Climate Diplomacy

MANAGING THE TRADE-OFFS OF TRANSFORMATION THROUGH FOREIGN POLICY

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Climate Diplomacy

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BY CLARE CHURCH (IISD), ALEC CRAWFORD (IISD) AND STELLA SCHALLER (ADELPHI)

Every change, no matter how small, can cause larger changes elsewhere. The radical transformation envisioned under the SDGs requires anticipating and managing trade-offs, and the diplomatic cadre will have a significant role to play in maximising synergies, mitigating adverse knock-on consequences and developing strategies for mutual benefit.

INCONSISTENCIES AND TRADE-OFFS BETWEEN DIFFERENT SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS)

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development seeks to transform the global approach to development, ambitiously tackling such noble and necessary goals as the eradication of poverty, the elimination of hunger, and the provision of widespread, quality education. The 17 goals that form the core of the 2030 Agenda are themselves – by design – an integrated set of global priorities and objectives that are fundamentally interdependent; they will interact with one another.[1]

But the sheer scope of the agenda, and the number of goals and targets contained within it, has the potential to result in inconsistencies and trade-offs between different SDGs; progress in one area, if not carefully planned and implemented, could jeopardize the achievement of other goals. These trade-offs could occur not just across SDGs but also across borders. While UN member states have primary responsibility for their own economic and social development, the cross-boundary nature of the SDGs will require that foreign policy be used to manage the synergies and trade-offs that might occur as countries pursue achievement of the goals.

Approaching the SDGs as a holistic set of interacting goals will greatly increase the chances of their attainment, while reducing the risks that might otherwise arise.

For example, the growth in demand for renewable energy technologies (SDG 7) could threaten stability in those fragile states rich in the minerals and metals required to produce them (SDG 16). Increasing trade and exports of developing countries (SDG 17) can accelerate species extinction (SDG 15) as trade in food, fibre

Achieving one SDG can leverage gains in other fields but may also require compromises and reconciliation of competing interests.

or timber has high impacts on biodiversity.[2] Similarly, a failure to integrate climate action (SDG 13) into the design and implementation of international peacebuilding efforts (SDG 16) could undermine the ability of fragile states to respond to the growing threat of climate change.

SDG trade-offs such as these affect a range of core foreign policy objectives for international security, stability, and prosperity. Foreign policy can and must play a role in ensuring that transformative change is managed peacefully. Peace, in turn, is not only an SDG in itself but also an important precondition for the successful implementation of most other SDGs.[3]

Ending hunger, eradicating poverty and improving education will, for example, all be very difficult to achieve in a context of weak governance and fragility. Approaching the SDGs as a holistic set of interacting goals, rather than as stand-alone targets, will greatly increase the chances of their attainment, while reducing the risks that might otherwise arise. Given the focus on international peace, justice, and human rights, foreign policy experts in particular should consider these interactions, and aspire to ensure that such unintended negative impacts do not occur.

THREE SCENARIOS: UNINTENDED IMPACTS OF SDG PROGRESS

In the implementation of the SDGs to date, positive synergies between goals have greatly surpassed any incompatibilities.[4,5] That said, actions toward the achievement of one goal can potentially negatively impact the attainment of other goals if they are not designed and implemented in a careful, conflict-sensitive, and fundamentally transformational way. These trade-offs and inconsistencies can occur across goals, but also within goals at the target level. Three scenarios are provided below, by no means an exhaustive list.

States with high reliance on fossil fuel exports may experience heightened geopolitical tensions as demand wavers in the face of green energy technologies.

SDG 7 for affordable and clean energy

There is broad agreement that mitigating climate change (SDG 13) requires a shift from non-renewable energy production and consumption systems (e.g. oil, natural gas, and coal) to a cleaner, low-carbon energy mix (SDG 7). This transition will, however, have geopolitical ramifications, and if pursued in isolation could result in heightened conflicts, grievances, and tensions, undermining progress toward SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions.[6]

Our economies are significantly shaped by fossil fuel use, and phasing out these fuels can have profound social geopolitical implications.

For one, green energy technologies – including solar panels, wind turbines, and electric vehicles – require significant supplies of metals and minerals, including lithium, cobalt, bauxite and rare earths. More than 70 per cent of global cobalt reserves are found in states perceived to be fragile and corrupt; for rare earths, 58 and 94 per cent of reserves are found in states perceived to be fragile or corrupt, respectively.[7,8,9] And while increased extraction should, in a well-governed sector, support improved infrastructure, increased jobs, health, and education, the mismanagement of this transition could exacerbate existing tensions and grievances in states already struggling with fragility, corruption, and violent conflict.[10]

More than 70 per cent of global cobalt reserves are found in states perceived to be fragile and corrupt.

