Commentary

The Shallow Consensus: SDGs, Leverage Points, and the Price of Concession in Global Governance

Miramanni Mishkin[1]

1. University of Southern Maine, United States

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) seek systemic transformation through a governance architecture organized around targets, indicators, and voluntary review. This article asks whether that architecture connects its ambitions to interventions capable of changing the global political economy. Using Meadows' leverage points as an analytical heuristic, it distinguishes the depth of stated objectives from the mechanisms through which they operate. The analysis identifies a concentration in aspirational parameters and information flows, with weaker connections to changes in rules, institutional power, and operative goals. SDG 8's growth commitment and SDG 10's distributional ambition illustrate different aspects of this mismatch. Observed trade-offs, selective progress, and limited institutional effects are consistent with policy resistance, although they do not establish a unique causal explanation. Basel III illustrates how formally non-binding standards acquire practical force through supervision, incentives, and institutional routines. The Pact for the Future and human-rights commitments sharpen the distinction between formal recognition and consequential practice. The argument is conditional: reporting and coordination can support transformation when coupled to changes in authority, incentives, and decision-making. A post-2030 framework should specify those connections and assess their depth and durability. Future research should test the mapping across scales and trace when commitments change institutional behavior.

Correspondence: papers@team.qeios.com — Qeios will forward to the authors

 doi.org/10.32388/OZJPOZ.3

1. Introduction

When the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda in September 2015, it described the Sustainable Development Goals as “a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity” of “unprecedented scope and significance” [1]. Their ambition is not in dispute. Ending poverty “in all its forms everywhere,” achieving zero hunger, reducing inequality within and among countries, and taking urgent action on climate change would each, on its own, require restructuring trade regimes, fiscal systems, energy infrastructures, property arrangements, and consumption patterns that have developed over centuries. Taken together, these objectives amount to a demand for systemic transformation of the global political economy. The Agenda’s voluntary international review arrangements coexist with domestic implementation and applicable human-rights obligations; their institutional connections are examined below.

The instrument chosen to deliver this transformation is a voluntary, non-binding framework of goals, targets, and indicators, monitored through self-reported national reviews, without an enforcement mechanism and amid a financing gap estimated at trillions of dollars annually, depending on how sustainable development is defined[2]. The latest official UN assessment shows meaningful but insufficient progress: of the 139 targets for which trend data are available, only 36 percent are on track or making moderate progress, while 49 percent are advancing too slowly and 15 percent have regressed below their 2015 baselines [3]. These outcomes may reflect implementation constraints and external shocks as well as structural interactions. The analysis below examines policy resistance as an interpretation of the observed patterns, rather than inferring its cause from limited progress alone.

Critiques of the SDGs are well established. They have been faulted for their unwieldy scope[4], their internal tensions between growth and ecological objectives[5], the politics embedded in their indicator apparatus[6], and their limited effects on institutional steering and resource allocation[7]. What these critiques often lack, however, is a unifying theoretical account of why such a framework should be expected to fail to produce systemic change. Without such an account, they can appear as a list of remediable design flaws—too many targets, insufficient funding, or inadequate political will—implying that a better-engineered goal framework could succeed where the current one struggles.

Meadows’ systems theory provides a framework for examining the relationship between ambition and institutional design. Her hierarchy distinguishes intervention in parameters and information flows from changes in rules, self-organization, system goals, and paradigms[8]. Thinking in Systems develops

the associated concepts of feedback, delays, system purpose, and policy resistance[9]. These distinctions direct attention to how commitments influence the processes that generate outcomes.

Recent scholarship has applied this perspective to SDG implementation. Allen and Malekpour[10] review pathways for accelerating transformations, while Koloffon Rosas[11] assesses the transformative potential of multi-affected/interested party partnerships. The present article extends this work to the governance architecture of the 2030 Agenda itself.

The central question is how the placement of the Agenda's interventions within the global political economy constrains its transformative capacity. The argument is that transformative ambitions are concentrated in targets and reporting arrangements without sufficiently strong connections to changes in rules, institutional power, and operative priorities. The issue is whether sustainability commitments become governing norms and sustained practices, rather than remaining aspirations alongside established institutional priorities. Section 3 specifies the conditions under which shallow interventions may contribute to deeper change.

The present article differs in its unit of analysis: it maps the governance architecture of the 2030 Agenda —its targets, indicators, review mechanisms, and normative commitments—onto Meadows' hierarchy and asks what this distribution implies about the Agenda's transformative capacity. It develops three further comparisons. First, it contrasts the SDG architecture with Basel III to examine why formally non-binding international standards can shape consequential regulatory practices in global finance, while sustainability commitments remain weakly connected to comparable changes in rules, resource allocation, and institutional power[12][13]. The comparison also considers how implementation resistance and interstate power dynamics can produce regulatory deadlock (Vestergaard & Wade, 2012). Second, it examines the 2024 Pact for the Future as a prospective test of movement toward deeper intervention. Third, it examines the human-rights connection through the same distinction between formally recognized commitments and their operation in practice.

The contribution is a conceptual diagnosis of how the Agenda's design may help explain patterns of trade-offs, selective progress, and limited institutional effects. It also identifies observable developments that would require revision of that diagnosis. The empirical literature supplies the patterns examined; their interpretation through Meadows' framework is the analytical contribution developed here.

2. The empirical case against the SDGs as an engine of transformation

Four strands of critique recur in the literature: scope and prioritization; legal character and financing; the growth–ecology tension; and governance by indicators.

The first strand concerns scope and prioritization. The 2030 Agenda comprises 17 goals, 169 targets, and a global indicator framework that has grown to include more than 230 indicators. Easterly[4] characterized this outcome as "senseless, dreamy, garbled," arguing that when everything is treated as a priority, the framework offers little guidance for allocating scarce political attention and fiscal resources. The contrast with the eight Millennium Development Goals is instructive: despite substantial flaws—including their donor-centric framing and neglect of inequality[14]—their relative parsimony made them more legible as a mechanism for prioritization. The SDGs' encyclopedic breadth reflects the political economy of their negotiation, in which accommodating the concerns of every constituency was the price of consensus[15]. Comprehensiveness was therefore purchased at the expense of strategy.

The second strand concerns the framework's legal character and financing. The SDGs are voluntary and non-binding (Vijge et al., 2020), and their primary accountability mechanism is the Voluntary National Review, a self-assessment presented at the UN High-Level Political Forum (Europe, 2022). This does not place the Agenda outside existing law: it expressly affirms human-rights instruments and implementation consistent with international obligations[1]. Section 7.4 examines those obligations through the same question of institutional operation. Their legal status does not, by itself, establish that sustainability governs decisions and practices. The distinction here concerns what the Agenda's review arrangements cause institutions to do. States decide what to report, how to measure progress, and how to frame shortfalls. Meanwhile, estimates of the annual financing gap for achieving the goals in developing countries initially stood at roughly USD 2.5 trillion and widened substantially after the pandemic. A framework that calls for trillions of dollars in reallocations while imposing no obligation on any actor to make them depends heavily on convergence between the goals and the interests of states, firms, and financial institutions.

The weakness of consistently applied constraints also creates opportunities for regulatory arbitrage. Firms and financial institutions can respond selectively to SDG expectations by emphasizing favorable

indicators, relocating activities across jurisdictions, or treating voluntary alignment as a reputational asset while avoiding costly changes to their underlying business models. This contrasts with rule-level regimes such as Basel III, which, despite uneven implementation and political contestation, establish specific prudential requirements and supervisory expectations across participating jurisdictions (Vestergaard & Wade, 2012). Frameworks with weak implementation mechanisms may therefore coordinate disclosure and aspirations while leaving actors considerable room to exploit differences in enforcement, reporting, and regulatory ambition. In systems terms, the SDGs seek convergence in goals and information without securing convergence in the rules that structure competitive behavior.

The third strand concerns an internal contradiction. SDG 8 targets "sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth," including annual GDP growth of at least 7% in the least developed countries[1]. Hickel[5] demonstrated the arithmetic tension between growth of this kind and the ecological objectives of SDGs 12, 13, 14, and 15, and subsequent research has strengthened this evidence. Systematic reviews of the empirical decoupling literature—screening more than 11,500 studies and analyzing 835 in full—find that, although relative decoupling of GDP from resource use and emissions is common, evidence of absolute decoupling at the scale and speed required to meet climate and ecological targets remains scarce[16]. The IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report reflects this debate: it notes that many countries have decoupled territorial CO_2 emissions from GDP, whereas fewer have decoupled consumption-based emissions. For the first time in an IPCC assessment, it also acknowledges degrowth and post-growth scholarship questioning the feasibility of reconciling continued global growth with mitigation at the required pace[17]. Nor does the circular economy resolve this tension, despite its prominence in SDG 12 discourse. Critical reviews identify thermodynamic limits to circularity, pervasive rebound effects, and structural barriers to implementation. They conclude that circularity, as currently deployed, functions largely as a growth-compatible narrative rather than as a demonstrated pathway to absolute reductions in material throughput[18]. The framework thus instructs the system to accelerate and brake simultaneously, without acknowledging the conflict or specifying how it should be resolved. The empirical basis for believing that efficiency or circularity can dissolve this tension has therefore weakened, rather than strengthened, since 2015.

