

# REPORT

## Case-study on the UN Development Policy

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## List of Abbreviations

11th MP	Eleventh Malaysia Plan 2016-2020
ACC	ASEAN Coordinating Council
ACD	Asia Cooperation Dialogue
ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADFIAP	Association of Development Financing Institution in Asia and the Pacific
AEC	ASEAN Economic Community
AGS	Annual Growth Survey
AFSNDP	ASEAN Forum on SDGs with National Development Planning Agencies
AIF	ASEAN Integration Fund
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
APFSD	Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development
APSC	ASEAN Political Security Community
ASCC	ASEAN Socio Cultural Community
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEAN-CSDSD	ASEAN Centre for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue
ASEC	ASEAN Secretariat
BAPPENAS	Indonesian Ministry of National Development Planning
BPS	Statistics Indonesia
CFP	Common Fisheries Policy
CoE	Council of Europe
CPR	Committee of Permanent Representatives
CSD	Commission on Sustainable Development
CSDG	Cambodia SDGs
CSR	Country-Specific Recommendations
DFI	Development Financing Institutions
ECSC	European Coal and Steel Community
EEC	European Economic Community
EGF	European Globalization Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
EU27	27 Members of the European Union
EUSDR	European Union Strategy for the Danube Region
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization



FVP	First Vice-President of the European Commission
GAC	General Affairs Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HDI	Human Development Index
HLBD	High-Level Brainstorming Dialogue
HLPF	High-Level Panel Forum
IAI	Initiative for ASEAN Integration
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
IEEP	Institute for European Environmental Policy
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IR	International Relations
JCM	Joint Consultative Meeting
JER	Joint Employment Report
LDC	Least Developed Country
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MSP	Multi-Stakeholder Platform (MSP)
NGFS	Network for Greening the Financial System (NGFS)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OOF	Other Official Assistance
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
OWG	Open Working Group
PEGD	Poverty Eradication and Gender Division
Rio+20	United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development
RIT	Regulator-Intermediary-Target
RO	Regional Organization
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SDSN	Sustainable Development Solution Network
SEOM	Senior Economic Official Meeting
SFDRR	Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction
SOM	Senior Officials Meeting
TAC	Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia
TAN	Transnational Advocacy Networks



TEU	Treaty of the European Union
UDHR	Universal Declaration on Human Rights
UN AIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UN APRCM	United Nations Asia Pacific Regional Coordination Mechanism
UN CBD	United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity
UN CCD	United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)
UN CED	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED)
UN CHE	United Nations Conference on the Human Environment
UN CRD	United Nations Centre for Regional Development
UN DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UN ESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Program
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFCCC	United Nation's Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNV	United Nations Volunteers
UNWomen	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UXO	Unexploded Ordnance
VNR	Voluntary National Reports
WCED	World Commission on Environment and Development
WHO	World Health Organization
WP	Working Party of the European Council on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
WTO	World Trade Organization



## 1. Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the United Nations (UN) constitutes the most important UN sustainable development agenda for the next decade. It is known for its far-reaching and ambitious vision with its 17 goals and 169 targets that are listed as part of the so-called “universal policy agenda” (United Nations 2015). The document itself claims that it is a historic decision with no precedence both in scope and significance (United Nations 2015). More importantly, the Agenda also marks a new approach in the UN governance model as it further develops and embraces ‘governance through goals’ (Biermann, Kanie and Kim 2017). This model emerges from decades of learning in governing sustainability which involves various efforts in addressing different aspects of sustainable development as well as finding the right approach from top-down regulation to market mechanisms (Biermann, Kanie and Kim 2017, 26). These efforts culminated in countries’ acknowledgment of the importance of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a single integrated policy framework mainstreaming the three pillars of sustainable development in each goal rather than compartmentalizing each pillar in separate goals, as was the case of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and other preceding efforts (Meuleman and Niestroy 2015). Securing agreement and participation of UN member states and relevant stakeholders to this universal agenda was possible as it was treated as a goal set through an inclusive and consultative process, rather than as a rigid binding agreement imposed top-down by a small number of actors. The “bottom-up, non-confrontational, country-driven, and stakeholder-oriented” character of this goal-setting model enabled the adoption of the Agenda, and is also perceived as a factor for its potential success (Biermann, Kanie and Kim 2017).

The goal-setting model, which can be considered as a form of global experimentalist governance (de Búrca et al., 2013; 2014), has implications for each actor’s role and relations in global governance. On the one hand, as mentioned in the 2030 Agenda document, the broad agendas for the SDGs require a revitalized global partnership among various stakeholders from the UN system, including governments, private sectors, civil society, and other relevant actors at all levels from local, national, regional to global (United Nations 2015). On the other hand, the non-binding character and the loose institutional arrangements in implementing the agenda allows for different policy interpretation and prioritization among member states and stakeholders, which in the end shape their unique role and participation in the SDG agenda (Biermann, Kanie and Kim 2017). The 2030 Agenda document states that the SDGs implementation will pay attention to the “different national realities, capacities, level of development, and respecting national policies and priorities” as well as “regional and sub-regional dimension” (United Nations 2015). In short, even though areas have been identified for the role of various actors in the SDGs, the goal-setting model allows them to play unique role in the related areas based on their unique context and capacities.





In this paper, we focus on the role of regional organizations in the governance of the SDGs as an important intermediary between the UN and the member states. Regional organizations can contribute, in various ways, to the achievement of the SDGs. According to Marks et al. (2014, p. 1), regional organizations *'are composed of regional groupings of states that institutionalize cooperation by establishing formal institutions that resemble the trias politica—a legislative assembly normally dominated by the member states themselves; an executive on which all or a subset of member state representatives sit as delegates or trustees; a secretariat with more or less control over the agenda; some machinery for arbitrating disputes; along with one or more consultative bodies composed of stakeholders or experts.'* Currently there are more than 30 regional organizations active which differ significantly in terms of institutional design (Lenz and Marks, 2016). The paper aims to contribute to analyzing the (actual and potential) role of regional organizations in the goal-setting model of global governance of the SDGs by looking at the role of two specific regional organizations – the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In research on the SDGs, regional organizations have not received much attention. Indeed, there seems to be a dismissal on the role of regional organizations because of the global and country-led character of the SDGs. In fact, within the vast scholarly literature on the SDGs, most research heavily focus on the evolution, theories, debates, and practices of sustainable development governance at the global level (Browne, 2017; Dodds, Donoghue, & Roesch, 2017; Kanie, Biermann, & (Ed.), 2017; ; Meuleman, 2019; Monkelbaan, 2019); on individual country's implementation (Hazra & Bhukta, 2020; Holzhaecker & Agussalim, 2019; Jung, 2018; Keitumetse, Hens, & Norris, 2020; Khemka & Kumar, 2020; Wang & Zhang, 2020) and on implementation of specific goals of the SDGs (Kaltenborn, Krajewski, & Kuhn, 2020; Nhamo & Mjimba, 2020; Valentini et.al., 2019; Walker et.al. (Ed.), 2019). Only few address the role of regional organizations in the governance of the SDGs (Kapfudzaruwa et.al., 2017; Karlsson & Silander, 2020; Mickler & Wachira, 2020).

We argue that the role of regional organizations is currently underdeveloped and could be strengthened in the context of the global SDG agenda. This focus is especially important in the context of the GLOBE project which aims to investigate trends in global governance and the role of the EU therein. Our overall argument starts from the observation that the SDG agenda constitutes a relatively new form of global governance which resembles a global experimentalist governance model, revolving around global goal-setting and country-level (member state) implementation. For such a governance model to work, its architecture or institutional design is crucial and involves many different actors on multiple levels of governance. Each actor in the design has an important role to play. Such a global goal-setting framework should not be a loose, soft or voluntary system but needs sufficient dynamic accountability/reporting mechanisms between different levels to achieve goals. In such an architecture, regional organizations play a potentially important role since they can help with/strengthen implementation through different governance modes and roles. As the SDGs address transboundary issues, regional organizations can



foster coherence, learning, and ratcheting up through benchmarking between their member states. They can be ‘stepping stones’ to better SDG implementation, but possibly also a ‘stumbling block’ (Lamy, 2002). The paper analyzes the current contribution of two leading regional organizations, EU and ASEAN, to the SDGs. The analysis shows only a limited engagement of the regional organizations with the SDG agenda and identifies several shortcomings with regard to implementation, coordination and monitoring in order to make a significant contribution to the SDG agenda.

Understanding the characteristics of the goal-setting model underlying the governance of the SDGs and conducting careful regional examination is important in giving regional organizations justice in judging their role in the governance of the SDGs. To this end, this paper will proceed as follows. The next part discusses the emergence and development of the SDGs as a global goal-setting global governance model. The following part will develop a theoretical framework, based on international relations and global governance literature, which will allow us to analyze the role of regional organizations in the goal-setting governance architecture of the SDGs. The third part will then examine the role of regional organizations in the goal-setting model of the SDGs through the case studies of the EU and ASEAN. The last part will compare the two cases, discuss the main findings and draw some implications and recommendations for regional organizations to better contribute to the SDGs.

## 2. The Emergence and Development of the SDGs

### 2.1 The origins of the SDGs: the concept of sustainable development

The adoption of the SDGs is the result of more than 40 years of learning with regard to governing for sustainable development. This learning process started in 1972 with the UN Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE). This conference is an important starting point as it was convened to respond to two main criticisms toward the western development model. The first criticism was that this model is seen as having negative consequences on nature and contributing to increased environmental degradation, as it is based on the ‘domination over nature’, and is hence exploitative in its use of natural resources mainly for human purposes (Baker 2006, 3). The second criticism was that the model is predicted to last for no more than 100 years if the existing trend continues, given that it will exceed the Earth’s carrying capacity, or, using the term from the Club of Rome report, that there are, after all, limits to growth (Meadows et.al, 1972; Baker, 2006). The Conference, in this sense, marked the beginning of international attention to environmental issues as it was followed by the establishment of the UN Environment Program (UNEP) and ministries of environment across countries. More importantly, it built momentum to rethink the western development model. The concept of sustainable development proposed by Brundtland in the ‘Our Common Future’ report of 1987 could be seen as part of the follow up process in answering this call for a new model of governance in development. By introducing the norm of sustainable development, the Brundtland report aimed to demonstrate that economic development and environmental protection are



not necessarily a zero sum game. Development could be designed to meet not only developmental goals but also environmental protection (Baker 2006, 20). In its often cited definition, sustainable development is the type of development “that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p. 43; Monkelbaan, 2019, p. 9). While this new norm has gained wide popularity and triggered further discussion and adoption of the norm in various areas, it is not binding and is criticized for its lack of measurable criteria.

In this regard, Brundtland’s proposed Earth Summit that was held in the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro could be seen as another follow up effort to institutionalize the norm, marking the shift from norm-setting to rule-making model in governing sustainable development. UNCED, otherwise known as the Rio Earth Summit, was convened 20 years after the UNCHE and resulted in five governance mechanisms. The first two mechanisms, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), are legally binding instruments. Meanwhile, the latter three, that is the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, the Agenda 21, and the Forest Principle, are not binding. Both the Rio Declaration and the Agenda 21 are soft law instruments that outline the principles and plan of actions for promoting sustainable development (Baker 2006, 56). As its monitoring and reporting mechanism, UNCED established the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) which holds annual meetings to monitor the progress of the five agreed mechanisms in addition to voluntary reporting from member states (Baker 2006, 56). As a new governance model, UNCED has been praised for its greater inclusion of various actors in the process (there are 1400 NGOs joining the forum) (Najam & Cleveland, 2004; Norma & Carr, 2009), the number of agreements it produced, and its monitoring mechanism for all these agreements. All these elements have become the foundation in the practice of governance of sustainable development in the following years. The broad coverage of UNCED, however, has led to the criticism that the forum did not meet expectations. The US, for example, questioned the principles adopted in the Rio Declaration (Baker 2006, 59). Others criticized UNCED’s focus on the environmental aspect of sustainable development and particularly on three issues – biodiversity, forest, and climate change – along with its governing mechanism. Emission trading as a market mechanism developed in the subsequent process of UNFCCC, for example, was criticized for not addressing the causes of pollution as countries could prefer buying emission permits from other countries. The CSD as UNCED monitoring mechanism has also underperformed due to its broad responsibilities. Finally, there were only two binding mechanisms produced in the UNCED, meaning that the other mechanisms relied on voluntary cooperation from member states.