Cobalt extraction in the Democratic Republic Congo (DRC) has already been connected to incidents of child labor, extortion, human rights abuses, and dangerous working conditions.[11,12] In the 'Lithium Triangle' – the border region between Argentina, Chile, and Bolivia – increased mining operations have resulted in public demonstrations relating to water access and control, and land rights.[13,14,15] Zimbabwe also has significant lithium reserves – as well as a history of mining revenues being used in ways that undermine human development.[16] In Guinea, the mining of bauxite – a key input across green technologies – has been associated with community protests and violence.[17]

How these minerals and metals are sourced in the future will determine whether or not the low-carbon transition supports peaceful, sustainable development in mineral-rich states, or reinforces weak governance and conflict.[18] Voluntary and regulatory initiatives on responsible sourcing, as well as effective foreign policy, will be integral to ensuring this peaceful transition.

At the same time, states with high reserves of or reliance on the export of fossil fuel like natural gas, coal, and oil may experience heightened geopolitical tensions as demand wavers in the face of green energy technologies.[19,20] Fuel accounts for more than 90 per cent of total exports for Algeria, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, and Venezuela – states already struggling with high rates of fragility and conflict.[21,22] As the international community transitions to alternative energy sources, oil-rich countries are faced with a future in which their principal resource declines in value, and – unless they adapt to this new reality – along with it their coffers and geopolitical influence.[23,24]

SDG 12 for responsible consumption and production

SDG 12 aims to ensure responsible consumption and production patterns. This includes promoting sustainable public procurement practices, efficiently managing natural resources, and reporting on sustainability measures – or the lack thereof – in the global supply chains.[25]

Section 1502 of the US Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act requires that publicly-traded companies dealing with tin, tungsten, tantalum, and gold (3TG) sourced from the DRC or adjacent countries in their supply chains take steps to ensure that the mining and trade of these minerals does not contribute to conflict. Signed in 2010, the Act in theory reinforces SDG 12 for Responsible Consumption and Production, by addressing the supply chains of 3TG and mandating reporting and responsible sourcing best practices.

In execution, many companies and investors responded to the legislation by simply not investing in the DRC altogether, threatening the livelihoods of many legitimate, safe, and responsible miners in the country. As a result, many artisanal small-scale miners and their families are now facing considerable hardships due to the widespread lack of demand for minerals from the region.[26,27] In some cases, miners have been forced to find other ways to survive, including joining the very armed groups whose growth and activities Section 1502 aimed to prevent.[28] While well-intentioned, a narrow approach to responsible consumption and production ultimately threatened the decent work and economic growth of legitimate Congolese miners, thereby jeopardizing progress in SDG 8 for Decent Work and Economic Growth as well as SDG 16.

A narrow approach to responsible consumption and production ultimately threatens decent work and peace.

SDG 13 for climate action

SDG 13 aims to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts, including targets to strengthen resilience and adaptive capacities in all countries.[29] It is crucial that as governments and development partners begin designing and implementing climate actions, they do so with a view toward conflict risks; by incorporating a conflict-sensitive or do-no-harm approach to climate change adaptation and mitigation projects, they can help ensure that the work they are doing does not undermine progress on peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16).[30]

Ensuring that a policy of minimising conflict risks and enhancing peacebuilding opportunities is integrated in climate change programming will help ensure that, for example, the distribution of the benefits of adaptation programming to a select group of beneficiaries does not lead to grievances and competition between or among communities; or that the benefits derived from a climate change action do not make a group a target for violence or theft.[31]

Conversely, peacebuilding and humanitarian actors must work to ensure that their interventions in pursuit of SDG 16 do not impinge upon long-term efforts to increase climate resilience in fragile states. Climate change and variability could reverse or undermine much of the progress that has been achieved in fragile states, and the changing climate is increasingly seen as a challenge to human security and a potential driver of conflict.[32] Fragile and conflict-affected states and societies are more likely to suffer the negative effects of climate change. Climate change acts as a threat multiplier in places where governments are already struggling to provide basic services, where populations rely on climate-dependent, resource-based livelihoods, and where there are already tensions or conflicts. Adaptation measures therefore must take into account fragility and conflict risks, while peacebuilding and conflict prevention measures need to factor in climate risks.[33,34]

Adaptation must take into account fragility and conflict risks, while peacebuilding needs to factor in climate risks.