Relative improvements do not, by themselves, resolve the growth–ecology tension. The SDG framework does not specify a mechanism, timetable, or institutional trigger for converting them into absolute reductions or binding constraints. It promotes growth as an explicit objective while treating ecological

limits as parallel targets, leaving unresolved which objective should prevail when the two cannot be reconciled.

The fourth strand concerns governance by indicators. The methodological design of the Global Indicator Framework compounds this problem. Its expansion has encouraged the assumption that increasingly extensive measurement can compensate for the absence of prioritization and institutional authority. Indicators necessarily reduce multidimensional and contested goals to selected proxies, while differences in definitions, coverage, data quality, and reporting capacity constrain comparability across countries and over time[6]. The resulting framework risks privileging what can be standardized and counted over what is politically difficult to measure, while obscuring the causal distance between changes in an indicator and the policies or structural conditions that produced them. The indicator architecture is therefore part of the Agenda's governing method: it converts broad normative commitments into numerical signals without establishing how those signals should be weighted, reconciled when they conflict, or translated into sustained changes in resource allocation and institutional behavior. This connects the critique of breadth to the systems-theoretic argument developed below: a proliferation of targets and indicators increases the quantity of information in the system without necessarily altering the rules, goals, or feedback structures that generate its outcomes.

Governance by indicators is not a neutral technology: what is measured shapes what is pursued, while the selection of indicators embeds contestable normative judgments within ostensibly technical decisions[6]. These judgments are further structured by asymmetries in data production. "Data imperialism" describes how powerful states, international organizations, and private actors can define measurement standards, determine which forms of knowledge are considered valid, and extract or represent information about less powerful societies through categories that may not reflect local realities. Moreover, data for many indicators are absent or unreliable precisely in the poorest countries, where the goals matter most; consequently, reported "progress" often relies on statistical modeling rather than direct observation (Sachs et al., 2021). The indicator apparatus therefore does not merely measure unequal development; it can also reproduce the epistemic inequalities through which that development is understood and governed, creating an appearance of monitoring that exceeds the available knowledge.

Each critique is forceful, but presenting them as a list invites a deflationary response: streamline the targets, increase financing, resolve the contradictions, and improve the data. The systems-theoretic reading developed below suggests that this response misunderstands the problem. The difficulty is not

that the SDGs are a flawed instance of an otherwise sound approach; rather, steering a system through numerical targets and monitoring while leaving its underlying structure intact represents the weakest form of intervention in the hierarchy of possible leverage points.

3. Analytical framework: Meadows' hierarchy of leverage points

Donella Meadows was a systems scientist, lead author of The Limits to Growth[19], and one of the most influential scholars to bring systems dynamics into public discourse. Her essay "Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System"[8] presents a rank-ordered list of twelve intervention points in a complex system, arranged by increasing transformative power. In simplified form, the hierarchy proceeds from weaker to stronger forms of intervention (Table 1). Here it is used as an analytical heuristic, not a validated measurement scale or a universally rigid rank-order: leverage may be context-dependent, and interactions across depths may be mutually constitutive. The framework is located within Western systems traditions and is not treated as a culturally neutral or exhaustive ontology.

The system considered here is the global political economy, including the institutions, rules, norms, and practices governing production, distribution, finance, and ecological pressures. The object of analysis is the 2030 Agenda's governance architecture—its goals, targets, indicators, and review and coordination arrangements—as an intervention within that system. Global governance refers to the arrangements linking international commitments to decisions within it. The question is which leverage points the Agenda's mechanisms engage and how its commitments become consequential in institutional practice. Claims about intervention depth are relative to this specified system; changes at local or national scales require assessment at those scales and in relation to their wider institutional connections.

The mapping is an interpretive reading of institutional functions, not an exhaustive coding of all targets or a measurement of causal effects. Components are classified by the mechanisms they establish or enable, rather than solely by the issues they address. For each component, the analysis distinguishes its stated ambition, its institutional mechanism, and the response it enables. Numerical specifications are treated as parameters; reporting and disclosure as information flows; changes in permissions, obligations, or incentives as rule interventions; changes in the capacity to organize or alter institutions as self-organization; and changes in operative priorities or governing assumptions as interventions in goals or paradigms. A component can engage more than one point. The depth of a stated ambition does not itself establish intervention at that depth.

Intervention depth and institutional strength are separate dimensions. Mandatory reporting remains an information mechanism unless connected to further changes; an ambitious distributional target does not itself alter distributive rules. Conversely, information flows, self-organization, and paradigm change can exert deep leverage without a legal sanction. The terms shallow and deep therefore describe the locus of intervention in context. Legal status is a further, separate dimension: a binding obligation may be weakly implemented, while a non-binding standard may organize consequential practices. Institutional operation is assessed through changes in routine decisions, resource allocation, incentives, and responses to departures from agreed expectations. Enforcement is one mechanism through which such effects arise, alongside supervision, professional norms, and organizational procedures. Table 1 summarizes this descriptive mapping; Sections 4 and 7 examine the institutional connections on which its interpretation depends.

#	Leverage point (Meadows, 1999)	Depth band	Assessment of the global SDG architecture	§
12	Constants, parameters, numbers (subsidies, taxes, standards)	Parameters	**Dense in targets and indicators.** Numerical commitments describe desired outcomes; their practical force depends on connections to budgets, standards, incentives, and institutional decisions.	4.1
11	Sizes of buffers and stocks	Parameters	**No direct mechanism identified.** The global framework does not itself alter buffer or stock capacities.	—
10	Structure of material stocks and flows	Parameters	**Ambition without direct restructuring.** SDG 12 addresses material throughput, but the framework does not itself reorganize material stocks and flows.	2, 6
9	Lengths of delays relative to rate of system change	Feedback	**No direct mechanism identified.** The framework does not itself redesign delays in system responses.	—
8	Strength of negative (balancing) feedback loops	Feedback	**Weak corrective coupling.** Missed targets do not reliably trigger corrective action. Basel illustrates how standards can connect to recurring supervisory responses.	4.2, 7.2
7	Gain around positive (reinforcing) feedback loops	Feedback	**Growth reinforcement largely retained.** SDG 8 affirms growth; the architecture does not systematically redirect its reinforcing dynamics.	4.3
6	Structure of information flows — who does and does not have access	Design	**Dense information, weak links to action.** Indicators, reports, and Voluntary National Reviews create information flows. Leverage depends on recipients' capacity and incentives to act, not reporting alone.	4.2
5	Rules of the system (incentives, punishments, constraints)	Design	**Rule-level ambitions, limited operative mechanisms.** Target 10.1 expresses a distributional ambition but does not itself institute redistributive measures. Commitments matter when they change governing rules and practices.	4.3, 7.1
4	Power to add, change, or self-organize system structure	Design	**Limited at the global scale.** The Agenda does not itself redistribute global rule-making power. Local self-organization is possible; reform commitments require assessment through institutional practice.	4.3, 7.3
3	The goals of the system	Intent	**Growth affirmed among multiple goals.** SDG 8 does not formally outrank other goals. The architecture lacks a general procedure for resolving conflicts between growth, ecological, and distributive objectives.	4.3
2	The mindset or paradigm from which the system arises	Intent	**Prevailing paradigm largely retained.** The analysis reads growth-oriented development as the dominant framing; integration is declared without consistently changing operative priorities.	4.3, 6
1	The power to transcend paradigms	Intent	**No explicit mechanism identified.** Paradigm transcendence is not institutionalized in the global architecture.	—

Depth bands: Parameters (12–10), Feedback (9–7), Design (6–4), Intent (3–1).
Interpretive mapping of global mechanisms, not a measurement scale; see Section 3 for scope and qualifications.

Table 1. Mapping the SDG architecture onto Meadows' leverage points. Adapted from Meadows[8]; ordering runs from weakest (12) to strongest (1) transformative power. Shading distinguishes the four depth bands. Note. Depth bands group Meadows' twelve points into parameters (12–10), feedback (9–7), design (6–4), and intent (3–1). References to absent intervention concern operative mechanisms at the global scale, rather than the absence of relevant ambitions. Target 10.1, for example, expresses a distributional ambition whose realization may involve rule-level changes without itself establishing those changes. This is a descriptive mapping, not a coded measurement scale; its ordering is subject to the contextual and interpretive qualifications discussed in this section.