## 2.2 Developing a goal-setting form of governance: the Millennium Development Goals

With the proliferation of agendas on sustainable development resulting from Rio and other UN conferences in the 1990s, the UN called for a summit in the start of the new millennium to maintain



international commitment on these agreements and to integrate them under the umbrella of a global development agenda to eradicate poverty (Baker 2006). Hence, following the Millennium Declaration by UN member states in 2000, UN agencies, the OECD, and the World Bank formulated a roadmap to follow up the declaration along with the targeted goals, later known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) comprising of 8 goals, 21 targets and 60 indicators (Dodds, Donoghue and Roesch 2017). The MDGs marked another shift in the governance of sustainable development as it used a set of goals to steer actors' behavior in progressing on their development agenda instead of forcing their compliance to a set of rules. The MDGs have also been equipped with an annual monitoring mechanism to track progress. Different from the Rio Summit and its broad civic engagement, however, the MDGs were imposed top-down by the UN, without negotiation among members. This, along with other factors such as the 9/11 attack and the 2009 financial crisis, has led to the lack of ownership among member states and stakeholders and to the slow implementation of the MDGs (Dodds, Donoghue and Roesch 2017). Critics also pointed out to MDGs' compartmentalization of issues and their limited attention to environmental issues as part of MDGs weaknesses as a governance model.

In 2007, therefore, Brazil called for another summit on sustainable development to be held in 2012, or 20 years from the Rio Earth Summit. Similar to the Rio Summit, the 2012 Summit, later known as Rio+20, adopted an inclusive approach in its process, involving as many relevant actors as possible. Different from the rule-making objective in Rio, however, Rio+20 aimed to build on the MDGs, meaning that they preferred to continue governance through goals. A proposal from Colombia which later became the central debate during the Rio+20 process advocated for a revised version of the MDGs into a more integrated metric among the three pillars of sustainable development and a universal agenda for all, meaning that it is not only targeted to developing countries as was the case with the MDGs, but also that it should be the agenda for both developed and developing countries (Dodds, Donoghue and Roesch 2017). Even after this proposal gained the majority of supporters, the forum still needed to agree on what to include in the new 'Sustainable Development Goals'. Therefore, an Open Working Group (OWG) was established to hold series of consultations with various stakeholders, which eventually came out with 17 goals agreed by the UNGA (Chasek, et.al., 2016). Concurrent with this process, the UN Secretary General also prepared the Post 2015 Agenda after the MDGs by establishing High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post 2015 Development Agenda led by Indonesia, Liberia, and the UK and supported by multi-stakeholder engagement through Sustainable Development Solution Network (SDSN) and other thematic and national consultations (Dodds, Donoghue and Roesch 2017). This process resulted in 12 proposed goals to substitute the MDGs. In 2014-2015, Member states continued their negotiations to streamline these two processes and explored how these proposed goals could be implemented (Chasek, et.al., 2016). This resulted in the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with the SDGs as the framework guiding the post 2015 development agenda with means of implementation and a follow up mechanism.



## 2.3 The Sustainable Development Goals

Hence, the birth of the SDGs marks another new era in the governance of sustainable development.<sup>1</sup> Even though the MDGs had adopted a goal-setting approach earlier, it was only during the negotiations on the SDGs that the process of goal-setting represented the inclusive process that is central in the idea of goal-setting governance which is introduced in the next part. It is only with the SDGs that countries agreed on a universal agenda presented in a single integrated document covering the three pillars of sustainable development. However, as shared by other goal-setting models, the SDGs cover very broad issues as seen in its 17 goals consisting of no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, industry, innovation and infrastructure, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, climate action, life below water, life on land, peace, justice and strong institutions, and partnerships for the goals. Targets and indicators, however, have been set to provide a clear definition of the goals and procedures to achieve them. The SDGs in this context include 169 targets and 231 indicators.

Hence, the SDG approach is constructed around three levels of governing through goals. In the first place, we have the 17 goals themselves. Each of these goals are made up of individual targets, with some goals containing as few as three targets, and some containing over 15. These targets hone in on specific problems, such as ocean acidification or primary school enrollment. This enables the SDGs to build up a comprehensive framework by having far-reaching goals, with specific targets to pin-point certain areas. In practice, the measurement of the achievement of targets can vary between countries and regions. For example, the EU defines specific EU targets for all SDGs (see below). Targets are then monitored by one or more indicators which act as proxies to measure the progress made on a certain target. An indicator is typically a measure of the state of a particular phenomenon. For example, the indicator for the target on reducing the maternal mortality rate is to bring it down to 70 per 100,000 live births. The SDG framework also has a loose institutional arrangement to allow for the inclusion of various governing approaches from each issue area as well as to encourage the participation of various stakeholders. The SDGs document has put finance, technology, capacity building and trade as part of its means of implementation and global partnership as one of its goals. Furthermore, the SDG framework

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the emergence, structure and interrelatedness of the SDGs, see: <https://www.edx.org/course/the-un-sustainable-development-goals-an-interdisci>. This Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) developed by KU Leuven offers an interdisciplinary academic introduction to the SDGs.



emphasizes the importance of policy and institutional coherence to achieve the goals. In order to track progress, the SDG framework establishes the High-Level Panel Forum (HLPF) as a mechanism for countries to share their voluntary national reports (VNR). The VNRs are presented at the yearly High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) and 'have the central role in overseeing follow-up and review at the global level' (UNGA 2015, Para. 47). Finally, it is also important to note that the SDGs do not replace existing international law commitments and conventions but in a way complements and operationalizes these commitments. As such, they are mutually reinforcing. To exemplify this strong interconnection in the case of international human rights commitments, the Danish Institute for Human Rights provides for a 'Human Rights Guide to the Sustainable Development Goals'. This tool shows that Goal 2, Target 1 to 'by 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people [to food]' can be linked to 'the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger' under Article 11.2 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), among human rights instruments (Danish Institute for Human Rights 2019). Similarly, other SDGs can be linked to already existing environmental instruments, primarily the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), and to international labour standards by the International Labour Organization.

Even though the SDG agenda reflects a global vision with country-led implementation, the 2030 Agenda document identifies the importance of regional organizations (United Nations 2015). First of all, the document reaffirms the importance of SDGs implementation and review at the national, regional, and global levels. The interconnectivity and economic integration at the regional level have also been acknowledged as important factors in SDGs implementation in individual countries. Goals 1, 2, 9, and 11 specifically highlight the need for regional cooperation, policy frameworks, and connectivity to promote agendas on poverty alleviation; zero hunger; industry, innovation, and infrastructure; and sustainable cities and communities respectively. Secondly, regional organizations are also envisaged to play an important role in localizing the SDGs by facilitating the translation of the global agenda into national action. Third, regional organizations are equally important in implementing the SDGs at the national level by facilitating regional dialogue and coordination for mutual learning, exchange of best practice, as well as discussion on shared targets. Finally, in the area of monitoring, regional organizations with their existing review mechanisms are expected to conduct voluntary review and follow-up of the national implementation in individual member states.

Despite these potential roles identified in the 2030 Agenda document, the actual role of individual regional organizations will likely vary depending on the level of institutional development of the regional organization and the socio-cultural and political-economic context of each region. Before we analyze the role of the EU and ASEAN in achieving the SDGs, we discuss the theoretical framework on which our analytic approach is based.



### 3. The Theoretical Framework for analyzing Goal-Setting Model

In this part, we introduce the theoretical model on which the empirical case studies are based. We start with introducing the goal-setting model in the international relations and global governance literature. We focus on how transnational goal-setting governance emerged and is conceptualized. We then explore how regional organizations can engage in global goal-setting governance. We conceptualize four concrete roles through which regional organizations can play: a translating, supporting, coordinating and monitoring role. An analysis of these four roles will guide the empirical research.

#### 3.1 The roots of international goal-setting governance

While goal-setting has been recently adopted in the governance of SDGs, this model is not new in the realm of governance. The goal-setting model is identified as a major instrument in governance along with rule-making and norm-setting models which we will briefly introduce. Indeed, this model also seeks to answer a central governance question that is how to “steer individuals or groups toward desired outcome” (Young, p. 31). Compared with the other two models, however, goal-setting receives less attention in the more specific area of global governance, as the other two models relate directly to the paradigmatic debate in international relations (IR), while the goal-setting model appears mostly in the discussions on public policy and management. In addition, global governance itself refers to “the exercise of authority across national borders as well as consented norms and rules beyond the nation state, both of them justified with reference to common goods or transnational problems” (Zürn 2018). From this definition, therefore, both rule-making and norm-setting are indispensable parts of global governance as the former reflects the exercise of authority while the latter reflects the mechanism leading to the consented norms that steer actors’ behavior to achieve common goods or to solve common problems at the global level.

Among the two, rule-making is perhaps the most commonly used model in global governance. It is rooted in the liberal tradition which sees humans as rational actors, and governing their relations must therefore be based on the logic of consequences through reward and punishment. Liberalism believes that international organizations reflect the intergovernmental bargaining among rational actors with their own preferences. They function more as a policy coordination mechanism (Moravcsik, 1993, 1997) and their role is limited to regulating actors’ behavior through punishing non-compliance and rewarding cooperation. Rule-making is therefore closely associated with hierarchical and market styles of governance. Hierarchical governance refers to the exercise of authority across national borders as found in the vertical top-down relations between the international organization and the state which aim to steer behaviors through command and control or forcing compliance through sanction mechanism (Meuleman L. , 2008). Meanwhile, market governance refers to the use of consented rules based on market mechanisms that give incentives and material benefit to steer actors behavior (see also Meuleman L. , 2008, p. 46). Market governance was commonly associated with the private sector, but nowadays,



governmental actors also adopt market-based governance given their performance in delivering accountability which yield them increased legitimacy and attraction (Donahue and Nye 2002, 2). In addition to its emphasis on incentives, market governance in public administration is also associated with other private principles, such as efficiency and service/customer orientation (Meuleman, 2008, p.28).

The anarchical nature of international relations, however, has proved that governing states' behavior through rule-making model has mixed results. Governance on issues where states' interests converge and have immediate material gain, such as in economic cooperation, have more successful records, while governance on issues where states' interests diverge and have no immediate material incentives, such as security or environment, tend to progress slowly. Negotiations in these issues also typically involve long and contentious discussions on compliance mechanisms and often end up in decisions which merely reflect the lowest common denominator among actors (Kanie, Griggs, et al. 2019). The adoption of market mechanisms in these issues has increased incentives for actors to cooperate, yet it is also criticized for the uneven benefits and concerns whether the market performance of the private sector also applies to the public sector, not to mention concerns on the possibility of this mechanism "distorting public mission" (Donahue & Nye, 2002, p. 2-24). Another criticism to the rule-making model is that in most cases, it only binds state behaviors and has limited capacity to control other key stakeholders (Kanie, Griggs, et al. 2019). In this regard, other governance models are usually needed, and this is where norm-setting is often taken into consideration.

