metric determined by the software showing the statistical link between the word occurrences and the actor to which the text segment is attributed. A positive χ^2 indicates that the word is mobilized extensively by the actor, while a negative χ^2 indicates that the word is least likely to be mobilized by the actor. Conversely, a χ^2 close to zero indicates that the use of a word is not specific to the actor. Therefore, the closer to zero the χ^2, the higher inter-discourse engagement.

The following section provides a detailed analysis of discursive representation in the SDGs negotiations (see Table 1 for an overview of the results). The first subsection focuses on discursive diversity of the overall corpus of texts; therefore, quotes do not indicate the actor that originated the text. Then, the second subsection inserts back an actor criterion to analyze whether the (lack of) representation of discourses is actor-(in)dependent. This allowed me to test whether discursive representation succeeded in accommodating diverse interests, including those of marginalized actors.

3 Discursive representation in the negotiations on the Sustainable Development Goals

3.1 Discursive diversity

The SDGs negotiations mostly expressed a conservative approach with respect to global economic structures, and a reformist orientation to global political institutions. I detail the representation of the four discourses below.

3.1.1 Mainstream sustainability

Mainstream sustainability, characterized by a conservative orientation to the global economy and political institutions, represented 22% of the texts delivered in the SDGs negotiations.

Economically, the negotiations consistently emphasized the need to sustain economic growth and envisioned environmental sustainability as one of the means to achieve that goal. In this view, the existing liberal economic system, based on material growth, profit, and competition, is compatible with environmental sustainability policies whenever these encompass a decoupling of productivity, pollution, and resource use. The energy discussions called for the following solutions to “ensure economic growth in a low-carbon economy: concentrate on clean energy deployment as a key sector; price carbon to fund economic development and just transition; equip workers with the skills needed to compete in a 21st century economy” (UN 2014). Similarly, the discussions on a climate goal emphasized the market opportunity that a shift toward climate-resilient growth and a low-carbon economy would bring about, stressing that “addressing climate change is necessary to promote sustainable economic growth and protect development gains” (UN 2014).

Such co-benefits between environmental sustainability and economic growth were also reflected in the measures discussed to promote sustainable patterns of consumption and production, which would allow leapfrogging to a more resource-efficient, profitable, and cleaner growth, whenever such growth is decoupled from resource use and environmental degradation. Such conception was also reflected in the discussions on biodiversity, which highlighted the need to preserve the health of ecosystems to keep producing services essential to sustain economic growth. As a result, the SDGs negotiations mostly conveyed a relationship to the natural world based on externality, whereby nature is primarily conceived as a resource that provides services for the benefit of economic growth and development, such as illustrated in the corpus:

> Biodiversity is a vital asset in global and local economies. […] The world’s fisheries employ more than 180 million people, with the global marine fish catch worth US$ 70 to 80 billion per year. Overall, marine ecosystem services are valued at US $4.5–6.7 trillion annually (UN 2014).

Overall, the SDGs negotiations showed a widespread mobilization of terms like “economic growth,” “green economy,” or “green growth” (129 occurrences), which further demonstrates that the negotiations conveyed a conservative approach to the global economy.

Politically, however, the conservative orientation toward global political institutions that characterizes mainstream sustainability was poorly represented in the SDGs negotiations. This ultimately explains the limited representation of mainstream sustainability. Although these negotiations stressed that actors and institutions already endowed with power and authority remain essential to address global environmental sustainability challenges, only 27 texts out of 122 underlined that existing institutions and norms should not be reformed to promote a more equalizing world order.

3.1.2 Progressive sustainability

Progressive sustainability held a dominant position in the SDGs negotiations, with 70% of the texts expressing such a discourse. Economically, the view that progressive sustainability accepts the neoliberal parameters of the global economy was highly salient in the negotiations. Conversely to mainstream sustainability, however, progressive sustainability calls for a reform of existing institutions and norms dealing with environmental sustainability with an equalizing objective.