This ordering does not imply that lower-leverage interventions are politically or theoretically irrelevant. Recent systems-oriented research on transformation emphasizes that changes in parameters, information flows, coordination, and feedbacks can build momentum, generate learning, weaken stabilizing dynamics, and create conditions for deeper changes in rules, goals, or paradigms[10]. Shallow

interventions can therefore contribute to deeper change when deliberately coupled and sequenced with changes in institutional authority, incentives, and rule-making capacity; the hierarchy does not presuppose a strictly linear or one-directional theory of change. Such a pathway requires identifiable mechanisms, milestones, and institutional triggers connecting learning and coordination to changes in rules, power, and system goals. Without these connections, sequencing remains a plausible hypothesis rather than evidence of transformation. The analytical question is whether shallow interventions form part of a credible sequence toward institutional transformation or remain isolated adjustments that leave the system's governing structure intact.

Two features of the hierarchy matter for present purposes. First, Meadows observed that political attention is distributed in inverse proportion to leverage. Parameters—especially numerical targets—are where concern, negotiation, and reporting tend to concentrate, yet changes at this level rarely alter system behavior when the system's structure, goals, and paradigms continue to reproduce the outcomes those parameters were intended to prevent. Second, deeper leverage points matter because they shape the operation of shallower ones: paradigms give rise to goals, goals to rules, and rules to flows and parameters. Intervening downstream while leaving these upstream sources unchanged may therefore produce only temporary or localized improvements.

Meadows'[9] "Thinking in Systems" also clarifies why information is not transformation. Information flows can be powerful, but only when they reach actors with the authority, incentives, and institutional channels to respond. Information circulated through self-reporting mechanisms among actors whose rules and constraints remain unchanged becomes monitoring rather than structural change. By contrast, information generated within localized initiatives may contribute to transformation when coupled with collective agency, new feedback loops, and the capacity to reorganize relationships and practices. The critical question is not simply whether an intervention is bottom-up or top-down, but whether it creates durable changes in the system's rules, feedbacks, or organizing capacities at the scale where resistance is being diagnosed. This is key to converting information into systemic change. Such an approach requires shifting from viewing systems as static, predictable entities to recognizing them as complex, nested structures in which place-based context and intent shape the efficacy of any intervention (Bolton, 2022; Leventon, 2021; Ostrom, 1991).

"Thinking in Systems" is especially important to the diagnosis advanced here because it provides the paper's account of policy resistance. Meadows describes policy resistance as the tendency of a system to defeat, dilute, or displace interventions that challenge its structure, as actors, incentives, feedback loops,

and delays continue to reproduce its implicit purpose. This concept prevents the argument from becoming a simple accusation of bad faith. If the SDGs produce selective progress, trade-offs, and absorption without deep institutional change, these patterns are consistent with resistance to interventions that leave governing structures intact; their causal interpretation requires further investigation.

Because claims about leverage are relative to a specified system, the diagnosis advanced here concerns the global political economy and does not transfer automatically to other scales. At national and global levels, SDG implementation is mediated through established administrative rules, reporting procedures, funding constraints, and accountability arrangements that can absorb or redirect interventions challenging the prevailing structure. Bottom-up and localized initiatives may encounter these constraints, but they can also generate self-organization—a deeper leverage point in Meadows' hierarchy—by creating new forms of cooperation, knowledge, and institutional practice[8]. Change in local rules or authority can therefore constitute deeper intervention within that setting without establishing comparable change in global arrangements.

Local and national systems remain connected to wider institutional arrangements. Their initiatives may depend on external resources, encounter constraints imposed at other scales, or contribute to changes beyond their immediate setting. The relevant questions are what changes within the specified system and how those changes interact across scales. Local transformation is neither ruled out by the global diagnosis nor, by itself, sufficient to overturn it; its wider significance depends on the institutional connections through which its effects extend.

More recently, this framework has been applied specifically to the SDG regime. In a narrative review of transformations toward the SDGs, Allen and Malekpour[10] argue that meaningful change ultimately requires shifts in system goals and design, although it may begin with momentum-building interventions at shallower leverage points. These interventions include weakening balancing feedbacks that stabilize existing configurations, strengthening reinforcing feedbacks that support emerging alternatives, and sequencing interventions to move systems toward tipping points that enable decisive policy action. Koloffon Rosas[11] operationalizes the hierarchy empirically by assessing the transformative potential of 35 multistakeholder partnerships registered on the SDG Actions Platform and working across SDGs 4, 13, 14, and 15. Although these partnerships target multiple intervention points, they often neglect the deepest points, where more profound transformation could occur. The present analysis builds on this work by adopting the Parameters–Feedbacks–Design–Intent aggregation as a

methodological framework for diagnosing how the SDG governance architecture distributes transformative capacity across these four domains (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Visualization of the application of Meadows' leverage points as they are grouped into bands of intervention depth and how they might apply to SDG architecture and rule-level comparison.

This article positions itself in relation to this literature in two ways. First, its unit of analysis differs: whereas existing operationalizations assess implementation vehicles against the hierarchy, this article

doi.org/10.32388/OZJPOZ.3

examines the governance architecture of the 2030 Agenda itself. Here, "governance architecture" refers to both the Agenda's substantive and institutional components: its 17 goals, 169 targets, and hierarchical indicator structure, as well as the reporting, review, and coordination mechanisms through which it is implemented, including the Voluntary National Reviews and the High-level Political Forum. The analysis therefore asks not only where the framework's targets and indicators fall within the hierarchy, but also whether its institutional mechanisms generate feedbacks, establish rules, or create accountability arrangements capable of shifting that position. Second, the findings from this literature provide convergent evidence: if the architecture and its principal implementation vehicles independently concentrate at low and mid-range leverage points[20][11], this convergence supports the architectural diagnosis without independently establishing causation or excluding implementation deficits[10]. Applying the hierarchy to the architecture is the task of the next section.

4. Mapping the SDG architecture onto the hierarchy

4.1. A framework made of parameters

Viewed through Meadows' hierarchy, the most striking feature of the 2030 Agenda is its concentration at leverage point 12. Applying the sequencing qualification in Section 3, the problem is its concentration of transformative expectations in parameters without connecting them to a credible pathway toward deeper institutional change.

The framework's operational content—the elements that govern behavior, reporting, and assessment—consists largely of numerical targets and indicators: proportions of populations below income thresholds, growth rates, percentages of protected areas, and school-completion ratios. During the 2012–2015 negotiations, diplomatic attention focused overwhelmingly on which numbers to include and how to phrase them; since 2015, institutional efforts have centered on measuring them. This is precisely the pattern Meadows described: parameters attract attention, negotiation, and a sense of consequence while possessing the least capacity to change what the system does.

It is important to be precise about the claim. Parameters are not causally inert: a changed tax rate or emissions standard can alter flows at the margin. However, SDG targets are not parameters in this operative sense. A tax rate is a parameter within a system, enforced through its rules; a Basel III capital ratio, to anticipate the contrast developed in Section 7.2, is likewise embedded in regulatory standards, supervision, and implementation procedures[21]. Writing from the perspective of a regulator directly

involved in China's implementation of post-crisis financial reforms, Liu[22] cautioned that Basel should be understood as the beginning of an adaptive supervisory process rather than the completion of financial reform. His account qualifies its use as an informative model of global regulatory governance: although he strongly supports the reforms, he emphasizes that their effectiveness depends not merely on promulgating common standards but on maintaining their connection to institutional capacity.

Liu's emphasis on supervisory incentives has implications extending well beyond financial regulation, with direct implications for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) implementation. He argues that effective macroprudential supervision requires regulators to possess not only formal mandates and adequate resources, but also organizational structures, accountability mechanisms, and incentive systems that support intervention even when preventive action is politically unpopular or its benefits are not immediately visible[22].

This observation identifies an implementation condition frequently overlooked in global governance: institutional authority alone is insufficient unless coupled with incentives that encourage organizations to exercise that authority proactively. Because successful prevention averts crises that never materialize, its benefits are inherently difficult to observe, whereas the costs of regulation are immediate and politically salient. This dynamic is a manifestation of what public policy scholars call the "prevention paradox"[23]—a structural vulnerability where regulators are routinely penalized for visible enforcement friction but rarely rewarded for non-eventful, invisible successes.