Different from rule-making, norm-setting emerges from the constructivist tradition which sees humans as social actors, and international relations, as social relations, involve a learning process and the socialization of new norms, which may then build up the identity and interests of those actors (Wendt, 1992). In this type of social setting, actors' behavior is based more on the logic of appropriateness of what is normal or acceptable in the society. Constructivism in this regard is more optimistic towards the role of international organizations as they can not only regulate actors' behavior but also reshape the identity and interests of states, since they are seen as socially constructed. Changes to the international system is therefore more feasible (Wendt, 1992). Governance through norm-setting involves a process of creating, internationalizing, cascading, and internalizing norms (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 895). As norms are not binding, norms socialization uses social pressure for norm-violating states to change their behavior. States themselves conform to norms because they feel morally obliged to follow the norm or for other reasons such as "legitimation, conformity, or esteem" (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 903). While norm-setting can be applied by international organizations or states, it is usually used by non-state actors to influence policy making because of their inability and inaccessibility to the rule-making process. Keck and Sikkink, for example, observed how non-state actors engage in transnational advocacy networks (TAN) to help them pressure governments to adopt certain policies (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Norm-setting therefore could be related, even though not necessarily, to another governance style, that is





network governance.

Network governance refers to a governance style which involves complex horizontal relations of many actors from governmental, political activists, societal groups, business interests (L. Meuleman 2008, 31) and other autonomous actors collaborating around common issues. This governance style emerged from the fact that international rules are not only made by the 'governors' as in hierarchical governance but also by sub-ordinate governmental units who can collaborate across borders. This approach was developed by Anne-Marie Slaughter in her book *A New Global Order* (for a further elaboration see Slaughter and Zaring 2006). Slaughter (2004 p. 18) starts, first of all, from the observation that the state is not disappearing but is disaggregating into its components, which are no longer solely interacting within the hierarchical state but also outside their boundaries with foreign counterparts. As a result, secondly, government networks emerge which exist alongside, and sometimes within, more traditional international organizations. Slaughter (2004, pp. 19-21) distinguishes horizontal (between states) and vertical (between states and international organizations) international networks. These horizontal and vertical networks can differ in nature as a function of their main purpose, namely information exchange, enforcement and harmonization. As a result, information networks, enforcement networks and harmonization networks emerge (Slaughter, 2004, pp. 52-61). In public administration, further development of network governance also spans to include the participation of various non-state actors and is thus associated with multi-actor, multi-stakeholder, participatory or community governance (Meuleman, 2008, p. 31). The idea of involving non-state actors in the governance process is to pool knowledge sources and supports from these actors so that policies resulting from this process is more acceptable and consensual (Meuleman, 2008, p. 33). While this process may lead to a binding agreement as in rule-making, the many actors involved and the consensual nature of this process often lead to prescriptive outcome as in norm-setting. Even the idea of network governance to include multi-actors to allow learning process in policy making entails norm/value socialization which underlies the norm-setting model. Network governance, as other cases of norm-setting, however, has been criticized in practice to be only symbolic and inefficient. The non-binding character of norms makes it difficult to ensure compliance and long term commitment. Also, even though norm-setting is often used by non-state actors, the key targets remain states and international organizations.

An innovation in global governance is the goal-setting model. Goal-setting itself is defined as a governance approach which seeks to steer behavior by:

“(i) establishing priorities to be used in allocating both attention and scarce resources among competing objectives, (ii) galvanizing the efforts of those assigned to work toward attaining the goals, (iii) identifying targets and providing yardsticks or benchmarks to be used in tracking progress toward achieving goals, and (iv) combating the tendency for short-term desires and impulses to distract attention or resources of

those assigned to work of goal attainment” (Young, 2017, p.32).

The goal-setting model emerges from the growing complexity and interlinkages across issue areas as well as the growing numbers of actors involved in each issue. In addition, there are variations of governance styles across issue areas where some may reflect hierarchy and others may reflect market-based or network governance. Therefore, rule-making or norm-setting alone is not sufficient and the goal-setting model tries to combine both. As Zürn (2018) stated, the difference between national and global governance is that the former is bounded by physical territory, while the latter is bounded by issue area which he called ‘global function system’, such as finance, education, health and many others. When countries aim to create a single integrated framework across these function systems, there must be a new approach which transcends the traditional approach of rule-making and norm-setting, as the governance style is not only limited to hierarchy, market or network, but rather reflects the combination of these three, often referred to as meta-governance (Monkelbaan 2019). Metagovernance, according to Meuleman (2019), is “a means by which to produce some degree of coordinated governance, by designing and managing sound combinations of hierarchical, market and network governance, to achieve the best possible outcomes”. It spans from the minimum measures to ensure coherence among the three styles to mixing these three styles to achieve the best possible outcome (Meuleman, 2019). Within the broad context of metagovernance, therefore, goal-setting could be understood as a way to govern the different styles of governance on a cross-cutting issue. Goal-setting has the strength of network style as it involves multi-actors in its process, but it does so more extensively by including not only horizontal network of actors, but as many actors as possible both horizontally and vertically in order to capitalize on their various resources and comparative advantages. More importantly, the model works based on identifying common problems and setting broad goals for all actors rather than pushing them to agree on a binding agreement (Kanie, Griggs, et al. 2019). Thus, it is not only more feasible given the vast number of actors and interests involved, but it also tackles the problems of and facilitates rule-making and norm-setting in the existing arrangement. Engaging as many actors from the beginning of the goal-setting process strengthens their sense of belonging, motivates them to actively participate in achieving the goals, helps build longer-term commitments, and increases their willingness to mobilize resources to achieve the goals. In relation to the focus of this paper on the role of regional organizations, the goal-setting model offers more room for the role of regional organizations than in any of the three governance styles. Relations between regional and international organizations has been subject to debate with regard to their competitive or complementing roles. The UN Secretary General has called for a greater role of regional organizations since 1994. However, there are many issue areas adopting hierarchic/market/network governance styles or rule-making/norm-setting models which set direct relations between international organizations and individual states, thus leaving questions on the position of regional organizations. The goal-setting model therefore offers a way for regional organizations to strengthen their valuable role in global governance without impeding states’ authority and power.



### 3.2 Operationalizing goal-setting governance: a four role framework

Goal-setting, however, has some consequences on governance arrangements. First of all, goal-setting tends to include broad goals and targets to accommodate various actors' interests. Secondly, it involves many actors which require complex coordination to ensure policy coherence. Third, it does not have separate binding mechanisms to ensure compliance but rather relies where possible on existing commitments and binding mechanisms. Finally, it is designed to accommodate unique contexts of individual stakeholders – as long as they could achieve the goals, not to mention that certain cultural contexts tend to have their own preferences for specific governance styles (Meuleman, 2019). Thus, the success of the goal-setting model requires (1) the ability of participating actors to clearly define the goals and procedures to achieve them, (2) the ability to mobilize support and resources through coalition, social movement, and compelling motives to achieve the goals, such as rewards, honor, moral obligation, sense of solidarity, and social norms, (3) the ability to ensure policy coherence among actors, and (4) the ability to track progress (Kanie, et al., 2019; Young, 2017; de Búrca et al., 2013; 2014). Following this line of thinking, therefore, the actors involved in the goal-setting governance model will be involved in four main types of roles, namely the translating, supporting, coordinating and monitoring role. We discuss each of these four roles.

First, participating in formulating a clear global vision along with its targets and indicators and translating these visions to institutional/local setting of individual actors constitute the **translating role**. At the global level, actors could participate in the formulation of global goals to build their sense of belonging, commitment, and willingness to mobilize resources to achieve the goals. Actors, however, need to agree on limited numbers of goals which represent their priorities expressed in well-defined goals and measurable targets along with clear means of implementation (Young, 2017). Making the goals public with appealing wordings and include it in a “high profile document or declaration” are some ways to enhance the commitment of actors to the agreed goals (Young, 2017). Global goals need to be further translated into context-specific goals in order to ensure the operationability of global goals in the regional and national contexts, as well as to build a sense of awareness and belonging to the goals. This could be done by mapping and aligning global goals with regional or national goals or by prioritizing goals. In the context of the SDGs, this translating role mainly refers to operationalizing SDG targets for specific countries and regions. Finally, the translating role also refers to actions taken to implement the goals through different mechanisms and instruments and hence is not only about re-defining goals but also about providing pathways to achieve them.

Second, socializing these goals, mobilizing support and implementing goals requires a **supporting role**. In cases of limited resources, coalition building is important to pool resources to attain the goals. Therefore, actors at the global, regional, and national levels could participate in mobilizing financial, technical, and institutional supports. Resource mobilization could be done by increasing incentives for



participation in the coalition of the willings, and also costs for not participating, and by promoting social norms that would help mainstreaming the goals within the local social context (Young, 2017). As Young (2017) also notes, creating social narratives is important where logic of appropriateness is central in a community. In this context, regional organisations can play an important role as ‘intermediaries’ as defined in the regulator-intermediary-target (RIT) model elaborated by Abbott, Levi-Faur, and Snidal (2017). This model narrows in on the role of intermediaries, broadly defined, on the implementation of a global agenda. In the context of the SDGs, for example, the UN is the ‘regulator’, the regional organization the intermediary, and the member states the rule-takers. In the RIT model, intermediaries can perform different functions such as operationalizing rules and goals (more akin to the translation role above), offering procedures for implementation and enforcement of rules, monitoring the implementation of rules (more akin to the monitoring role below), and providing capacity for the achievement of rules or goals. This latter function is of importance in relation to the supporting role of regional organizations. Regional organizations as intermediaries can bring several ‘assets’ or ‘capacities’ to the implementation of the Goals. These include (Abbott, Levi-Faur, and Snidal 2017, pp. 20-21) *inter alia* operational capacity, bridging capacity and knowledge capacity. Concerning operational capacity, ‘regulators’ often turn to intermediaries to carry out concrete activities in the field for which they lack technical or financial capacity. Concerning bridging capacity, regional organizations as intermediaries are often better placed to engage with rule-takers on certain issues than the rule-makers because of proximity and information and knowledge advantages. This enables contacts with rule targets and enhances their ability to contribute to the implementation of global goals. This is especially the case for regional organizations which are membership organizations of the ‘rule-taker’. Finally, concerning knowledge capacity or expertise, regional organizations, as intermediaries, can possess specialized knowledge or a knowledge exchange mechanism between member states on how to implement global commitments. This can include knowledge on how other members are implementing global goals which can create learning effects within a regional organization.

Third, coordinating policies between actors (ie member states) to ensure policy coherence makes up the **coordinating role**. As goal-setting model tends to have a loose institutional arrangement connecting large numbers of actors, actors involved in regional organizations could participate in conducting horizontal and vertical coordination. Horizontal coordination is conducted across institutions within actors’ own internal structure and with other external actors at the same level. Vertical coordination is conducted with actors at higher (systemic) and lower (unit) levels of governance or between the level of the regional organization and the member state level. This coordinating role, on the one hand, refers back to regional organizations as intermediaries. As intermediaries, they can initiate and manage different mechanisms for horizontal and vertical coordination. This coordinating role, on the other hand, also resembles the idea of orchestration which is developed in the global governance literature. Regional organizations can ‘orchestrate’ to achieve global goals through coordinating between actors in the implementation process



of global goals. The orchestration role has grown as global governance increasingly takes place outside traditional fora and hierarchical models. Rather than directly engaging a governance target, such as a citizen, government, or firm, a governance actor such as an international organization or a regional organization may take on the role of “orchestrator” and either delegate to or enlist the help of another actor which can be a member state of an organization or a private actor (Abbott et al. 2015; Abbott, Levi-Faur, and Snidal 2017). Hence, in order to get its ultimate targets – i.e. member states or private actors - to introduce policy, provide a certain public good, or ensure conduct in support of the SDGs, regional organizations may coordinate with different sets of actors.