Progressive sustainability was reflected in the framing of the issues and solutions related to energy, sustainable consumption and production, climate action, and biodiversity. For instance, the discussions on energy depicted access to secure and affordable energy as a catalyst for improving health and transportation services, promoting education, combating poverty and hunger, and improving livelihoods and shared prosperity. These discussions insisted on the equity considerations of energy access, which, when unequal, represents a serious constraint on inclusive development. Similarly, the discussions on sustainable consumption and production referred to current unsustainable, inequitable, and unbalanced global consumption patterns as a constraint to inclusive development efforts. Indeed, if existing institutions and norms do not catalyze ambitious action to depart from a business-as-usual scenario, the most marginalized actors will have increasing difficulties to access scarcer and more expensive natural resources, thus exacerbating existing inequalities. The following excerpt illustrates this approach:

> [One of the key issues] to framing our approach to SCP [sustainable consumption and production] is the sheer inequity in the consumption of world’s resources. […] 1.2 billion people living in extreme poverty account for only 1% of world’s consumption of resources, while the richest 1 billion people consume 72%. The ecological footprint in developed countries increased from 3.8 global hectares in 1961 to 5.3 global hectares in 2007, representing an increase of 39%. In contrast, the per capita ecological footprint in developing countries over the same period increased by 28% from 1.4 to 1.8 global hectares (UN 2014).

This framing resulted in calls to establish “a new political and economic architecture […] to promote values of social inclusion, equity and solidarity” (UN 2014).

The discussions on a climate goal also pictured the consequences of climate change (i.e., sea level rise and extreme weather events) as threats to inclusive and equitable development. As those who suffer from climate change impacts contribute the least to the global concentration of greenhouse gas emissions, one of the rationales for climate action conveyed in the discussions was the restoration of equity. Similarly, the discussions on biodiversity emphasized the positive correlation between the unsustainable management of natural resources, and poverty and inequality aggravation. The solutions contemplated to address environmental sustainability challenges reflected such equity considerations. Publicly funded technology and knowledge transfer were consistently emphasized to reduce inequalities, as well as the principle of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR)[3] in addressing climate change and promoting sustainable consumption and production.

Progressive sustainability was also reflected in the penetration of specific terminology related to a reformist approach of the global political order toward equalization. The SDGs negotiations indeed showed a widespread use of terms such as "well-being" (72 occurrences) and "peoples' livelihoods" (73 occurrences), as well as "equality" and "equity" (80 occurrences), which emphasize the need to promote inclusive development.

Interestingly, multi-stakeholder "partnerships" (29 occurrences) or "participation" in policymaking and implementation (22 occurrences) were significantly less mobilized in the negotiations, even though the sustainability arena has been identified in the literature as being particularly conducive to collaborative governance (Andonova 2010; Benner et al. 2004; Pattberg and Widerberg 2016). As one would expect in such an intergovernmental UN setting based on state membership, the political orientation of SDGs negotiations was typically state-centric, with mild recognition of the importance of inclusive representation, participation, and empowerment of a broader range of non-state actors in global policymaking, such as local communities, indigenous peoples, youth, and NGOs, as well as future generations and non-humans. As a result, the SDGs negotiations mainly expressed the view that public authorities should lead the transformation toward environmental sustainability. Here, the role of public authorities is central and goes beyond the mere regulation of the market, as regulations (e.g., emissions standards), publicly funded technology, and knowledge transfer are emphasized to address inequalities of existing power structures and respond to global environmental challenges. This approach highly resonates with Maarten Hajer's concept of "cockpit-ism" which he defines as the illusion that top-down steering by governments and IGOs alone can address global sustainability problems. He and his co-authors have argued that although key documents of the SDGs process, including the OWG's draft proposal, do refer to the importance of the active involvement of all relevant stakeholders, they address some of these stakeholders such as business, cities, and civil society only to a limited extent (Hajer et al. 2015).

3.1.3 A limits discourse

Only 2% of the texts in the SDGs negotiations expressed a discourse that emphasizes the need to reorient society to stay within safe planetary limits.