Consequently, institutions face persistent pressure toward delayed or minimal intervention unless their governance structures explicitly reward preventive action. In the economic sphere, this tendency is driven by "time inconsistency"[24], which demonstrates that even well-intentioned regulators operating under pure discretion face overwhelming short-term incentives to defer unpopular interventions during stable periods, inadvertently compounding long-term systemic risk. This institutional inertia is further aggravated by the asymmetric political pressures of regulatory capture[25]; heavily regulated industries or concentrated interest groups feel the immediate, acute costs of compliance and lobby aggressively against them, while the diffuse public beneficiaries of crisis-prevention remain largely unengaged.

Ultimately, Liu's critique mirrors what Mark Carney[26] termed the "tragedy of the horizon," wherein the catastrophic impacts of systemic failures—whether financial collapses or climate disasters—fall well beyond the traditional horizons of political cycles and business quarters. By linking Liu's macroprudential insights to these broader frameworks, it becomes clear that if global governance

mechanisms like the SDGs are to succeed, they must move past static, rules-based checklists and actively restructure the micro-incentives inside governing bodies to insulate and reward regulators who choose the politically difficult, preventive path.

Basel III illustrates that complex global governance succeeds not simply because it establishes ambitious goals or enjoys broad approval, but because it institutionalizes adaptive implementation. This is why it serves here as a working example. The missing element in the SDGs is therefore not additional ambition, but the governance architecture necessary to translate goals into sustained, monitored, and revisable practice. Basel III is more institutionally consequential than an SDG target, but its effects are neither automatic nor uniformly binding: regulatory arbitrage, uneven national implementation, and political or administrative deadlock can weaken its influence on bank behavior. The comparison, then, is not between wholly non-binding SDG targets and a perfectly enforced Basel III regime, but between aspirational targets that lack direct adjustment mechanisms and financial standards embedded—albeit imperfectly—in institutions with supervisory and compliance capacities.

An SDG target is a parameter about a system: a description of a desired output level that is attached to no mechanism for adjusting any actual tax, subsidy, standard, or budget line. The framework therefore occupies a weaker position than even an imperfectly implemented regulatory parameter in Meadows' hierarchy: it consists of aspirational values without the institutional machinery needed to make them operative.

This implementation problem is equally evident in the Sustainable Development Goals. Although governments have formally endorsed the SDGs, the framework provides comparatively weak institutional incentives for politically difficult interventions whose benefits materialize only over long time horizons. Progress is assessed largely through voluntary reporting and indicator performance rather than through governance mechanisms that systematically align organizational incentives with implementation. Consequently, many SDG commitments remain aspirational because the institutional architecture rewards short-term political responsiveness more consistently than long-term systemic resilience.

4.2. Information flows without empowered recipients

The strongest element of the SDG architecture, in leverage terms, is its information apparatus: the global indicator framework, the annual progress reports, the Voluntary National Reviews. This is intervention at leverage point 6, and Meadows[8] regarded new information flows as genuinely powerful — her

illustrative example was the disclosure requirement of the US Toxics Release Inventory, which reduced emissions not by prohibiting anything but by making pollution publicly visible to communities positioned to react. Transparency acts as a catalyst for accountability only when it empowers actors with the agency to exert pressure on those who govern system parameters (Biermann et al., 2017).

The SDG information system currently fails Meadows' own test in two respects. First, the information loop is largely self-referential: states report on themselves, select their own emphases, and face an audience—the High-Level Political Forum—with no power to sanction. Evidence suggests that VNRs function substantially as performance and diplomatic signaling rather than accountability[7]. Second, information is directed mainly to governments and international institutions whose incentives remain shaped by the system's existing rules. Information becomes leverage when it reaches actors capable of acting on it; circulated among actors whose constraints remain unchanged, it often functions merely as reporting. The measurement mirage identified in Section 2 is therefore problematic not because activity at leverage point 6 lacks value, but because it is often mistaken for transformation rather than treated as a transitional step toward deeper institutional realignment.

4.3. Rules untouched, goals reinscribed

The diagnosis darkens as one ascends the hierarchy. The rules of the global economic system — trade law, investment treaties, intellectual property regimes, sovereign debt architecture, the fiscal rules that structure national budgets — are the domain of leverage point 5, and the 2030 Agenda leaves them essentially untouched. Where the SDGs gesture at rules (as in SDG 17's calls for a "universal, rules-based, open, non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trading system"), they endorse the existing ones. Calls for reform and representation are not equivalent to amendments of treaties, voting arrangements, or enforcement mechanisms. The framework demands outcomes that current rules systematically fail to produce, while affirming those rules. The difficulty, in the terms set out in Section 3, is the absence of mechanisms that convert reporting into redistribution, targets into rules that govern practice, and incremental reforms into a redefinition of system goals.

At leverage point 3—the goals of the system—the relevant distinction is between formally declared objectives and operative priorities. SDG 8 affirms sustained economic growth, but its inclusion among seventeen goals does not establish that growth formally outranks them. The argument concerns the wider political economy: growth functions as a prevailing development objective within which ecological and distributive aims are pursued, rather than being systematically subordinated to them. The growth–

ecology literature identifies tensions in this arrangement[5][16]; it does not establish an invariant priority across every institution or jurisdiction. The narrower architectural claim is that the Agenda does not establish a general decision rule requiring growth objectives to yield when they conflict with ecological or distributive commitments. Whether growth actually prevails in particular conflicts remains a question for institutional investigation.

The social dimension clarifies the distinction between ambition and mechanism. Target 10.1 sets a 2030 horizon for income growth among the bottom forty per cent to exceed the national average[1]. Achieving that distributional objective may involve taxation, wage-setting, social protection, or other rules affecting income. The target is therefore relevant to rule-level change, but it does not itself institute those measures. Its transformative significance depends on how the numerical commitment is connected to institutions able to change distribution.

The comparison of SDGs 8 and 10 suggests a mismatch between the depth of some ambitions and their institutional attachment. It does not establish a measured inverse relationship across all 169 targets. The point is that a framework can contain structurally demanding commitments while supplying limited mechanisms for realizing them. This distinction brings the social pillar into the analysis without treating every distributional aspiration as an operative rule intervention.

At leverage point 2, the paradigm—growth-based, extractive development as the meaning of progress—is the ground on which the entire Agenda stands. Here the historical irony is acute. Meadows' own career began with the demonstration, in The Limits to Growth[19], that a system structured around exponential material growth on a finite planet tends toward overshoot and collapse, and that avoiding this outcome requires deliberate change in the system's dominant feedback structure and goals rather than incremental parameter adjustment. Fifty years later, the international community's flagship sustainability framework rests on the paradigm her work called into question, and pursues sustainability through the parameter adjustments her framework identified as the weakest available instrument.

A word is owed here to the Agenda's claim to integration, since it is the feature its architects most often identify as the innovation distinguishing it from what came before. The 2030 Agenda declares its goals integrated and indivisible, balancing the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, and the declaration is not empty: it affirms that the goals should be pursued together, and it repudiates the sectoral fragmentation of earlier development frameworks. The difficulty is that indivisibility is asserted without being operationalized. The Agenda provides no general procedure for adjudicating conflicts among its goals. Applicable human-rights obligations nevertheless constrain

policy choices, as discussed in Section 7.4. The interactions literature has documented those conflicts extensively[27][28], and states resolve them, necessarily, according to domestic political priority. Integration declared at the level of goals, without a rule for adjudicating conflict, is a normative commitment at leverage point 3 rather than an intervention at leverage point 5 — and that distinction is the one this article exists to draw. Indivisibility names what a coupled architecture would deliver. It does not supply the coupling.

In summary, the SDGs are concentrated at leverage points 12 and 6, address points 5 and 4 only weakly or not at all from a primarily global, top-down perspective, and remain actively conservative at points 3 and 2. This assessment requires qualification at leverage point 4: although the SDGs do not redistribute power within global rule-making institutions, their localization has facilitated pockets of subnational self-organization, coordination, and experimentation. In some contexts, these local dynamics can partially bypass national-level growth constraints, even if they have not yet altered the deeper structures shaping the system as a whole. Table 1 summarizes this distribution. A systems-theoretic observer shown this distribution in 2015 and asked to predict the framework's transformative effect would likely have anticipated much of what the empirical record now shows.

5. Policy resistance: reading the empirical record through systems theory

Meadows[9] describes policy resistance as the characteristic behavior of a system pushed at low leverage: the system's feedback structure compensates, and effort produces displacement rather than change. Three features of the SDG record are consistent with this interpretation.

The studies cited below document interactions among goals, progress trends, and institutional effects. Their interpretation as policy resistance is advanced here, rather than attributed to those sources. These patterns are compatible with structural compensation or absorption, but are not uniquely diagnostic: implementation delays, resource and administrative constraints, political choices, and external shocks can also contribute. The evidence reviewed does not isolate their relative effects.