In North Darfur, UN Environment's "Wadi El Ku Catchment Management" project demonstrated how resource management, climate, and conflict sensitivity could be integrated. Since 2003, the armed conflict in Darfur has eroded social cohesion and institutions, making it more difficult to sustainably manage natural resources and maintain livelihoods — and easier for armed groups to recruit young people. To reverse the cycle of conflict and environmental degradation, the project sought to restore safe and sustainable access to natural resources, including fresh water, for the more than 700,000 people. NGOs, national authorities and communities jointly built irrigation infrastructure, thereby increasing agricultural production without competing with other users of their shared water sources. These efforts also increased trust between groups and governance levels.[35,36]

FOREIGN POLICY CAN HELP MANAGE THE SPILLOVER EFFECTS OF SDG IMPLEMENTATION

Foreign policy has a strong role to play in ensuring that the positive synergies which exist among the SDGs are promoted and enhanced, while the negative trade-offs that might emerge as a result of a siloed approach to SDG implementation – as illustrated in the cases above – are minimised. In cases where national efforts fail or are insufficient to reach certain SDGs, diplomacy can help by stimulating informed international action. To achieve this will require that knowledge gaps are addressed, that incentives are adopted for transformative policy solutions, and that competing stakeholder interests are reconciled (see essay #3 in this volume). Foreign policy professionals could help to overcome these challenges by:

Foreign policy has the unique capacity to draw on networks to generate more comprehensive knowledge on potential systemic impacts.

1 Generating, understanding, monitoring, and disseminating knowledge on the interlinkages that exist among the SDGs

Foreign policy actors are uniquely positioned to generate, understand, monitor, and disseminate knowledge on the interlinkages between SDGs. To avoid unintended negative consequences, the SDGs must be implemented with a better understanding of their potential systemic impacts. For foreign policy makers, this means understanding and monitoring the possible spillover effects and systemic dynamics of SDG implementation on local, national, and transboundary levels. Foreign policy has the unique capacity to draw on country networks in order to generate more comprehensive knowledge on the subject. Moreover, foreign policy actors can invest in transboundary scenario planning exercises, simulating national and transboundary interactions beforehand.

Foreign policy actors are also often skilled at conducting conflict analysis. They can and should incorporate this lens to sustainable development implementation, through the promotion and adoption of a conflict-sensitive approach to the SDGs. Foreign policy actors should consider how domestic and international efforts to achieve the SDGs will impact a country's external relations and international geopolitical stability.[37] This information should be distributed to relevant actors – both within and beyond the foreign policy sphere.

In the Wadi El Ku, North Darfur, UN Environment works to find participative solutions to both strengthen conflict-affected communities and improve natural resource management.

2 Encouraging and facilitating cooperation across sectors, ministries, departments and borders

Policies must be designed to minimise inconsistencies between the SDGs and to incentivise their comprehensive implementation. Given the varied and numerous actors impacted by SDG implementation, it is essential that all relevant stakeholders – across sectors, ministries, departments, countries – be brought together to coordinate implementation of related policies, activities, and frameworks.

There is still a dire need to advocate for, promote, and implement more radical and ambitious solutions – often against existing systemic and institutional barriers.

With regard to international aspects, diplomats and foreign policy experts have the advantage of being able to draw on their power to bring together different ministries and departments, with the aim of working across borders and sectors. Foreign policy can create cross-sectoral and inter-agency working groups and policy processes to address the international dimension of SDGs and raise awareness on this dimension with other actors. Foreign policy experts can also help to build strong partnerships[38] and promote dialogue among actors to enhance their mutual trust. Encouraging and facilitating dialogue and cooperation across sectors, ministries, departments, and borders will help to better account for the cross-cutting and transboundary nature of the SDGs, and increase coordination in their implementation

3 Advocating and pushing for transformation in ongoing policy frameworks

Though the call for transformation is often heard, there is still a dire need to advocate for, promote, and implement more radical and ambitious solutions – often against existing systemic and institutional barriers, including siloed structures in administration, or mechanisms of funding, and short timelines for development outcomes.

It is essential that all relevant stakeholders – across sectors, ministries, departments, countries – be brought together to coordinate SDG implementation.

Not all unintended negative consequences of SDG implementation will emerge due to lack of knowledge or coordination. Working toward achievement of the SDGs is not simply a technical process; it is also political, and will be affected by competing interests and power dynamics. The transformative solutions that are needed for SDG implementation will depend on policymaking that acknowledges and manages these dynamics, maintains partnerships, and promotes participative and inclusive processes.

Dynamics relating to the perceived and real winners and losers of SDG implementation must be managed with both mindfulness and pragmatism.[39] In the case of SDG 7, the surging demand for clean energy sources will present new challenges for both energy-rich and mineral-rich states struggling with fragility and conflict. It is essential that this transition take a transformative rather than business-as-usual approach to implementation, with a particular focus on the possible governance and conflict implications of the transition to a low-carbon economy. The OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals may be considered as good practice in this regard – it does not promote avoidance of sourcing from conflict-affected and high risk areas, but instead offers comprehensive guidance for ensuring mineral sourcing that respects human rights and environmental protection.

The pursuit of the SDGs is likely to affect international politics and foreign policy, a function of the strong interconnections that exist among the goals. This is particularly true for SDG 16, as peace, justice, and strong institutions are foundational principles upon which all of the other goals are built. The 2030 Agenda can only be successfully realised through the informed and effective management of the trade-offs of SDG implementation at local, regional, national, and international levels. This process will be driven by governments themselves, but will require the support of a myriad of stakeholders, including foreign policymakers.

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