Economically, a limits discourse in the SDGs negotiations either explicitly mentioned that an economy based on accumulation and profit is not compatible with environmental sustainability, or advocated for solutions to address sustainability challenges that imply a fundamental reorientation of economic development. These include, for instance, a strict cap on the use of depletable resources, as well as the allocation of a non-transferable share of the global footprint by person and country to contain and reduce human's impact on its environment.

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[3] Originally developed in climate negotiations, this international law principle suggests that all countries bear a responsibility in global environmental challenges, but recognizes historical differences in the contributions of developed and developing countries to global environmental issues, and differences in their respective economic and technical capacity to tackle these issues.

In addition, alternative concepts based on a reform of neoliberal global economic structures were almost absent from the discussions. For example, there are only two references to a sufficient economy, which promotes an economic development based on moderation and self-sufficiency. Similarly, a discourse that calls for development that is not growth, rejecting GDP (4 occurrences) as the only indicator to measure human progress and considering the ecological footprint (13 occurrences) or planetary boundaries (10 occurrences), was underrepresented.

Politically, the idea that existing institutions and norms are considered adequate to reorient development away from a growth-based model was underrepresented. The discussions that conveyed a limits discourse particularly emphasized state action, within the framework of existing international governance arrangements, to steer transformation toward frugal societies.

3.1.4 Radical sustainability

Finally, radical sustainability was represented in the SDGs negotiations, yet to a very limited extent. Only 6% of the texts called for an overhaul of the existing liberal economic system beyond a primary focus on economic growth, while also urging for reformed political institutions that promote equity not only between countries but also to a broader range of actors, including non-state actors, future generations, and non-humans.

The texts that expressed radical sustainability seek a fundamental shift of economic development away from material consumption, competition, and growth. For instance, the discussions on energy stated there is a "need [for] leadership to transition from a growth-focused economy, one that obsesses over profit at the expense of the Earth, to a just, equitable, and sustainable economy with a world dependent on sustainable energy" (UN 2014).

However, as previously argued, such reformist approach to the global economy was underrepresented. For instance, there was only one reference to the Buen Vivir concept, which calls for an ecologically balanced and culturally sensitive community-based development that promotes harmony between human beings and nature. An economy based on this concept would require a significant overhaul of capitalist modes of production and consumption, based on a substantial reduction of consumption and the development of small-scale production.

Politically, the reorientation of current economic development requires a redistribution of power, from the global and governmental level to the local and non-governmental level, to allow for genuine participation by marginalized and affected people, as typified in the following:

> The TPP [Trans-Pacific Partnership] and other state-driven investment agreements continue to alienate us from our indigenous lands by binding us to transnational corporations through agreements signed by the state of Chile, and not by the Rapa Nui people who are the proper rights-holders. (UN 2014)

Similarly, this approach rejects market-based instruments because they further marginalize locally affected civil society actors from policymaking and implementation. For instance, the corpus mentions that "financialization of biodiversity threatens communities […] because it turns nature and land into financial, tradeable assets and because it favors institutions and wealthy landowners best able to maneuver and exploit complex financial markets" (UN 2014).

However, the reform toward a more equitable global political order that a radical sustainability discourse endeavors was poorly represented in the SDGs negotiations. Even though most texts in SDGs negotiations called for a reorientation of existing institutions and norms to even out inequalities, they conveyed a narrow vision of equity according to which equalization should primarily be fostered between developed and developing countries, through the equity principle of CBDR. Conversely, a broader understanding of equity that recognizes the importance of the participation or representation of a larger number of actors (e.g., global poor, non-state actors, non-humans) in developing effective responses to global sustainability challenges was almost absent from the negotiations.

Finally, the underrepresentation of radical sustainability is reflected in the framing of the relationship to the natural world. Indeed, a conception of a non-hierarchical relationship between humans and nature, whereby societies are integrated into and interconnected with a holistic natural world, was poorly reflected. For instance, "ecosystem services," which refer to the benefits people obtain from the use of ecosystems (i.e., food and water provision, flood and disease control, recreational and cultural benefits) and depicts a relationship between human and natural worlds based on externality, are mentioned 67 times throughout the corpus. Conversely, the expressions "ecosystem approach"[4] (9 occurrences), "global commons" (12 occurrences), or "Mother Earth" (4 occurrences), which reflect integration, are significantly less present.