First, trade-offs and burden-shifting between goals. The literature on SDG interactions[27][28] finds systematic negative interactions among goals—most prominently between SDG 8 and the ecological goals, and between consumption-related targets and virtually everything else. Progress on one indicator achieved by intensifying efforts within the existing structure tends to appear as regression elsewhere

because the underlying stocks and flows are shared. Such displacement is consistent with compensating feedback, although identifying that mechanism requires tracing the processes connecting the outcomes.

Second, the pattern of selective progress. Goals and targets aligned with what the system already does—promoting growth, infrastructure, connectivity, and formal enrollment—show the most progress; those requiring the system to do what it is not structured to do—reduce inequality, achieve absolute decoupling, and transform consumption—show the least (Messerli et al., 2019). A purely aspirational framework thus acts as a filter: it allows the system's pre-existing momentum to pass through and labels the resulting movement as achievement.

Third, absorption. Synthesizing evidence across governance levels, Biermann et al. (Hickmann et al., 2024) conclude that the SDGs' effects have been largely discursive—changing how actors talk—with limited normative and institutional effects on legislation, budgets, or organizational structures. In systems terms, the intervention has been metabolized: the system has incorporated the goals as vocabulary while leaving its rules, incentive structures, and resource flows substantially unaltered. Corporate SDG reporting, in which firms map existing activities onto the 17 icons, provides the clearest illustration of absorption at the firm level (Nicolò et al., 2022). The evidence on partnerships points in the same direction: even the multi-affected/interested party partnerships positioned as the Agenda's flagship implementation mechanism tend to neglect the deepest intervention points, despite addressing multiple levels of intervention (Higham et al., 2024).

The diagnosis would be weakened by evidence that SDG implementation persistently changes institutional rules, decision-making authority, or operative priorities, and that these changes influence outcomes beyond isolated initiatives. Sections 7.3 and 7.4 specify prospective tests. Conversely, disappointing aggregate outcomes alone cannot confirm policy resistance; causal assessment must examine the relevant feedbacks and competing explanations.

6. The discursive defense and why it concedes the argument

The strongest defense of the SDGs accepts that they are unenforceable but argues that this criticism misunderstands their nature. On this view, the SDGs represent governance through goals[29]: a normative framework intended to orient discourse, shape expectations, legitimize advocacy, and diffuse a shared vocabulary of development, with behavioral change occurring indirectly. This defense takes at least three forms. First, the SDGs may function as a norm cascade, making poverty, inequality, climate action,

gender equality, and biodiversity protection part of a shared global vocabulary. Second, they may serve as a coordination device, enabling states, firms, universities, civil society organizations, and funders to align their activities around common categories. Third, they may operate as mobilizing discourse, giving advocates and bureaucratic entrepreneurs a language through which to claim resources and legitimacy. Recent scholarship on SDG localization adds an important qualification: at the subnational level, SDG discourse may sometimes enable local governments to circumvent or reframe national-level paradigms, thereby translating discursive shifts into changes in local priorities, institutions, and policy coalitions. Such cases suggest that discourse can alter system behavior at particular scales, even when it fails to transform the global system as a whole. These effects are real and should not be dismissed. The question is whether they are strong enough, in Meadows' terms, to alter the behavior of the relevant system rather than merely stabilize it—and whether localized changes can be generalized, coordinated, and coupled with deeper changes in rules, resource flows, and power.

Meadows' framework takes this defense more seriously than most critics do—and reveals both its potential and its limits (Figure 2). Meadows insisted that paradigm change, the deepest form of leverage, typically begins with words: identifying anomalies, repeating a new frame, and working with actors who are receptive to it. If the SDGs functioned as a paradigm intervention—if they identified the growth paradigm as the anomaly and consistently drew attention to it—they would merit classification as a leverage-point-2 intervention despite their lack of enforcement, and the critique developed here would be substantially weakened. The relevant question, therefore, is not whether discourse can ever contribute to transformation, but whether the SDGs' discourse is oriented toward that trajectory and connected to mechanisms capable of advancing it. The evidence considered here supports a concern that these connections remain weak at the global level, without excluding transformative effects in particular settings.

The framework's affirmation of growth complicates that reading. A discursive intervention that reaffirms the existing paradigm is not a lever for paradigm change; it is an instrument of paradigm maintenance. The SDGs' vocabulary embeds growth as an objective, endorses the existing rule structure, and frames sustainability as compatible with—and indeed achievable through—the continuation of present arrangements. On the evidence, their discursive effect has been to provide the existing system with an idiom of transformation: the 17 icons appear in corporate reports, ministry strategies, and university branding, often used to describe existing activities (Hickmann et al., 2024). The circular economy discourse that has flourished under SDG 12 illustrates the same dynamic at the narrative level:

it offers an appealing vocabulary of closed loops and decoupled growth while, on critical examination, depoliticizing questions of material throughput and keeping systemic alternatives off the agenda. Discourse is indeed powerful; that is precisely why discourse that stabilizes the paradigm matters. The defense thus concedes the decisive premise—that the SDGs' operative channel is talk rather than rules or resources—while overlooking the fact that this discourse operates in a paradigm-conserving direction.

A second version of the defense proceeds from gradualism. The sequencing account of Allen and Malekpour [10], developed in Section 3, is accepted here as a theoretical possibility. The disagreement concerns its realization: whether the interventions pursued through the development decades, the MDGs, and the SDGs were strategic, coordinated, and coupled in the manner the theory requires.

The relevant empirical question is whether coordination and discourse become connected to durable changes in decision-making. The literature reviewed identifies limited institutional effects, supporting concern about the strength of those connections. It does not supply a comprehensive historical test of every sequence initiated through global goal-setting. The assessment therefore remains conditional: evidence of sustained changes attributable in part to SDG implementation would weaken the diagnosis of absorption.

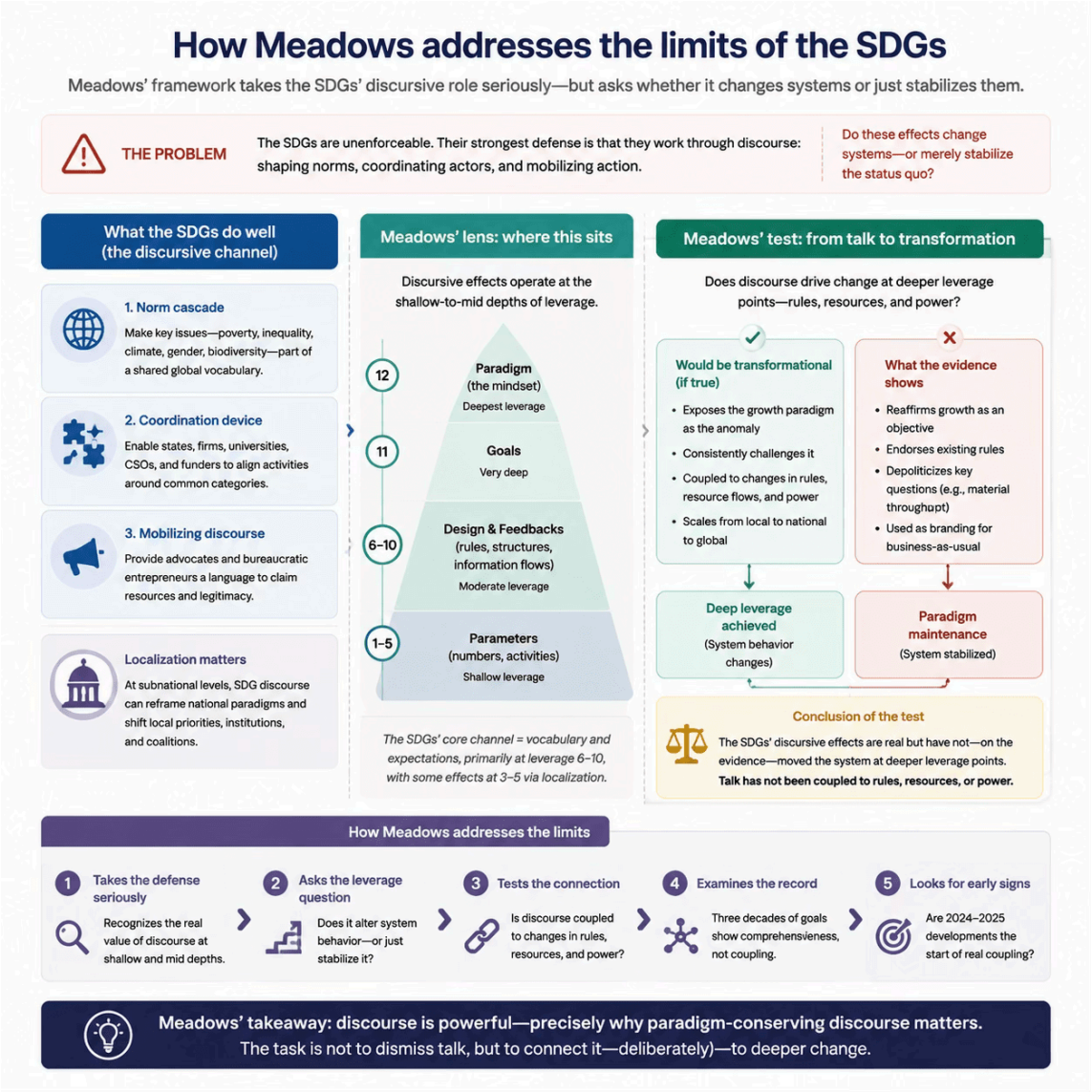


Figure 2. Graphical representation of the role of Meadows' lens as it might apply to in the limits of the SDGs and impacts of discourse.