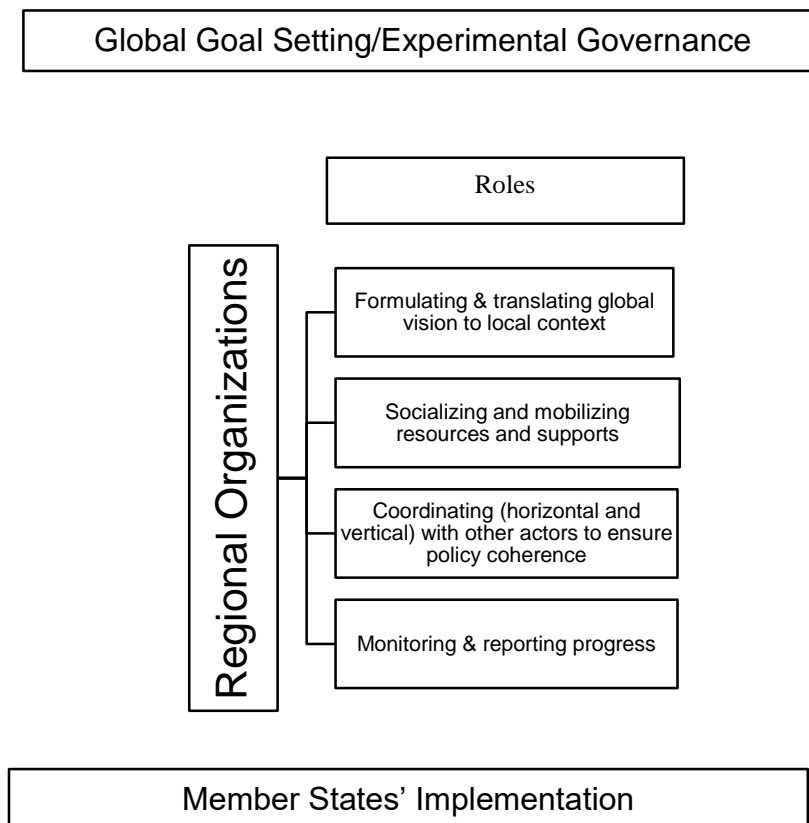
Fourth, regional organizations can play a **monitoring and progress reporting role**. As goal-setting most often does not have a binding mechanism to ensure compliance, tracking progress through indicators, time table, and benchmark is important to maintain actors’ commitment in pursuing long-term goals. Monitoring refers to a top down mechanism, meanwhile reporting refers to a voluntary bottom up mechanism for tracking progress. The importance of monitoring and the involvement of different actors in monitoring is further developed in the literature on global governing through indicators. Indicators are used by a variety of global governance actors to quantify, rank and measure compliance with various international treaties and commitments or progress toward certain goals, including sustainable development (Davis et al. 2012). Indicators are usually presented in the form of numerical data and to arrive at simpler, usable numbers. Various methods of aggregation and simplification are often used in addition to estimations or other techniques to handle missing data, which gives a certain degree of discretion to the compiler (Davis et al. 2012). Because these data are used to inform governance decisions, set goals and measure conformity and progress, producers of data have a certain level of influence over governance outcomes. Moreover, indicators – especially numerical – are often imbued with a considerable degree of authority, regardless of the uncertainty and ambiguity of how the numbers were derived (Davis et al. 2012). Davis et al. argue that indicators can be considered a “technology of global governance” and have the potential to impact “where, by whom, and in relation to whom governance takes place...; the processes through which standards are set; the processes through which decisions are made about the application of standards to particular cases; and the means and the dynamics of contesting and regulating exercises of power in global governance” (2012, p.12-13). The use of indicators has a special relevance for the SDGs, which specify 231 indicators by which progress toward the SDGs can be measured (United Nations 2020). In this context, regional organizations can play an important role of governing through the use of indicators and especially benchmarking member states and providing recommendations for corrective actions or improvements. This governing through indicators can be performed directly by the regional organization if it has sufficient monitoring capacity, but could also be performed through a form of ‘orchestration’ with other levels of governance such as the UN bodies/commissions.



Acting as a capacity-builder (supporting role), as an orchestrator (coordinating role) or as a benchmarker (translating and monitoring role) can be conceived as different modes of governance used to fulfil a role. Each mode is associated to specific roles as they provide insights into the mechanism by which a role can obtain results. Yet, each mode can in practice be applied in other roles as well, although rather as a secondary mode that contribute to fulfilling the role. For example, a regional organization can act as an orchestrator in the monitoring role by centralizing reports of progress on the goals or by mandating another actor to track progress. However, we simplify and associate each mode of governance to specific roles to which it most substantially contributes.

Figure 1 summarizes our theoretical approach in a model, which highlights the role of regional organizations in a global goal-setting/experimentalist governance model through the above mentioned four roles.

Figure 1: The (Actual and Potential) Role of Regional Organizations in the SDG Architecture



Source: Authors

### 3.3 The Link between Goal-Setting Governance and Global Experimental Governance

This form of goal-setting global governance is further developed and conceptualized in the global



experimental governance literature. The four identified roles of translating, implementing, coordinating and monitoring are also combined in global experimental governance designs. Theorized by Sabel and Zeitlin in the early 2000's, experimentalist governance in its most general definition constitutes a recursive process of provisional goal-setting and revision based on insights gained from different approaches and experiences (Sabel and Zeitlin, 2012a, 169). These processes of coordination and governance are dubbed experimentalist because they systematically question their own assumptions and practices and treat all solutions as incomplete, provisional and correctable. As a result, experimentalist governance produces a continuous reciprocal readjustment of ends and means, based on insights derived from a systematic comparison of alternative approaches towards jointly established framework goals (Sabel, 1994; Sabel and Zeitlin, 2012a, 172). This readjustment between ends and means implies that there are feedback loops between the ultimate goals (ends) and lessons from the implementation process (means). This feedback loop creates opportunities for learning about how to implement and achieve goals and targets. The ultimate aim of experimentalist governance is to generate learning effects which contribute to achieving stated goals. These learning effects are institutionally determined in the sense that the institutional design of an experimentalist regime can contribute or inhibit learning effects. The creation of learning effects can be facilitated by organizations, especially regional organizations.

Experimental governance is assumed to dissolve a strict distinction between top-down and bottom-up perspectives (Sabel and Zeitlin, 2010b, 17; Sabel and Zeitlin, 2012b, 411). Transnational experimentalist approaches have been identified across a wide range of policy domains, including forest law enforcement (Overdevest and Zeitlin, 2014a, b, and 2017), human rights (de Búrca 2017) and environmental sustainability, food safety, data protection, anti-money laundering (Zeitlin, 2015). The ideal-type (de Búrca et al., 2013, 727) experimental governance architecture involves a multi-level architecture, based on an iterative, cyclical process involving four steps. First, 'some combination of "central" and "local" units, in consultation with relevant stakeholders' jointly define provisional sets of open-ended framework goals and metrics (Sabel and Zeitlin, 2012a, 171). Second, the implementation of these framework goals is delegated to a range of lower-level, 'contextually situated' actors and entails the active participation of key stakeholders with knowledge of local conditions. Third, local actors enjoy considerable discretion when it comes to translating these objectives to local contextual circumstances and, in return for this autonomy, are subjected to regular reporting duties and a system of peer review in which their actions are evaluated alongside those of others. Fourth, as a result of this feedback loop, framework goals, metrics and the decision-making procedures themselves are periodically revised. Revisions involve a widening circle of actors and stakeholders 'whose views', in light of the problems and possibilities revealed throughout the implementation process, 'come to be seen as indispensable to full and fair deliberation' (Sabel and Zeitlin, 2008, 273- 274).



The SDGs approach could be considered as an experimentalist governance approach with the exception that the goals and targets cannot be revised through the process. However, the architecture allows for interaction between different levels and the creation of learning effects for the implementation of the SDGs. In the four-tier dynamic model outlined above, regional organizations can contribute to achieving the goals set out in the SDGs through the four potential roles they can play.

In the next section, we apply the goal-setting model to two case studies of regional organizations, namely the European Union and ASEAN. We contend that the framework can also be applied to other regional organizations. The degree to which the different roles are developed in each regional organization will be a function of the degree to which they already cooperate on different policy areas related to the SDGs.

## 4. Analyzing Regional Organizations in the Goal-Setting Governance Model of SDGs

The goal-setting governance model of the SDGs, which is characterized by a global vision with country-led implementation, raises the question of the role of regional organizations in this governance model. As explained earlier, the role of regional organizations has been identified in the 2030 Agenda document. However, their actual role will likely vary in terms of degree and approaches across regions depending on the unique regional contexts. First of all, regional organizations have different characteristics from the highly integrated to the merely intergovernmental ones, which in turn influence the extent to which they could support, socialize, and finance the implementation of SDGs in each member state. The existing development programs and review mechanisms in regional organizations also influence the prioritization of the Sustainable Development Goals and the extent to which they could facilitate monitoring these goals in individual member states. Secondly, different national capacities, realities, levels of development, and priorities among member states are also important factors in shaping the role of regional organizations. The document noted that middle income countries might need more support from regional organizations compared to high income countries (United Nations 2015). In addition, it also mentions that member states could choose the most suitable regional forum to coordinate its SDGs implementation. Therefore, the role of regional organizations will also depend on the state's preference. Thirdly, regional organizations often operate in a crowded field in which other RO are active. So, for example, many Southeast-Asian countries are part of ASEAN but also members of the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) or the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and European countries are members of the European Union, the Council of Europe (CoE) or the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Fourthly, each regional organization also has unique relations with the UN regional commissions responsible for the implementation of SDGs in their regions including the respective Economics Commissions for Asia and the Pacific, and for Europe. The combination of these factors in the end shape the unique role of each regional organization that is incomparable to others.





Against this backdrop, this paper aims to contribute in explaining the actual role of regional organizations in the goal-setting model of global governance on the SDGs by looking at the role of two specific regional organizations – the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) – in their respective region. The EU and ASEAN were selected based on two criteria. First, it could be argued that they are the most advanced regional organizations in terms of institutional design and forms of cooperation and their commitment to the SDGs, and can therefore serve as an example for other regional organizations. The EU is the most integrated regional organization with a supranational institution representing its achievement as a political union. ASEAN has also transformed into a regional community and has been acknowledged for its success in maintaining regional stability with no major military conflict among its members since its establishment. Despite the fact that they are two of the most advanced regional organizations, the EU and ASEAN have very different institutional designs which allows to analyze how the different roles identified above take form in different settings. The European Union is highly integrated and institutionalized, with a supranational institution having competencies to coordinate policies in various issue areas. Meanwhile, ASEAN is an intergovernmental organization with loose institutional arrangements and limited power to deal with regional issues, let alone domestic issues of its individual member states. In addition, the EU and ASEAN also operate in very different environments with the former operating in Europe which consists mostly of economically developed and politically democratic countries. Meanwhile, ASEAN operates in Southeast Asia which is diverse economically, politically, and culturally. Economically, it comprises of both lower income countries such as Laos and high income countries such as Singapore (World Economic Outlook 2018 in IMF, 2018). Politically it consists of socialist, semi-democratic and fully democratic countries. And culturally, it has a wide variety of ethnic groups, languages and religions. Looking at both regional organizations, therefore, is expected to better capture the possible variation of roles among individual regional organizations and how different factors at the regional level shape their unique role in the goal-setting governance model of the SDGs.