In sum, discursive diversity in the SDGs negotiations was limited. A progressive sustainability discourse dominated the discussions on environmental goals. Most of the texts did not question the existing parameters of the global economy, whereby development is essentially growth-based and nature is external to human societies. Additionally, most of the texts called for a reorientation of the global political order that evens out inequalities between developed and developing countries to achieve environmental sustainability, yet with limited recognition of the need to foster vertical equalization between different stakeholders.

Beyond the underrepresentation or overrepresentation of certain discourses lies another critical question which informs whether the SDGs negotiations were discursively democratic: have IGOs, governments, civil society, and business engaged in different discourses on sustainability? The next section addresses this question by assessing inter-discourse engagement.

3.2 Inter-discourse engagement

I found that inter-discourse engagement, that is, how much actors individually or collectively engaged in different discourses, was uneven in the SDGs negotiations: while most actors engaged in progressive sustainability, the other discourses were actor-specific. Business, and to a lesser extent, developed countries, mainly engaged in mainstream sustainability. All the texts from business actors reflected mainstream sustainability, while more than half of the texts from developed countries reflected this discourse. Conversely, <5% of the texts from developing countries and civil society expressed mainstream sustainability.

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[4] The ecosystem approach is an integrated management strategy that promotes the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources in an equitable way, and that recognizes that humans are an integral component of ecosystems.

Therefore, a coalition between business and developed countries emerged to advance the framing of the transition toward environmental sustainability as an opportunity to foster economic growth. For instance, statements from business actors presented solutions to ensure long-lasting economic growth in a low-carbon economy, such as "the scaling up and implementation of development, commercialization, and widespread dissemination of technologies and innovative services" (UN 2014). Similarly, statements delivered by the European Union consistently emphasized the co-benefits, in terms of wealth and job creation, that the transition to ecologically sustainable economies would bring about. Statements delivered by the United States, Canada, and Israel also emphasized the role of the private sector as the leading agent responsible to foster technology improvements and innovation, both considered critical to catalyze such transition.

A progressive sustainability discourse was mostly mobilized by developing countries (97% of texts) and IGOs (89%), and to a lesser extent, civil society (54%). However, it was least mobilized by business, as none of their texts expressed progressive sustainability, and to a lesser extent by developed countries (45%). Most stakeholders thus concurred on the fact that environmental sustainability and economic growth are compatible, though a redistribution of power is necessary to achieve an equalizing and inclusive human development.

The principle of equity, central to the discourse of progressive sustainability, was highly salient in the discussions on climate, sustainable consumption and production, and biodiversity. Specifically, civil society and developing countries consistently referred to the equity principle of CBDR to even out inequalities in the current global political order. For instance, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka frequently stated that "any international response to climate change must be in full accordance with the principles of equity and CBDR" (UN 2014). Conversely, statements from developed countries (e.g., the United States, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the European Union) advocated that the equity principle of CBDR should not be applied to the SDGs negotiations.

The participation of non-state actors in policymaking is another key feature of progressive sustainability. However, it was more frequently mobilized by civil society, with 17 out of 22 references throughout the corpus, than by developed or developing countries who advocated for higher inclusion of non-state actors in decision-making in only five texts. These include two statements from developed countries (e.g., the troikas of Montenegro and Slovenia; France, Germany, and Switzerland) and three statements from developing countries (e.g., the Pacific Small-Islands Developing States and the troikas of Brazil and Nicaragua; Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador). This confirms that the equalization of the global political order conveyed in the SDGs negotiations was mostly horizontal, encompassing a reduction of inequalities primarily between states, with little recognition of the importance of empowering a broader range of actors. As recent research has shown, rather than being used as a means of contestation and democratization in policymaking, participation in the UN has become increasingly instrumentalized and used as a means of implementation of projects to conceal other types of institutional change based on efficiency considerations and neoliberal values (Mert 2019, Utting and Zammit 2009).