Whether the institutional developments of 2024–2025 constitute the beginning of such coupling is the question taken up next.

doi.org/10.32388/OZJPOZ.3

7. Deep leverage after 2015: design criteria and the Pact for the Future

7.1. What deep-leverage intervention would entail

A successor framework operating at Meadows' deeper leverage points would differ from the SDGs in identifiable ways. At the level of rules, it would address the binding structures that the SDGs avoid: trade and investment law, debt architecture, tax cooperation, and intellectual-property regimes—the domains in which obligations are established and enforced and where the developmental and ecological consequences of current arrangements are generated. At the level of self-organization, it would redistribute the capacity to make and change rules by addressing the representation of developing countries in international financial institutions, rather than aspiring to outcomes that those institutions' current governance makes unlikely. At the level of goals, it would replace aggregate output growth with objectives defined by the variables that matter—provisioning within planetary boundaries, as elaborated in Doughnut Economics and post-growth scholarship[5][30]—and accept the distributional confrontation this entails rather than dissolving it in the solvent of "sustained, inclusive and sustainable" growth. At the level of paradigm, it would do what Meadows argued paradigm challengers must do: name the anomaly explicitly rather than encode its denial in a target. These identify dimensions of institutional change against which claims of transformation can be assessed.

The sequencing argument in Section 3 does not require a successor framework to intervene at every deeper level simultaneously. It does require explicit milestones, mechanisms for escalation, and feedback between successive interventions. Common indicators and disclosure requirements would need to be connected to institutional arrangements capable of supporting subsequent reforms in finance, trade, debt, and taxation.

For a post-2030 framework, this implies specifying who receives indicator information, which decisions it informs, who has authority and resources to respond, and what triggers review or corrective action. Targets should be linked to identifiable policy instruments and public reasons for departures; participation should include the capacity of affected groups to contest priorities and influence rules. These are design principles derived from the analysis, not a claim that one institutional model suits every domain.

7.2. Operating at the level of rules: Basel III as an instructive contrast

The Basel comparison addresses a central puzzle: why can formally non-binding international standards become institutionally consequential in global finance, while global sustainability commitments remain largely aspirational? Basel demonstrates that international legal softness does not itself preclude consequential governance. Its formally non-binding standards operate through domestic transposition, supervisory expectations, peer review, and market discipline[31]. The explanatory point is that these connections make agreed standards part of institutional practice. Domestic law matters within this arrangement, but legal adoption alone would not account for its operation. The comparison concerns how norms become embedded in routine assessment, decisions, and responses to non-compliance.

Terminology matters to this comparison. "Basel III" denotes the broader post-crisis prudential framework; "the 2017 final Basel III reforms" denotes its finalisation package[12]. "Basel 3.1" is used here specifically for the UK Prudential Regulation Authority's implementation of the remaining Basel III standards.

Basel III—the broader post-crisis framework of prudential banking standards—establishes minimum common-equity requirements; capital-conservation and countercyclical buffers; a leverage ratio; liquidity-coverage and stable-funding ratios; and capital surcharges for globally systemically important banks. Superficially, these are numbers: interventions at leverage point 12, and far more granular than any SDG target. What distinguishes them is the institutional machinery in which they are embedded. Basel standards are transposed into binding national and supranational law, including the EU's Capital Requirements Regulation, U.S. capital rules, and the UK Prudential Regulation Authority's rulebook, where breaches carry automatic consequences, beginning with restrictions on dividend distributions and bonus payments. Compliance is continuously supervised and assessed through the Committee's Regulatory Consistency Assessment Programme and the IMF–World Bank Financial Sector Assessment Program. It is also disciplined by markets through mandatory public disclosure under Pillar 3, which places information about capital adequacy in the hands of investors and counterparties with immediate incentives to act on it. In the vocabulary of this article, Basel III exhibits the couplings that the SDGs lack: parameters embedded in rules, information flows reaching empowered recipients, and deliberately engineered feedback. The countercyclical capital buffer, for example, constitutes a designed negative-feedback loop that strengthens as credit expansion accelerates. The result was substantial behavioral change at scale: the highest-quality capital held by internationally active banks increased by over 70% relative to pre-crisis levels within a decade (Paduszyńska & Lesiak, 2022).

Basel connects numerical standards to institutions expected to apply them, information to actors positioned to respond, and review to recurring decisions about bank behavior. The contrast concerns the operation of agreed norms and procedures. Formally non-binding international standards can be more consequential in practice than legally binding commitments whose implementation remains weak. This is an institutional proposition, not a claim that soft law is inherently superior to hard law. The SDGs' reliance on reporting becomes problematic where reported conditions do not reliably alter the practices that generate them.

The framework should not, however, be presented as an unqualified success of rule-based governance. The effectiveness of the Basel framework is mediated by uneven transposition, regulatory arbitrage, and the political economy of implementation. As Liu[22][32] observed during the early implementation of Basel III, common standards do not automatically produce effective supervision. Their success depends not only on regulators' formal mandates, but also on sufficient resources, institutional independence, and organizational incentives to intervene despite political resistance and the immediate visibility of regulatory costs. Implementation is therefore a governance challenge, not merely an administrative exercise. Continuing disputes over the 2017 final Basel III reforms—often discussed in the United States as the "Basel III Endgame"—illustrate how industry resistance can delay, dilute, or otherwise reshape standards before they take full effect. In the United States, for example, opposition from large and small banks contributed to the watering down of the original implementation proposal, while the European Union postponed key provisions amid concerns about divergence from the U.S. timetable[33]. Basel III therefore demonstrates both the possibility of coupling parameters to rules and feedback and the difficulty of sustaining that coupling when compliance imposes distributive costs on powerful actors. Its record is best understood as a qualified success: capital requirements altered bank behavior, but regulatory gaps, contested enforcement, and delayed or diluted implementation remain integral to the regime rather than incidental imperfections. The comparison with the SDGs is consequently not between effective rules and ineffective targets in the abstract, but between a framework with institutional mechanisms capable of generating and defending behavioral change and one whose indicators remain largely detached from such mechanisms.

The comparison has limits. Banking regulation concerns a narrower set of activities and more identifiable regulated actors and supervisory institutions than the sustainable development agenda. These differences affect feasibility and prevent an inference that Basel's arrangements can simply be replicated. Two further cautions attend any wholesale transfer of the Basel model. First, Basel governance

is club governance. The Committee comprises central banks and supervisory authorities from fewer than thirty jurisdictions, while most developing countries receive its standards as rule-takers. Replicating the Basel architecture without reforming its membership would therefore reproduce, at leverage point 4, precisely the representational deficit targeted by the Pact for the Future. Second, prudential capital rules are instruments for pricing risk to banks, not for pricing harm to the world. They can transmit a sustainability objective, but they cannot supply one. That objective must come from the level of system goals—the level the SDGs left unchanged.

Could the Basel model be applied to the sustainability agenda itself? Only partially, and the limits of existing applications are diagnostic. The most obvious application concerns the financial preconditions of the SDGs: climate and broader sustainability risks could be incorporated into capital and supervisory frameworks so that banks' exposure to transition-vulnerable and ecologically destructive assets carries prudential consequences rather than merely reputational ones. Movement in this direction already exists —the Basel Committee has issued principles for the management and supervision of climate-related financial risks[13]—and should not be dismissed as mere policy resistance. Under the sequencing criteria in Section 3, the relevant test is whether supervisory guidance, disclosure obligations, and improved risk information lead to sustained changes in supervisory decisions, incentives, and financial behavior. The principles provide supervisory guidance without themselves establishing differentiated capital requirements for climate-exposed assets. That distinction does not settle their practical significance: guidance may be consequential if it changes supervisory routines and bank decisions. The relevant evidence concerns its application and effects, rather than its formal designation alone.