This part will examine the role of these two regional organizations in the governance of the SDGs. In identifying their roles, this section will apply the model of actor's role in goal-setting governance as set out in section 3. It will examine the role of regional organizations in formulating and translating the SDGs, socializing the goals and mobilizing resources, coordinating with other actors, and monitoring progress on the SDGs. Within each role, we will also examine the adopted modes of governance, which include orchestrating, serving as rules intermediaries, and governing through goals.

This part is based on a close analysis of primary and secondary sources as well as interviews. For the EU, we base our research on primary documents of the different EU institutions, including Parliament's resolutions, Commission's communications, Council's conclusions, as well as reports and briefings. For the EU MS we base the research on the different Voluntary National Reviews (VNR's), in which countries give a periodic overview of what actions they have taken, what progress they have made and what



challenges lay ahead. The VNRs provide a source of information on how the various countries view the SDGs, what actions they have taken and what their own priorities are. All 27 Member States of the European Union (EU27) have submitted at least one VNR since 2015 to the HLPF. For ASEAN, data is collected from the VNR, the national development plans and other official documents from individual countries; reports and official websites of key developmental stakeholders in Southeast Asia, such as the UNESCAP, ASEAN, the UNDP, the IMF, and the World Bank; in-depth interview with the ASEAN Secretariat (ASEC), the UN ESCAP, and the UNDP Indonesia; and participant observation in the Multi-stakeholder Forum on Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals as a sub-regional process of the SDGs governance leading to the APHLF.

#### 4.1. The Case Study of the EU

While the European Union (EU) benefits from an enhanced observer status at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) where it aims to speak with a common EU voice, the formal adoption of the 2030 Agenda belonged to Member States. After the adoption of the SDGs, the EU and EU Member States (EU MS) have taken action with regard to strategy, implementation, financing, monitoring and reporting on the SDGs. In this part, we will discuss the different actions taken by the EU and EU MS based on the different identified roles. Before we describe how the EU and EU MS fulfill the different roles, we first briefly describe the EU as a political system and how the EU is doing with regard to the different SDGs.

##### 4.1.1. The Historical and Institutional Context of the European Union

The roots of the European Union are found in the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). Founded in 1952 by Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and West Germany, its aim was to transfer the control of two main resources of war, coal and steel, to a supranational entity. Other communities, particularly the European Economic Community (EEC) followed shortly after. After a series of treaties and institutional developments in 1992 the European Union was founded with the Treaty of Maastricht – then with 12 Member States. Later on, the EU expanded with new EU MS. To become a new Member State, countries need to be a European State and ‘respect the common values of the Member States and undertake to promote them’, as well as to implement all current EU rules (the ‘*acquis*’). In the three decades after, particularly in the year 2004, the total Member States grew to be 28. With the formal withdrawal of the United Kingdom in 2020, the number is 27. The European Union got its current institutional shape with the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009 (Mayer and Thies 2019). The European Union (EU) is a unique political system since it is neither a full federal state nor a pure intergovernmental organization. On the level of the EU, three institutions – the European Council, European Parliament and European Commission – are important for policy-making.

First of all, the European Council brings together all heads of state or government of the 27 EU MS, and,



in the words of the Lisbon Treaty, ‘shall provide the Union with the necessary impetus for its development and shall define the general political directions and priorities thereof’ (Lisbon Treaty 2009, Article 9 B).<sup>2</sup> It serves to set the agenda, political direction and priorities of the Union. Also the European Council President (currently Charles Michel), the President of the European Commission (currently Ursula van der Leyen) and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (currently Josep Borrell, when foreign affairs are discussed) participate, but do not vote on the Council’s so-called ‘Council Conclusions’. While not having direct legislative capabilities, its composition of executive powers make it key to Europe’s common strategies (European Council n.d.). The European Commission, led by its current president Ursula van der Leyen, is both responsible for proposing legislation as for implementing them. The Commission is responsible for the day-to-day business of the EU. It operates as an executive with 27 members, or Commissioners, responsible for their own portfolio and appointed for five years (Lisbon Treaty 2009, Article 9 D). The European Commission also includes about 32,000 civil servants divided over the various directorates-general and services. In this sense, it can be compared to a government with cabinets, ministers and ministries (European Commission n.d.). Finally, the European Parliament is the EU’s only directly-elected institution and counts 705 Members of Parliament elected for five years (Lisbon Treaty 2009, Article 9 A). The Commission is accountable to the Parliament and has to be approved by it (European Parliament n.d.).

To achieve the SDGs in Europe, one also needs to understand that the EU constitutes a political system (Hix and Hoyland, 2011) with multiple levels of government across which responsibilities for policy areas are distributed (Marks, Hooghe and Blank, 1996). Policy is made on the European, national, regional and local levels. However, all levels are not of equal importance or of equal relevance to different policy areas. For some policy areas, such as trade policy, the EU level is the most important level of policy making since the EU has an ‘exclusive’ competence to make policy. For other policy areas/SDGs, other levels of governance might be more important. The importance of a governance level is determined by multiple factors and is enshrined in national and European Union (EU) law. EU law is guided by a set of general principles by which the lawfulness of administrative and legislative measures of the EU is assessed. The principle of subsidiarity is of crucial importance for determining the potential reach, ambit and ambition of EU initiatives to achieve the SDGs. Article 5 Treaty of the European Union (TEU) stipulates that the use of Union competences is governed by the principle of subsidiarity (Article 5.1 TEU). This principle is the logical complement to the fact that the limits of the EU are governed by the principle of conferral, where powers are voluntarily conferred to the EU by its Member States through international treaties and can hence only be exercised by the EU within these limits and in order to achieve the goals set out

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<sup>2</sup> Not to be confused with Council of the European Union or Council of Europe.

therein. The principle of subsidiarity means that the EU shall, in those policy areas that do not fall within the exclusive competence of the EU, “act only if and in so far as the objectives of the proposed action cannot be sufficiently achieved by the EU MS, either at central level or at regional and local level, but can rather, by reason of the scale or effects of the proposed action, be better achieved at Union level” (Article 5.3 TEU). As the EU competences relating to the SDGs are almost solely either shared or supporting, respect for the principle of subsidiarity is of utmost importance in understanding the EU approach to achieving the SDGs.

The competences conferred upon the Union are classified into three principal categories: (1) exclusive competences; (2) shared competences; and (3) competences to carry out actions to support, coordinate or supplement the actions of the EU MS. First, there is the exclusive competence. Article 3 of the TFEU grants the EU exclusive competence with respect to the following matters: the customs union; competition law necessary for the functioning of the internal market; the monetary policy of the Eurozone; the conservation of marine biological resources under the common fisheries policy; and the common commercial policy. It should be noted that the list of areas covered by exclusive competence is exhaustive. Where a matter falls within the EU’s exclusive competence, it is only the EU that can legislate or adopt legally binding acts with respect to that matter, in principle to the exclusion of Member State action. In the areas of shared competence, both the EU and the EU MS are entitled to regulate, however not at the same time. The EU enjoys a right of pre-emption over EU MS when it comes to the exercise of shared competences. Pursuant to Article 2(2) TFEU, a Member State may take action in an area of shared competence only to the extent that the Union has not exercised its competence in that area. In other words, if an area is regulated at the EU level, the EU MS must abstain from also regulating that area at national level. The EU shares competences with the EU MS in the following policy areas: internal market; some aspects of social policy; economic, social and territorial cohesion; agriculture and fisheries; environment; consumer protection; transport; trans-European networks; energy; area of freedom, security and justice; and common safety concerns in public health matters. Several of these policy areas are relevant in the context of the SDGs. Finally, there are competences to coordinate, support or supplement the EU MS’ actions. The following areas are covered by such competences: protection and improvement of human health; industry; culture; tourism; education, vocational training, youth and sport; civil protection; and administrative cooperation. Among the three categories of competences, these latter are the weakest in terms of EU’s power to legislate. In general, several SDGs fall under the category of supporting competences, which means that most policy-making with regard to the SDGs should occur on the level of the EU Member States.

#### 4.1.2. Progress on the SDGs in the European Union

How is the EU doing on the SDGs? With its fifth anniversary celebrated in September 2020, we have reached a point where the first results can be measured, gathered and analyzed, at least until COVID 19



struck.<sup>3</sup> In order to explore this, we analyzed Eurostat data, which gathers data on all EU27 Member States on parameters relevant to the SDGs. Conveniently, its databases can be structured per Goal (Eurostat 2020).

By linking the Eurostat parameters to the various Targets and Indicators over the last five years, the European Union aims to get a broad overview of the progress made per goal. So, for example, where Target 10.1 sets the goal to 'by 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average', the corresponding Eurostat table gives us the 'Income share of the bottom 40% of the population (% of income)' in 2015 and 2018.<sup>4</sup>

Table 1 presents the progress made so far for all the 27 member states combined per SDG as well as per EU MS. The table identifies for each SDG whether the SDG is achieved (green bullet) or whether challenges remain, and how strong these challenges are (yellow, orange and red bullets), as well as how progress towards achieving the SDG is going through the use of arrows (on track, moderately increasing, stagnating or decreasing).<sup>5</sup>

The table shows that there is significant variation between the SDGs and progress achieved so far for the EU as a whole. Overall, the EU as a whole is doing rather well but is stagnating with regard to some of the Goals. Secondly, the table shows that there is variation between EU MS with several MS for which major challenges remain and which are decreasing in terms of achieving specific SDGs (red arrows downwards). Overall, least progress is being made on SDGs 12, 13, 14 and 15 visualized by the many red bullets.

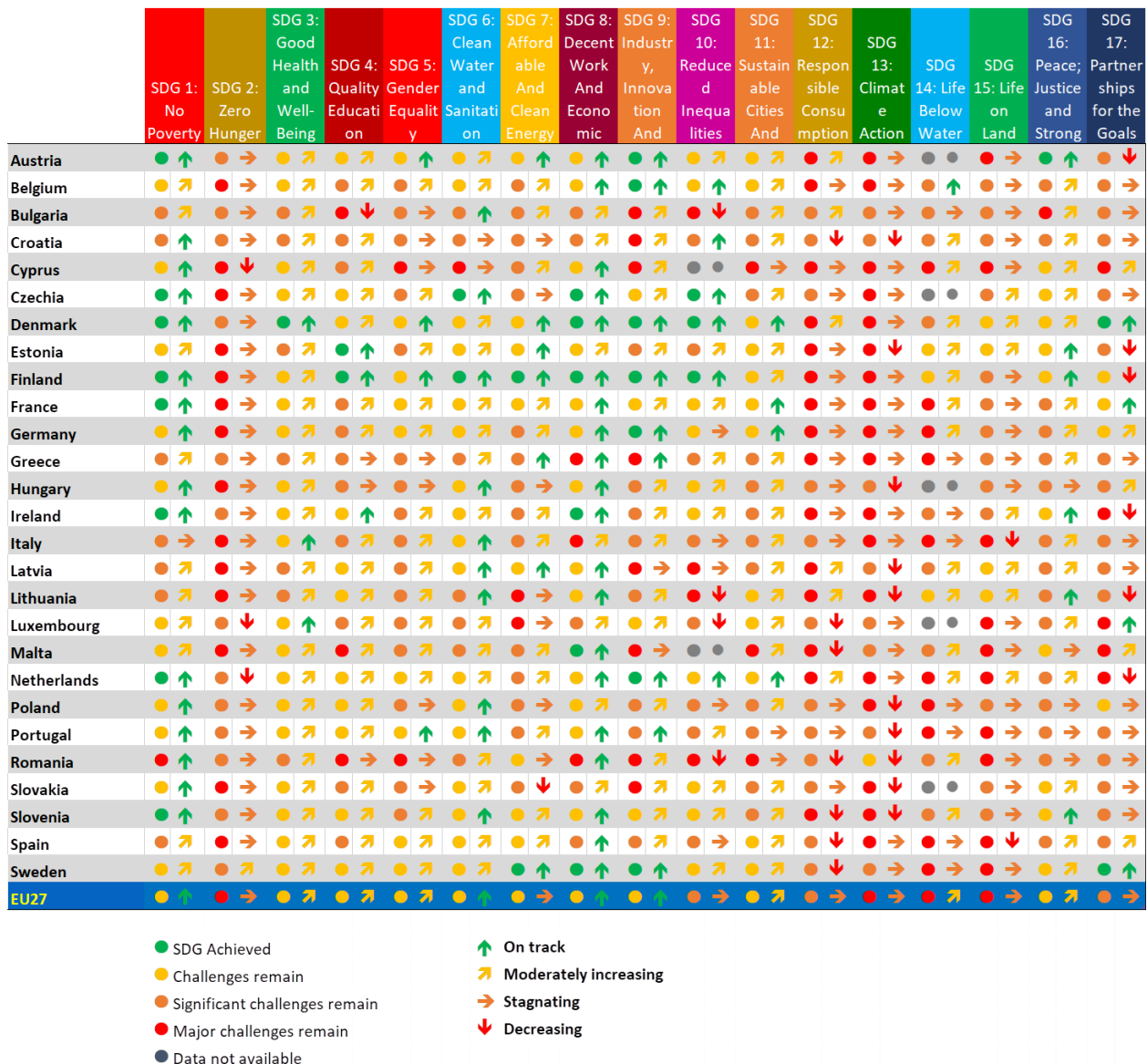
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<sup>3</sup> A specific but all SDG-encompassing issue is that of the impact of COVID-19. Eurostat data, or data in general, is collected with delay and not much is available on how big this impact concretely is. However, it is certain that it will prove a massive setback in terms of poverty (SDG 1), good health and well-being (SDG 3), and decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), just to name a few.