Ideas consistent with discourses of limits and radical sustainability were mostly mobilized by civil society. For instance, 43% of civil society texts expressed radical sustainability. For instance, the statements of the Children and Youth Major Group and the Commons Cluster, a civil society network consisting of individuals and NGOs, disputed the "accumulation economy." Specifically, they argued that current economic structures "inevitably encroach upon the ability of our economy to provide basic goods and services and meet basic human needs" and called for a strict cap on the use of depletable resources, and for ecocide to be considered as a crime against peace (UN 2014). Also, statements from civil society more than any other actor personified Nature. The Commons Cluster for instance stated that "no entity however powerful they may seem to be can survive without support of Nature herself" (UN 2014).

Also, governments from developed and developing countries referred to concepts associated with radical sustainability or a limits discourse. One statement from Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador mentioned the Buen Vivir concept during the discussions on sustainable consumption and production, recalling that a change of mentality is necessary to initiate the transformation toward sustainable consumption and production "to achieve sustainable development in accordance with the Buen Vivir paradigm" (UN 2014). Similarly, Poland and Romania referred to a limits discourse with the concept of a sufficient economy, stating that the international community needs to rethink its societal objectives, moving from a focus on wealth, growth, and efficiency, toward an emphasis on well-being, quality, and sufficiency. In turn, none of the texts from business and IGOs expressed these discourses.

Yet there were cleavages within groups of actors regarding their associations with specific discourses. For instance, the Women Major Group, the Indigenous Peoples Major Group, the Commons Cluster, and the Mining Working Group engaged more in limits or radical discourses than other civil society actors, whose statements either conveyed a mainstream or progressive discourse (e.g., NGO Major Group, Science and Technology Major Group). Also, within developing countries, only Latin-American states advanced radical economic approaches and an interconnected relationship between human and natural worlds, as the intervention of Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador during the discussions on biodiversity suggests:

> With the expansion of human activities for development, forced by the markets and the interests of capital, without respecting the limits of regeneration of nature, the extension and internal connectivity of native ecosystems decreases sharply, fragmenting the habitat and accelerating biodiversity loss, eventually putting at risk the integrity of ecosystems. (UN 2014)

The mobilization of specific terminology across actors further reveals uneven, if not low, inter-discourse engagement. Business and developed countries were more likely to mobilize terms that characterize mainstream sustainability. For instance, business actors strongly mobilized the idea that industrialization should remain a key feature of economic development under conditions of environmental sustainability, with a χ^2 amounting to 8.2. Similarly, "economic growth" was extensively mobilized by developed countries ($\chi^2 = 2.7$), while it was less likely to be mobilized by IGOs ($\chi^2 = -2.3$) and civil society ($\chi^2 = -2.6$). Additionally, developed countries were more likely to mobilize the "green economy" concept ($\chi^2 = 1.7$) and less likely to mobilize the equity principle of CBDR ($\chi^2 = -1.5$) than other actors.

Civil society and developing countries were more likely to mobilize terms that characterize a progressive sustainability discourse. For instance, developing countries ($\chi^2 = 1$) and civil society actors ($\chi^2 = 1.6$) mobilized the CBDR principle more than other actors. However, developing countries did not strongly engage in a discourse advocating for a reform of the global political order beyond the recognition of CBDR. For instance, the term "equity" was more likely to be mobilized by civil society than developing countries, with a χ^2 of 2.6 for civil society, whereas the χ^2 for developing countries, though close to zero, is still negative. Also, only civil society actors emphasized human rights in the negotiations with a χ^2 of 16, whereas developed countries ($\chi^2 = -3$) and developing countries ($\chi^2 = -6$) were those actors that least referred to it.