The contested implementation of the 2017 final Basel III reforms illustrates the political difficulty of sustaining consequential rules[33]. This is consistent with the expectation that changes carrying distributive costs encounter resistance; it does not prove a universal relationship between leverage depth and opposition. For sustainability governance, the lesson is to examine how institutional connections are established, contested, and maintained. Basel demonstrates that international soft law can become consequential through those connections, while leaving open the different political conditions under which comparable mechanisms might develop in sustainability governance.

7.3. The Pact for the Future as a partial test case

Adopted at the Summit of the Future[34], the Pact for the Future contains, under the heading "Transforming Global Governance," what the UN describes as its most detailed agreement to

date on reforming the international financial architecture. It calls for strengthening the voice and representation of developing countries in international financial institutions; reviewing the sovereign debt architecture, with the review to be conducted by the IMF in collaboration with the UN, the G20, and other actors; rechanneling special drawing rights and expanding multilateral development bank financing; engaging toward a UN framework convention on international tax cooperation; and developing measures of progress that go beyond gross domestic product. The Sevilla Commitment[35], adopted at the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development in 2025, extends the financing strand (Ruiz, 2025). In the vocabulary of this article, the Pact addresses leverage point 5 and leverage point 4 and, through its beyond-GDP workstream, gestures toward leverage point 3. Its financial-architecture chapter addresses institutions distinct from banking supervision, but the comparison raises a related question about implementation. Basel nonetheless provides a more demanding, rather than definitive, comparator: rule-level governance becomes consequential when numbers are translated into transposition, supervision, and enforceable requirements, but even established rule-based regimes remain vulnerable to regulatory deadlock, industry resistance, dilution, and uneven implementation, as contested implementation of the 2017 final Basel III reforms demonstrates[33]. The comparison therefore offers a standard against which the Pact's commitments can be assessed without treating Basel as an unqualified success. The relevant question is whether the Pact's commitments develop mechanisms capable of generating sustained implementation and consequences, rather than merely naming institutional reform.

The response to this challenge is that the Pact must be assessed by the same test this article applies to the SDGs: not by what it names, but by how it operates. As commitments in the Pact's adopted text, these provisions are largely procedural rather than self-executing; their subsequent implementation must be assessed separately. It commissions a review of the debt architecture rather than restructuring that architecture, and assigns leadership of the review to the IMF—the institution whose governance the reform agenda seeks to change (Gwaindepi, 2025). It commits states to "engage constructively" toward a tax convention rather than to conclude one, and to "explore options" for taxing high-net-worth individuals. Its beyond-GDP commitment establishes a process for developing complementary indicators, not for displacing growth as the operative objective of economic policy (Jansen et al., 2024)—an information intervention directed toward a possible change in system goals. In this respect, the Pact exemplifies a familiar mode of UN consensus-building: it converts contested institutional demands into carefully qualified commitments, open-ended processes, and future-oriented deliberation. Its language

records political recognition without yet imposing the rules, obligations, or consequences through which that recognition could become systemic change.

Two interpretations matter. The Pact's attention to institutional reform is consistent with the diagnosis that goals and reporting alone are insufficient. It is not proof that states adopted the Pact for that reason. Alternatively, its follow-up may demonstrate that multilateral commitments can generate deeper intervention. Distinguishing these possibilities requires examining implementation rather than treating the Pact's existence as either confirmation or refutation.

The sequencing perspective developed in Section 3 supplies a third reading: the Pact's procedural commitments may prepare the ground for deeper institutional change. The test is whether its follow-up processes connect coordination to consequential institutional practices, assessed against observable milestones rather than an indefinitely deferred promise of transformation.

For the purposes of this analysis, the end of the 2030 Agenda provides an initial assessment horizon, not a claim about the official deadlines of the Pact's follow-up processes. Assessment should distinguish adoption, institutional uptake, and implementation by 2030, and examine whether consequences persist across subsequent budgetary, regulatory, or restructuring cycles. Movement from declaratory or procedural commitments to sustained changes in governing practices counts against the diagnosis in proportion to its depth and durability; sustained movement across multiple domains would require correspondingly substantial revision. There is no fixed numerical threshold of domains that determines the result.

In international taxation, the observable test is whether, by 2030, the convention process and associated cooperation have changed the practices through which tax rules are administered, compliance is pursued, or taxing authority is exercised. Assessment should identify which institutions act differently, what consequences follow for revenue collection or the allocation of taxing rights, and whether these effects persist. The entry into force of obligations matters, but would not alone establish operative change. Conversely, consistently applied cooperative procedures could be consequential before a new treaty takes effect. The depth of change depends on whether these practices alter governing arrangements rather than merely expand reporting.

In sovereign debt architecture, the test is whether, by the same horizon, reform processes have changed the rules, authority, or established practices governing restructuring. Evidence would concern their application: whether creditor and debtor behavior changes, whether decision-making power shifts, and whether effects endure across subsequent cases. New legal provisions without implementation would be

insufficient. Repeated changes in negotiating procedures or institutional expectations could also matter where they demonstrably alter how restructuring operates, rather than merely relabel existing practice.

For beyond-GDP measurement, the test is whether, by 2030, complementary measures routinely influence budget allocation, policy appraisal, or institutional priorities, including decisions in which ecological or distributive considerations conflict with output-growth objectives. Continued use across successive budget or planning cycles would indicate durability. A legal requirement to publish a dashboard would not itself demonstrate deeper change. Established decision procedures that give these considerations practical priority could do so, provided their effects are observable and sustained.

These tests concern the depth and durability of institutional practice. Formal adoption, procedural activity, and legal obligation are relevant evidence, but none is a substitute for examining what institutions do. Durable changes in collective capacity or operative priorities may demonstrate deeper leverage; an effectively applied numerical adjustment may remain a shallower intervention. The framework therefore evaluates both the strength of implementation and the locus of change, without equating legal form with either.

7.4. Human rights and the distinction between obligation and practice

The Agenda's human-rights foundations sharpen the distinction between formal commitment and institutional operation. The Danish Institute for Human Rights reports that 156 of the 169 targets reflect provisions of international human-rights and labour standards[36]. That correspondence establishes an important normative foundation. It does not establish that the associated obligations consistently govern development decisions. A legally binding obligation can remain aspirational in its practical effects where implementation and responses to non-compliance are weak, without ceasing to be an obligation in law.

The Secretary-General's 2020 Call to Action places human rights at the core of sustainable development and calls for rights principles and mechanisms to guide SDG implementation[37]. Its significance for this analysis depends on whether those principles become part of established decision-making, resource allocation, and accountability practices. Reaffirming a norm and institutionalizing its application are distinct achievements.

Human-rights mechanisms offer capacities through which such institutionalization may occur. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights emphasizes domestic recognition of Covenant rights, appropriate remedies, and governmental accountability[38]. Treaty bodies also consider individual

complaints where the applicable procedural conditions are met[39]. These mechanisms cannot be dismissed as mere aspiration. Their existence nevertheless leaves open the question of how consistently they influence the practices relevant to sustainability. This article does not provide a comprehensive assessment of their enforcement across jurisdictions.

Basel clarifies why this distinction matters. Its international standards derive practical force from their incorporation into supervision, incentives, and recurring institutional decisions, including domestic legal requirements. The human-rights connection must be assessed on the same basis: whether commitments constrain incompatible decisions, influence resource allocation, and produce effective responses when obligations are not fulfilled. Identifying binding law is therefore not, by itself, a rebuttal to the architectural diagnosis. Evidence that rights commitments routinely shape development practice would bear on that diagnosis; their formal recognition alone does not close the gap it identifies.

The 2030 assessment horizon in Section 7.3 can guide investigation of these connections. Observable evidence would include sustained changes in administrative practice, budget decisions, institutional accountability, or implemented remedies through which rights commitments shape development outcomes. Research should distinguish citing a right or an SDG from giving it operative weight and should examine the Agenda's contribution where attribution is claimed. Consequential practice need not depend on creating a new obligation or obtaining a judicial decision. Its depth, reach, and durability determine how substantially it challenges the diagnosis.

8. Conclusion

The SDGs' transformative ambition exceeds the institutional mechanisms supplied by their global architecture. Read through Meadows' leverage points, the central mismatch is between commitments requiring changes in rules, power, and operative priorities and a framework concentrated in targets and reporting. The growth and distributional examples show why the depth of an aspiration must be distinguished from the depth of its implementation. The question is how sustainability becomes an operative norm within institutions, rather than a commitment pursued alongside practices that remain substantially unchanged. This is an architectural diagnosis, not a demonstration that the SDGs cannot contribute to transformation under any conditions.