<sup>4</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg\\_10\\_50/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg_10_50/default/table?lang=en).

<sup>5</sup> For all findings, consult: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/sdi/key-findings> [accessed 27 August 2020].

Table 1: Progress on the SDGs in the European Union



Source: Europe Sustainable Development Report Institute for European Environmental Policy 2020 p. 6

Table 1 displays the overall progress per SDG. However, within each SDG, progress on specific targets is also varying. On some targets, the EU is making significant progress; on others, it is actually deteriorating. With regard to SDG 4, for example, the EU is making progress on two of three targets for basic education (early leavers from education and training and participation in early childhood education) but performing below standard on one target (underachievement in reading, maths and science). With regard to the latter, the EU is moving away from the EU SDG target. Also, with regard to adult learning,



the EU is deteriorating and making insufficient progress towards the EU SDG target<sup>6</sup>.

Exact reasons for the discrepancy in progress between different SDGs and targets are difficult to account for but likely involve the fact that some SDGs have been prioritized over others, and that specific social, political or economic factors at play favoured progress on some SDGs. For example, Eurostat measures progress on SDG 16 through six indicators, one of which is “population with confidence in EU institutions”. Following a period of strong decline in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, EU institutions have recently recovered citizen’s confidence, which partly accounts for the progress on SDG 16 observed in the past 5 years (Eurostat, 2020, p.294). Some SDGs and targets may also be intrinsically easier to achieve, which partly depends on how they are operationalized and measured. Some EU MS may also have significantly progressed or regressed on specific SDGs. Indeed, these EU-wide general trends do hide significant differences between EU MS. For example, in the context of SDG 1 (No Poverty), when we zoom into the differences between countries with regards to their efforts to decrease the amount of ‘people at risk of poverty or social exclusion’ between 2015 and 2018, there are a number of countries that stand out. The European Union as a whole made progress by decreasing the number from 24.50% to 21.60%, which can be attributed to a large extent to Bulgaria and Hungary, which saw its numbers drop from 41.30% to 32.80% and 28.20% to 19.60% respectively. Also Romania, Portugal, Ireland and Cyprus had a decrease of 4.9% to 5.1%. On the contrary, Luxembourg had an increase from 18.50% to 21.90%, and also Estonia and the Netherlands had a slight increase. It should be stressed that the respective percentages follow domestic standards, and primarily say something about the progress or regress made during the selected period. It should also be noted that the countries making most progress, the ‘leaders’ of Goal 1, typically started on the lower half of the scoreboard and had therefore most to improve. Similar differences can be observed with regard to all SDGs. Overall, the EU and its Member States are making progress on some SDGs, while on others it is lagging behind.

In the next sections we describe how the EU engages with the SDG framework according to the four identified roles of regional organizations and linking with the different modes of governance.

#### 4.1.3. The European Union and the Translating Role

A first role for regional organizations is to translate the SDG agenda in a series of strategies and policy recommendations. So far, the EU has not developed an overarching and integrated SDGs implementation strategy, despite repeated calls on the previous and current Commissions from the Parliament and the Council to do so. Shortly after the adoption of the UN SDGs, the European Parliament

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<sup>6</sup> For more details on all SDGs see: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/sdi/key-findings>

called on the previous Commission to “come forward with a proposal for an overarching Sustainable Development Strategy encompassing all relevant internal and external policy areas, with a detailed timeline up to 2030, a mid-term review and a specific procedure ensuring Parliament’s full involvement, including a concrete implementation plan coordinating the achievement of the 17 goals, 169 targets and 231 global indicators and ensuring consistency with, and delivery of, the Paris Agreement goals”.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, the Commission’s Communication “Next steps for a sustainable European future – European action for sustainability”,<sup>8</sup> which constituted the first formal response of the Commission to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the European Commission did not present any strategy to achieve the SDGs, nor an intention to do so. Rather, the Commission stated that, in essence, the SDGs were already being pursued by the EU through its existing policies and (internal as well as external) actions, and that the SDGs were in line with the EU’s 10 priorities.<sup>9</sup> In this Communication, the Commission nonetheless committed to be “a frontrunner in implementing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs”, along with EU Member States and in accordance with the subsidiarity principle.

Since then, the Parliament and the Council have repeatedly called on the Commission to develop an overarching and comprehensive SDG implementation strategy. In June 2017, the Council urged the Commission to elaborate, by mid-2018, an implementation strategy identifying existing gaps and outlining timelines, objectives and concrete measures to reflect the 2030 Agenda in all relevant EU internal and external policies, taking into account the global impacts of the EU’s domestic actions.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in July 2017 and again in March 2019, the Parliament called the Commission to assess the EU’s approach to implementing the SDGs, and to identify inconsistencies, gaps, and challenges in that respect. The

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<sup>7</sup> European Parliament (P8\_TA(2016)0224). Parliament Resolution of 12 May 2016 on the Follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda.

<sup>8</sup> European Commission (COM(2016)739). Commission Communication of 22 November 2016 on the Next steps for a sustainable European future – European action for sustainability.

<sup>9</sup> The Juncker Commission’s (2014-2019) 10 priorities were: (1) a new boost for jobs, growth and investment; (2) a connected digital single market; (3) a resilient energy union with a forward-looking climate change policy; (4) a deeper and fairer internal market with a strengthened industrial base; (5) a deeper and fairer economic and monetary union; (6) a balanced and progressive trade policy to harness globalization; (7) an area of justice and fundamental rights based on mutual trust; (8) towards a new policy on migration; (9) a stronger global actor; (10) a Union of democratic change.

<sup>10</sup> European Council (10370/17). Council Conclusions of 20 June 2017 on A sustainable European future: The EU response to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.



Parliament stressed that consideration should be given to the development of a pan-European framework for the achievement of the SDGs.<sup>11</sup>

In 2019, the European Commission issued the Reflection Paper “Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030” (2019a) in which the Commission presents three scenarios on how to best achieve the SDGs:

- **Scenario 1:** The Commission considers the SDGs as an overarching framework for all EU policies and develops a comprehensive EU SDG strategy, in which implementation targets are defined by EU institutions (the Commission, the Parliament and the Council) in addition to national SDG strategies, with concrete targets to be achieved at EU level. This scenario also involves coordinated reporting and monitoring on the SDGs. The Commission notes that this scenario would send a strong signal to the international community but that there is a risk of not taking countries’ specificities into account in the implementation of the SDGs.
- **Scenario 2:** The Commission considers the SDGs as underlying the development of policies at the EU level, but in a non-binding manner for the EU Member States. In this scenario, the EU continues to mainstream the SDGs in EU policy as it is currently doing, and considers including them in the post-2020 growth strategy. Yet, this scenario presents a risk of incoherence between the EU and Member States policies (e.g. one Member State’s actions could affect the single market if there is no coordination at EU level).
- **Scenario 3:** The Commission explores the mainstreaming of the SDGs in EU external policies, relying on multilateral international cooperation, with the UN playing a central role, as well as with the involvement of the WTO. The Commission notes that in this scenario, the EU would miss the opportunity to act as a key, consolidated actor, which would question its credibility in international fora as well as towards citizens.

The first scenario involved developing an overarching SDGs implementation strategy, yet the Commission did not prescribe which scenario to follow. Indeed, as the Commission notes, “these scenarios are illustrative: they aim to offer different ideas and spur debate and thinking. The eventual outcome would likely be a combination of certain elements from each” (European Commission, 2019b).

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<sup>11</sup> European Parliament (P8\_TA(2017)0315). Parliament Resolution of 6 July 2017 on EU Action for Sustainability; European Parliament (P8\_TA(2019)0220). Parliament Resolution of 14 March 2019 on the Annual strategic report on the implementation and delivery of the SDGs.

Such lack of positioning was mildly welcomed by the Parliament and the Council. Indeed, the first scenario was preferred by the European Parliament,<sup>12</sup> and while the Council welcomed the Commission's Reflection Paper, it stressed the "need for an urgent shift towards a more integrated and comprehensive approach to the implementation of the SDGs", and called on the Commission to develop a comprehensive implementation strategy and to present clear roadmaps to overcome challenges.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, not only did this Reflection Paper not take position on which scenario to follow, but also, there was no follow-up or call for public consultation following its publication. This arguably shows a lack of willingness or ambition from the Commission to further engage in a strategy to achieve the SDGs. In conclusion, with regard to an SDGs implementation strategy, the position of the Council and the Parliament differ from the Commission's, as the Commission has not answered their calls to develop such a strategy, barely committing to mainstreaming the SDGs into EU's policies and actions.

On the level of EU MS, more progress has been made with regard to translating the SDGs into policies. The Voluntary National Reviews report on this translation function. EU MS have flexibility on what they should or should not include. The degree of elaboration range from anywhere between 38 pages in the Czech's 2017 VNR and 179 in the case of Spain's 2018 review (Annexes excluded). Also the focus per EU MS differs. Where some focus on their past measures and achievements, others look at their future challenges. Despite these differences, the reports include many of the same types of information, such as the already existing sustainable development policy and relevant institutional changes since 2015.

Virtually all countries in the EU27 had an existing policy or strategy in one way or another. For example, Germany, Latvia, Sweden and Greece started in 2002 with a first national sustainable development strategy, Romania already did in 1999. Lithuania in 2003 approved its 'National Strategy for Sustainable Development', later in 2009 updated to be in harmony with the 'EU Sustainable Development Strategy' (Lithuania 2018, 6). Luxembourg in 2004 passed a law to bring sustainable development in as a principle objective of its legal system, and also Malta has to this end various laws in place from 1992 onwards. Finally, Hungary established a standing Committee on Sustainable Development in Parliament in 2010.