Finally, civil society more likely mobilized terms that characterize a limits discourse or radical sustainability. For instance, they mobilized "planetary boundaries" ($\chi^2 = 3.3$) and the "ecological footprint" ($\chi^2 = 2.5$) more than other actors. "Environmental justice" was also most specific to these actors ($\chi^2 = 6.5$), and least specific to developed countries ($\chi^2 = -2$). Similarly, compared to developed countries ($\chi^2 = -3$), civil society actors extensively mobilized "global commons" ($\chi^2 = 5$) and advocated that their preservation is not compatible with the existing parameters of the global economy.

Yet there are also differentiations within groups of actors. For instance, although developed countries mainly referred to "ecosystem services" (mainstream sustainability), 4 out of 9 references to an "ecosystem approach" (radical sustainability) also emanated from developed countries (i.e., the European Union; the troikas of France, Germany, and Switzerland; Norway, Denmark, and Ireland; Serbia and Montenegro). Similarly, within civil society, the "ecosystem approach" was mobilized by the Indigenous Peoples Major Group, while other actors referred to "ecosystem services" (i.e., Science and Technology Major Group, Bioregional—an internationally operating NGO working on sustainability).

In sum, inter-discourse engagement was uneven in the SDGs negotiations. Mainstream sustainability was almost exclusively specific to business actors and developed countries, while civil society and some developing countries mobilized ideas and concepts characterizing radical sustainability. Even though discourse coalitions emerged between Latin-American countries and civil society on radical sustainability, these were not successful in increasing the representation of this discourse in the shaping of the SDGs. Similarly, the discourse coalition between some developed countries (Poland and Romania) and civil society on a sufficient economy failed to increase the representation of a limits' discourse in the SDGs negotiations. Unlike other discourses, progressive sustainability was not actor-specific. All actors except business engaged to some extent in a progressive sustainability discourse. However, the previous section has shown that in these negotiations, progressive sustainability only partially expressed the systemic political transformation that the least represented actors in policymaking endeavor. This indicates that the coalition around progressive sustainability did not relay the ideas and concepts formulated by the most marginalized actors in the negotiations.

4 Conclusion

With the example of the negotiations on environment-related SDGs, this study has shown that the effectiveness of discursive representation in representing the interests of marginalized actors and in democratizing global policymaking is limited. While the negotiations involved more than ten million civil society voices and resulted in an agreement that claims to "transform our world" and "leave no-one behind," the understandings of transformation and inclusiveness conveyed in the SDGs negotiations were eventually biased toward the interests of the most represented actors in the OWG: developing states. This comes with no surprise, as, in the end, developing countries recorded more seats and speaking slots in the OWG than the other actors, while in intergovernmental negotiations states are the final decision-makers of the exact framing of global agreements, with civil society playing a minor role.

The article also shows that discursive representation has partially failed to overcome the limitations of actor-based representation. Although progressive sustainability dominated the issue-framing phase of the negotiations and was mobilized by a broad range of actors, its narrow framing on issues of equity and responsibility in addressing global sustainable development challenges did not allow for the representation of the many subjectivities of different constituencies. Specifically, progressive sustainability did not include broader understandings of equity toward the marginalized and physically absent such as the global poor, let alone future generations and non-humans. In addition, the coalitions that emerged between state and non-state actors on radical sustainability and a limits discourse failed to increase the saliency of these framings in the negotiations.

Eventually, the analysis of discursive representation in the SDGs negotiations shows that intergovernmental negotiations in the United Nations headquarters in New York City are not a suitable platform to develop contestation and advance deliberative democracy. As Carant (2017: 34) argues in a recent article, alternative discourses such as radical sustainability or, as she labels it, "a World Social Forum discourse," remained "largely unheard in the articulation of the SDGs because the UN has failed to produce the transformational systemic shifts necessary for long-term, sustainable and equitable change for all." Discursive representation, however, should not be discarded. Addressing its flaws requires exploring whether and how alternative discourses may be represented in authoritative spaces of decision-making. Future studies could for instance identify the conditions under which unconstrained and true deliberative spaces could be secured within formal negotiations, so as to provide a legitimacy check on to which degree global policymaking features a comprehensive and accurate range of discourses on sustainability.

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