The observed patterns of trade-offs, selective progress, and limited institutional effects are consistent with policy resistance, but do not uniquely establish it. The analysis is limited by its interpretive mapping, reliance on the reviewed literature, and focus on the global architecture. It does not measure

the causal contribution of the SDGs or resolve variation across national and local settings. Meadows' framework also provides a situated analytical perspective rather than an exhaustive account of possible transformations. These limits constrain the generality of the conclusions without removing the institutional question the analysis identifies.

Basel III makes the central point: formally non-binding international standards can shape consequential practices when institutions routinely apply them. The human-rights connection sharpens the same distinction from the other direction: the existence of legal obligations does not itself establish their effective operation. A post-2030 framework should specify how commitments influence decisions, how information prompts institutional responses, and how affected groups can influence rules and priorities. Future research should trace these processes and assess their depth and durability. The argument is about the institutionalization of sustainability in governing norms and practices; neither additional declarations nor additional law is sufficient without examining what changes in their application.

References

1. ^a ^b ^c ^dUN General Assembly (2015). "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Developm ent (A/RES/70/1)." United Nations.
2. ^OECD (2022). Global Outlook on Financing for Sustainable Development 2023. OECD Publishing. doi:10.178 7/fcbe6ce9-en.
3. ^UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2026). "The Sustainable Development Goals Report 202 6." United Nations. https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2026.
4. ^a ^bEasterly W (2015). "The SDGs Should Stand for Senseless, Dreamy, Garbled." Foreign Policy.
5. ^a ^b ^c ^dHickel J (2019). "The Contradiction of the Sustainable Development Goals: Growth Versus Ecology on a Finite Planet." Sustain Dev. **27**(5):873–884. doi:10.1002/sd.1947.
6. ^a ^b ^cFukuda-Parr S, McNeill D (2019). "Knowledge and Politics in Setting and Measuring the SDGs: Introduc tion to Special Issue." Glob Policy. **10**(S1):5–15. doi:10.1111/1758-5899.12604.
7. ^a ^bBiermann F, Hickmann T, Sénit CA, Beisheim M, Bernstein S, Chasek P, Grob L, Kim RE, Kotzé LJ, Nilsson M, Ordoñez Llanos A, Okereke C, Pradhan P, Raven R, Sun Y, Vijge MJ, van Vuuren D, Wicke B (2022). "Scienti fic Evidence on the Political Impact of the Sustainable Development Goals." Nat Sustain. **5**(9):795–800. doi:1 0.1038/s41893-022-00909-5.

8. ^ a, b, c, d, e *Meadows DH (1999). "Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System." The Sustainability Institute. https://donellameadows.org/archives/leverage-points-places-to-intervene-in-a-system/.*
9. ^ a, b, c *Meadows DH (2008). Thinking in Systems: A Primer. Chelsea Green Publishing.*
10. ^ a, b, c, d, e *Allen C, Malekpour S (2023). "Unlocking and Accelerating Transformations to the SDGs: A Review of Existing Knowledge." Sustain Sci. **18**(4):1939–1960. doi:10.1007/s11625-023-01342-z.*
11. ^ a, b, c *Koloffon Rosas M (2025). "Partnerships for Sustainable Development: Measuring Transformative Potential Through Leverage Points." Earth Syst Gov. **25**:100265. doi:10.1016/j.esg.2025.100265.*
12. ^ a, b *Basel Committee on Banking Supervision (2017). Basel III: Finalising Post-Crisis Reforms. Bank for International Settlements.*
13. ^ a, b *Basel Committee on Banking Supervision (2022). Principles for the Effective Management and Supervision of Climate-Related Financial Risks. Bank for International Settlements.*
14. ^ *Fukuda-Parr S (2016). "From the Millennium Development Goals to the Sustainable Development Goals: Shifts in Purpose, Concept, and Politics of Global Goal Setting for Development." Gender Dev. **24**(1):43–52. doi:10.1080/13552074.2016.1145895.*
15. ^ *Kamau M, Chasek P, O'Connor D (2018). Transforming Multilateral Diplomacy: The Inside Story of the Sustainable Development Goals. Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780429491276.*
16. ^ a, b *Haberl H, Wiedenhofer D, Virág D, Kalt G, Plank B, Brockway P, Fishman T, Hausknost D, Krausmann F, Leon-Gruchalski B, Mayer A, Pichler M, Schaffartzik A, Sousa T, Streeck J, Creutzig F (2020). "A Systematic Review of the Evidence on Decoupling of GDP, Resource Use and GHG Emissions, Part II: Synthesizing the Insights." Environ Res Lett. **15**(6):065003. doi:10.1088/1748-9326/ab842a.*
17. ^ *IPCC (2022). Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change. Contribution of Working Group III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781009157926.*
18. ^ *Corvellec H, Stowell AF, Johansson N (2022). "Critiques of the Circular Economy." J Ind Ecol. **26**(2):421–432. doi:10.1111/jiec.13187.*
19. ^ a, b *Meadows DH, Meadows DL, Randers J, Behrens WW III (1972). The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind. Universe Books.*
20. ^ *Dorninger C, Abson DJ, Apetrei CI, Derwort P, Ives CD, Klaniecki K, Lam DPM, Langsenlehner M, Riechers M, Spittler N, von Wehrden H (2020). "Leverage Points for Sustainability Transformation: A Review on Interventions in Food and Energy Systems." Ecol Econ. **171**:106570. doi:10.1016/j.ecolecon.2019.106570.*

21. ^Liu C (2015). *Jiemie Basai'er: Jianxi Guoji Yinhang Jianguan Kuangjia [Decoding Basel: A Brief Analysis of the International Banking Regulatory Framework]*. China Financial Publishing House.

22. a, b, cLiu C (2011). "Rethinking the International Banking Regulatory Framework." *Financ Regul Res J.*

23. ^Hacker JS (2002). *The Divided Welfare State: The Battle over Public and Private Social Benefits in the United States*. Cambridge University Press.

24. ^Kydland FE, Prescott EC (1977). "Rules Rather than Discretion: The Inconsistency of Optimal Plans." *J Polit Econ.* **85**(3):473–491.

25. ^Stigler GJ (1971). "The Theory of Economic Regulation." *Bell J Econ Manage Sci.* **2**(1):3–21.

26. ^Carney M (2015). "Breaking the Tragedy of the Horizon: Climate Change and Financial Stability." *Speech delivered at Lloyd's of London, September 29.*

27. a, bNilsson M, Griggs D, Visbeck M (2016). "Policy: Map the Interactions Between Sustainable Development Goals." *Nature.* **534**(7607):320–322. doi:10.1038/534320a.

28. a, bPradhan P, Costa L, Rybski D, Lucht W, Kropp JP (2017). "A Systematic Study of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Interactions." *Earth's Future.* **5**(11):1169–1179. doi:10.1002/2017EF000632.

29. ^Kanie N, Biermann F (2017). *Governing Through Goals: Sustainable Development Goals as Governance Innovation*. MIT Press.

30. ^Raworth K (2017). *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist*. Chelsea Green Publishing.

31. ^Brummer C (2012). *Soft Law and the Global Financial System: Rule Making in the 21st Century*. Cambridge University Press.

32. ^Liu C (2011). "Financial Regulation Essential." *China Daily.* http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2011-02/16/content_12022463.htm.

33. a, b, cKolliopoulos A (2025). "Global Banking Regulation in the Era of the New State Interventionism." *J Bank Regul.* **26**(4):840–854. doi:10.1057/s41261-025-00290-1.

34. ^UN General Assembly (2024). "The Pact for the Future (A/RES/79/1)." United Nations.

35. ^United Nations (2025). "Outcome Document of the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development: Sevilla Commitment." United Nations.

36. ^Danish Institute for Human Rights. *Statement on human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals [Statement to the Working Group of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention, twentieth meeting]*. United Nations

Economic Commission for Europe. https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/env/pp/wgp/WGP-20/Statements and Presentations/Danish Institute for Human Rights Birgitte Feining.pdf

37. ^*United Nations Secretary-General (2020). "Remarks to the Human Rights Council: The Highest Aspiration—A Call to Action for Human Rights." United Nations Regional Information Centre. https://unric.org/it/discorso-del-segretario-generale-al-consiglio-onu-dei-diritti-umani-the-highest-aspiration-a-call-to-action-for-human-rights/.*
38. ^*Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) (1998). "General Comment No. 9: The Domestic Application of the Covenant (E/C.12/1998/24)." United Nations.*
39. ^*Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). "OHCHR Submission Portal." OHCHR. https://complaints.ohchr.org/.*

Declarations

Funding: No specific funding was received for this work.

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.