In order to implement the Agenda 2030, or in parallel to this framework, most EU27 States have their own sustainable development policies, action plans and road maps. This is also what the drafters of the

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<sup>12</sup> European Parliament (P8\_TA(2019)0220). Parliament Resolution of 14 March 2019 on the Annual strategic report on the implementation and delivery of the SDGs.

<sup>13</sup> European Council (8286/19). Council Conclusions of 9 April 2019 on Towards an ever more sustainable Union by 2030.

SDGs had in mind, as is reflected in the paragraphs 59, 78 and 79 of the founding General Assembly resolution (UNGA 2015). There can be already existing road maps, such as the Belgian ‘Long-term Vision for Sustainable Development’ from 2013, with 55 long term objectives for 2050 and a proposed set of indicators. Others adopted or updated policies after the SDGs were in place, such as Poland’s ‘Strategy for Responsible Development’ from February 2017 - which also has 2030 as the horizon. Similarly, Estonia is implementing its ‘Estonia 2035’ strategy, Ireland its ‘2030 Vision’, Luxembourg its ‘*Mise en œuvre de l’Agenda 2030 au et par le Luxembourg*’ and Slovenia its ‘Development Strategy 2030’. Others extended their plans even further into the future, such as Finland’s ‘Society’s Commitment on Sustainable Development – the Finland we want 2050’ or Malta’s ‘Vision 2050’.

These long-term strategies are often complemented by short- or long-term strategies. Latvia’s ‘Sustainable Development Strategy until 2030’ is implemented through, among others, its ‘National Development Plan 2014-2020’.

In these policy documents the EU Member States identify priorities. While the 17 SDGs are not established in order of importance, many of the 27 EU MS link them to their own countries priorities, or elaborate on their focus for the next couple of years. For example Sweden focuses on ‘gender equality, women’s rights and feminist foreign policy, international climate support, the UN Ocean Conference 2017, the Global Deal initiative, innovation policy and special collaborative programs, and initiatives against antibiotic resistance’. Austria gives special attention to the three main topics “Digitalization”, “Women, youth and ‘leaving no one behind’” as well as “Climate action and adaptation to climate change”. Estonia added its very own ‘SDG 18’ on culture.

A particular focus that is shared by many of the EU27 and the EU institutions is the Paris Agreement. Among others, the integration of this agreement has been mentioned prominently by, among others, Finland, Hungary, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Italy, Sweden and Greece. Also the United Nation’s Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), its Kyoto Protocol and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR) are frequently mentioned. Across the EU MS one can find different priorities.

The EU as a regional organization has therefore not (yet) played a significant translating role for the SDGs. Rather, its Member States develop their own strategies and roadmaps to achieve them. Even in areas in which the EU has an exclusive competence and theoretically is able to develop strategies and adopt measures to make progress on the SDGs pertaining to those policy areas, it remains largely absent. For example, the EU has exclusive competences in the conservation of marine biological resources under the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). The CFP aims to ensure that fishing and aquaculture are environmentally, economically and socially sustainable through, for example, catch limits and fishing licenses. Actions of the EU in this matter therefore *de facto* influence progress on SDG 14 on



Life below water, and more particularly on target 4<sup>14</sup>. Yet, so far, the SDGs are not explicitly mentioned in the CFP, which was last reformed in 2014 – before the adoption of the SDGs. Hence, the EU misses an opportunity to act as a translator in drawing an EU-wide strategy for SDGs implementation, at least in areas where it has exclusive competences.

#### 4.1.4. The European Union and the Supporting Role

The supporting role of regional organizations focuses on the implementation of the SDG-agenda. Technically, the implementation of the SDGs is left to UN Member States. Yet, the EU does play a role in the implementation of the SDGs, firstly through the subsidiarity principle, and secondly since frequently, policy targets adopted at national level are a translation of policy targets adopted at the EU level (IEEP, 2018).

In 2016, the previous European Commission argued that the EU was already implementing the SDGs through its existing policies. It nonetheless presented two work streams to implement the SDGs in the EU:<sup>15</sup>

1. “To fully integrate the SDGs in the European policy framework and current Commission priorities, assess where we stand and identify most relevant sustainability concerns”;
2. “To launch reflection work on further developing our longer term vision and the focus of sectoral policies after 2020, preparing for the long term implementation of the SDGs”.

In this Communication, the Commission also committed to work more closely with the Parliament, the Council and other relevant stakeholders to implement the SDGs. Moreover, it pledged to creating a Multi-Stakeholder Platform (MSP) to share best practices and to support and advise the Commission and other stakeholders on the implementation of the SDGs. The Commission also wished to ensure coherence, in

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<sup>14</sup> SDG 14.4 states: “By 2020, effectively regulate harvesting and end overfishing, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and destructive fishing practices and implement science-based management plans, in order to restore fish stocks in the shortest time feasible, at least to levels that can produce maximum sustainable yield as determined by their biological characteristics.”

<https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal14>

<sup>15</sup> European Commission (COM(2016)739). Commission Communication of 22 November 2016 on the Next steps for a sustainable European future – European action for sustainability, p.3.

particular by benefitting from the First VP's new function, i.e. his coordinating role on sustainable development issues. In 2017, the Vice-President Frans Timmermans effectively launched the High-Level Multi-Stakeholder Platform (MSP) on SDGs. This platform brought together stakeholders from civil society, nongovernmental organizations, and the private and corporate sector in regular meetings to support and advise the European Commission on the implementation of SDGs at EU level. It was composed of 30 members, being either individuals appointed in their personal capacity, or appointed to represent a common interest, organizations, as well as the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. All members should have experience in at least one of the SDGs and show commitment to sustainable development. Stakeholder representation should be inclusive and balanced. The tasks of the MSP involved: supporting and advising the Commission and all stakeholders involved on the implementation of the SDGs at Union level; supporting and advising the Commission in relation to Commission events on sustainable development and helping prepare the selection process of an annual sustainability award; and providing a forum for exchange of experience and best practice on the implementation of the SDGs across sectors and at local, regional, national and Union level. The MSP worked in subgroups, each related to a specific theme encompassing several SDGs. The MSP participated in target consultation for the Commission's Reflection Paper (2019a), and published recommendations from subgroups, a contribution to the Reflection Paper, as well as a position paper on the MFF advising the Commission to mainstream the SDGs into EU policies and financial instruments. "This Decision [to set up the MSP on the SDGs] shall apply until the end of 2019 and may be renewed afterwards".<sup>16</sup> However, the mandate of the MSP ended on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2019 and has not been renewed. As a response, the Council welcomed the establishment of the MSP.<sup>17</sup> The Parliament also welcomed it but called on the Commission to make of the MSP a model of best practices and inclusion. Moreover, it called on the First Vice-President to take the lead in SDGs implementation and coordination, as well as for enhanced mainstreaming mechanisms of sustainable development in EU policies and financial instruments.<sup>18</sup>

Besides, in a report, the Parliament (2019a) stressed that there is an uneven translation of the SDGs into

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<sup>16</sup> European Commission (C(2017)2941). Commission Decision of 22 May 2017 on setting up the multi-stakeholder platform on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in the EU, Art.15 p.8.

<sup>17</sup> European Council (10370/17). Council Conclusions of 20 June 2017 on A sustainable European future: The EU response to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

<sup>18</sup> European Parliament (P8\_TA(2017)0315). Parliament Resolution of 6 July 2017 on EU Action for Sustainability.

national policies across EU Member States, which have different interpretations of the SDGs and their principles. The Parliament argued that the Commission did not fulfill its intention to mainstream SDGs in EU policies through regulation tools and instruments such as the structural funds, and underlined that the economic dimension of the sustainability paradigm still dominates in the Commission's approach.

Yet, later in 2019, under the new and current Commission, President von der Leyen included in all Mission Letters to Commissioners that "each Commissioner will ensure the delivery of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals within their policy area. The College as a whole will be responsible for the overall implementation of the Goals", thereby furthering the intention of the Commission to mainstream the SDGs into all EU policy areas. Commissioner for Economy Gentiloni was also given a special role to "contribute to turning the European Semester cycle of economic governance into an instrument that integrates the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals"<sup>19</sup> (see section on coordination role). The inclusion of the SDGs in the Mission Letters from the new Commission might signal a positive shift in its ambition to achieve the SDGs, although it remains to be seen.

At EU MS level, implementation takes many forms.<sup>20</sup> A popular way to give body to the SDGs are (inter-ministerial) working groups or task forces. Such working groups go by different names that do or do not make explicit references to the SDGs. Others appointed SDG Focal Points. In Spain for example they appointed an 'Ambassador-at-Large for the 2030 Agenda', 'High Commissioner for the 2030 Agenda', 'Joint Parliamentary Committee for the 2030 Agenda' and, coordinating all ministries on the SDGs, a 'High-Level Group'. As a result of this working group and focal points logic, the responsibility for the implementation of the SDGs lies with one or more ministries. We see generally two different ways to go about where the responsibility lays. Some States see 'integration' as a key notion and urge each of their ministries to take responsibility for the Goals closest to their expertise, such as Austria, Cyprus, Spain, Finland, Germany or Hungary. Ireland takes a what they call 'whole-of-Government approach to

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<sup>19</sup> European Commission (2019). Mission letter: Paolo Gentiloni – Commissioner-designate for Economy, p.4.

<sup>20</sup> When analyzing the implementation of the SDGs through the VNR we also looked at the budget made available for the implementation. However, none of the countries mentioned in their report a specific budget for the implementation of the SDGs domestically, nor where a specific budget would come from. Denmark is a positive exception to this observation. Denmark in 2017 was finalizing its SDG Fund and expected to contribute around 450 million USD to this fund, to be matched by an equal contribution from institutional investors.



implementing the SDGs'. Others appointed one or multiple ministers to take the lead. Which ministry exactly ranges from the Prime Minister (Lithuania), Ministry for Foreign Affairs (Bulgaria and Portugal), Ministry of Economic Development (Poland), the Ministry for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation (Netherlands), the Ministries for Sustainable Development and Infrastructure and the one for Cooperation jointly (Luxembourg), or the Ministry of Finance (Denmark and Italy).

Most EU MS governments actively engage other stakeholders in its implementation policies. Hence, following para 52 EU MS engage with 'parliaments, the United Nations system and other international institutions, local authorities, indigenous peoples, civil society, business and the private sector, the scientific and academic community – and all people' (UNGA 2015, Para. 52). This is explicitly mentioned in most VNRs. There is some variation between different types of stakeholders across EU MS. Some (Latvia, Hungary and Croatia) refer, for example, quite strongly to the role of the business community while others give more equal attention to all stakeholders. Some also single out specific stakeholders such as youth (Hungary, Austria and Finland) or citizens Bulgaria, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands and Slovenia.

Consequently, although the implementation of the SDGs mostly relies on individual countries' efforts, the EU does play a supporting role. More specifically, the EU has used the Multi-Stakeholder Platform and mandates of Commissioners as intermediaries to support the implementation of the SDGs.

#### 4.1.5 The European Union and the Coordinating Role

The coordination role in the EU can be considered from two perspectives. One is, bottom up, from the perspective of the EU MS. The other one, top down, is from the perspective of the EU and mainly the European Commission.

##### 4.1.5.1 Vertical Coordination: from MS to EU

The degree of vertical coordination and cooperation relies on the position of EU MS towards the EU to take up a coordinating role. In order to assess this we screened all 27 VNR for references to the EU and cooperation with the EU. The vast majority of EU MS made explicit reference to EU cooperation but there is significant variation on how this is done. Table 2 summarizes the references to EU cooperation per EU MS.

Table 2: Overview of references to EU cooperation in VNRs

Austria	The Austrian VNR includes several references to EU cooperation and also used its role as president of the European Council to pursue an SDG agenda. During the Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2018, the priority of the Council Working Group on the 2030 Agenda was to establish instruments, processes and structures that would promote the desired mainstreaming within the Council and make use of synergies. However, it focusses on level among States, rather than the work of the European Commission. Finally, it mentioned the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, which is based in Vienna.
Belgium	The Belgian VNR includes several references to the EU and European cooperation, and aims to establish overarching policies needed to implement the 2030 Agenda at the EU level and throughout the EU institutions, notably in the context of the recently adopted European Consensus on Development and during the discussions on the Council Conclusions related to a Sustainable European Future. The European Commission itself is mostly mentioned as source for data related to SDG 4, 12 and 17.
Bulgaria	The Bulgarian VNR includes references to the EU and mostly notes that national legislation needs to be harmonized with EU legislation. It also refers to the European Commission for some of its data, however does not go in-depth. It also does not go in-depth on the EU under its institutional changes.
Croatia	The Croatian effort in multilateralism and EU engagement is mentioned throughout the Croatian VNR, but never in-depth apart except for its contribution to the European Social Fund (ESF) for civil society development projects.
Cyprus	Cyprus refers to European Cooperation widely, and uses the words 'Europe', 'European Cooperation' or 'European Commission' 131 times. Under the various SDGs, it makes mention of different policies of the European Commission, including the Digital Single Market Strategy 2014-2020 (SDG9) and the EU Action Plan to tackle wildlife trafficking within the EU and to strengthen the EU's role in the global fight against these illegal activities (SDG15).
Czechia	In the VNR of Czechia, the EU is only sporadically mentioned. It mentions the Europe 2020 Framework, however only twice.
Denmark	The Danish VNR stresses the importance of EU cooperation and coordination and notes that the Danish government will engage at local, regional and international level in the realisation of the SDGs. It mentions that the EU's global influence is greater than that of Denmark alone, and that the government is therefore working to ensure that the EU and its member states integrate the SDGs in new policies and initiatives. The new European Consensus on Development and the Council Conclusions on a Sustainable European Future are important steps in this regard.
Estonia	The Estonian VNR pushes European cooperation and notes that at the level of the European Union, Estonia agreed on the integration of sustainable development goals into the European Union's European Semester. This means that in the future, the supervision of the fulfilment of the sustainable development goals will be centralised at the level of the European Union, i.e. the importance of the sustainable development goals will increase both in Estonia and in the European Union.



Finland	The Finish VNR stresses the importance of the EU by noting that EU member states have delegated competencies in some policy areas from member states to the Union, and since common EU legislation and policies have a significant impact on national decision making and legislation, the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of the SDG's at country level depend significantly on the decisions made at the EU level.
France	Overall, France mentions Europe just 18 times, including 'Europe 2020'. When specifying its SDGs, it takes European standards as its comparison however does not go into depth on specific EU policies or strategies.
Germany	The German VNR focuses regularly on the EU and states that Germany is pushing for an ambitious approach for implementing the 2030 Agenda on the EU level, inter alia through a revision of the EU's sustainability strategy and its CSR strategy, as well as revising the EU Consensus on Development. As a member of the EU, Germany is working on a new strategic EU framework to realise the 2030 Agenda. It states that the 2030 Agenda is to be taken into account in all strategies affecting more than one policy field, including the EU's global strategy for foreign and security policy and the EU trade policy strategy. Germany has successfully pushed for a revision of the EU Consensus on Development, which dates back to 2005, in the light of the 2030 Agenda.
Greece	While Greece does not go in-depth on EU cooperation by way of a dedicated chapter, its reveres widely to various European initiatives, including Europe 2020, the European Social Model or the European Globalisation Fund (EGF). Throughout, it looks at the European Commission for guidance on how to implement certain aims and goals.
Hungary	Hungary mentions EU cooperation only sporadically, however mentions Europe 2020 under SDG 1. It also refers to, among others, the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) under SDG 6 and the European Union Emergency Trust Fund (SDG 8). In terms of cooperation, Hungary mentions primarily cooperation among the Eastern bloc.
Ireland	Ireland mentioned the European Union and related terms throughout its elaboration of its SDG implementation, primarily when talking about its statistics. However also under SDG 9 it mentions the Horizon 2020 and it mentions various European strategies such as the European Commission's 'Closing the Loop – An Action Plan for the Circular Economy' (SDG 12).
Italy	The Italian VNR notes that the European Union is working to define a common framework to address and reflect the Agenda 2030 challenges, as a main reference for Member States in setting their final strategic objectives. It also notes that at a European level, the 2030 Agenda has stimulated the launch of various initiatives which it supports. It also refers to the European Semester and European statistics throughout.
Latvia	Latvia's VNR explicitly refers to the EU as the leading organization for the SDG agenda and links EU membership to achieving the SDGs. It notes that one of the most significant aspects of the enabling environment for the implementation of the SDGs is Latvia's membership in EU. Participation at the EU in joint decision-making regarding the future of Europe, common EU External Action, the European Single Market, European cohesion as well as the stability of the Eurozone - all facilitate the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Latvia supports the European Union's common ambition to play a major role in the Agenda 2030 process.

Lithuania	Lithuania only mentions European Union initiatives scarcely, and uses it mainly as a way of comparing its own achievements with the other 26 Member States. It also states to comply with European legislation, however does not go in-depth, with the exception of Natura 2000.
Luxembourg	Luxembourg sees itself as a central State within the European Union however does with the exception of Erasmus+ not go in-depth of specific policies or strategies.
Malta	Malta's VNR refers to EU membership as a means to achieving SDGs. Malta's EU membership entails that several of its policies are aligned to the EU acquis, with the EU being at the forefront of promoting sustainable development practices.
Netherlands	The Dutch VNR contains several references to EU and its role in coordination for the SDGs. It notes that many current efforts to enhance sustainability reflect common European policies. In judging its own progress, it uses the other EU MS as a baseline.
Poland	Poland does not refer to European initiatives much throughout the text, with the exception of the European Commission's 'Youth Employment Package' and different Funds mentioned under SDG 10: the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund etc.
Portugal	The Portuguese VNR contains many references to the European Union and highlights that the EU seeks to set out a new approach to ensure growth and sustainability in its three dimensions (economic, social and environmental) beyond 2020. It explicitly links the achievement of the SDGs to European cooperation and joint action, where it stresses that the review of the Europe 2020 Strategy for the future, must reflect the internal and external achievement of the two major international milestones of 2015 in Sustainable Development: the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. It endorses, among others, the 2016 Commission Communication on "Next steps for a sustainable European future".
Romania	The Romanian VNR has a strong emphasis on the EU. At the European level, in the preparation process for the presidency of the EU Council in the first half of 2019, Romania proposed sustainable development as one of the top priorities on the European Union's policy agenda. The VNR strongly stresses the importance of European cooperation for achieving the SDGs
Slovakia	Slovakia mentions the common project of the Council of Europe and the European Commission "Inclusive Schools: Making Difference for Roma Children" and Europe 2020. These are, apart from certain Eurostat data, the only mentions of the European Union.
Slovenia	When talking about European cooperation in implementing the SDGs, the Slovenian VNR elaborates mostly on the European Green Deal the European Agenda. It notes that the achievement of the set goals in the Green Deal will require action by all sectors of Slovenia's economy and lists a number of steps it will take. It also makes mention of the Natura 2000 network, Europe's Cohesion Policy and the EU's 'Trade for All' strategy, however not elaborately.
Spain	Spain makes sporadic references to European cooperation and states its intent to take a European level approach to the implementation of the SDGs. It mentions the Europe 2020 strategy and a number of specific Funds. As one of its prime commitments, Spain states that 'within the EU it is necessary for the Member States and European institutions to bring to bear their political leadership in order to place the SDGs at the

centre of the European project’.	
Sweden	The Swedish VNR presents a pro-European approach and notes that within the EU, Sweden works and contributes in all areas so that the Union’s policy, strategies and actions, will be characterised and guided by the 2030 Agenda and the sustainable development goals. It makes reference to several EU internal (emission trading) and external (development cooperation) policies and how it wants to contribute to them to achieve the SDGs. Sweden notes that it has worked for the EU to make ambitious and complementary use of the tools at its disposal in relation to national and other international initiatives.

*Source: authors based on all EU MS VNRs<sup>21</sup>*

Table 2 shows that there is variation between EU MS and their references to EU cooperation. First, there are some EU MS which only sporadically refer to the EU while other EU MS emphasize the important role the EU plays/can play. Second, some EU MS only refer to EU cooperation in the field of external relations and most notably development cooperation while others also focus on the internal dimension and the importance of the SDGs to achieve sustainability internally in the EU (i.e. The Green Deal). Yet others do both. Third, the references to the EU are more elaborate when the VNR is released shortly before or after the EU MS took up the presidency of the European Council.

This variation between EU MS is quite striking. To further illustrate this, we looked at how EU MS were referring to cooperation with the EU in order to achieve the SDGs. We measured this based on EU MS VNRs and focused on two dimensions: the quantity of references to cooperation with the EU, and the quality of references to cooperation with the EU. Each dimension is divided into two categories. We used the distinction few/many with regard to the quantity dimension and the distinction superficial/strong with regard to the quality dimension. In allocating the different countries to these categories, the quantity depends on the number of times a EU MS refers to the EU as whole, European projects, European cooperation or data throughout the reporting, ranging from one reference to Erasmus+ by Luxembourg to countries mentioning it 100+ times, such as Cyprus (Government of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg 2017, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Cyprus 2017). Countries which mentioned EU cooperation in at least five different occurrences fall under the *many* category, with multiple mentions in one paragraph or section counting as one occurrence.

For the qualitative dimension, the focus lies on the relevance of these references. We based this assessment on an interpretative reading of the VNRs and how they referred to the EU (see also table 2).

<sup>21</sup> All Voluntary National Reviews can be retrieved via: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>.

EU MS that mention EU cooperation only as a side note, for instance while providing nationally implemented EU projects as an attest to their SDG efforts or the use of EU statistics to compare their own progress, fall under the *superficial* category. On the other hand, EU MS who see the EU as a pillar of their SDG implementation efforts, for example through explicit statements on cooperation with and within the EU or their efforts to include the 2030 Agenda in EU policy, are coded as having *strong* commitments to the EU. Generally, more weight is given to such statements in the first chapter(s) of the VNRs, where countries elaborate on their general attitude towards the SDGs, rather than the later ones, where countries go into more technical detail on each SDG.

This approach allows us to create a four-cell distinction in which we can identify different types of vertical cooperation and coordination between the EU and EU MS: *few-superficial* (strongly EU MS focused), *many-superficial*, *few-strong* and *many-strong* (strongly EU focused) (see table 3).

Table 3: Overview of different types of EU MS in relation to cooperation with the EU

		Quantity	
		<i>Few</i>	<i>Many</i>
Quality	<i>Superficial</i>	Bulgaria, Czechia, France, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, Slovakia	Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Slovenia
	<i>Strong</i>	Estonia, Finland, Malta, Spain	Austria, Denmark, Germany, Latvia, Portugal, Romania, Sweden

Table 3 shows that there are four types of vertical of cooperation between the EU and EU MS. First (*few-superficial*), a total of nine EU MS give only a few and superficial references to EU cooperation, often referring only to EU statistics as a comparison to their own data, or mentioning their participation in European projects such as Erasmus+ or Natura2000. In the second category (*many-superficial*), seven EU MS report many of the same type of references, but more often throughout their VNR. For example, Belgium refers to EU projects, research and data in many of its elaborations of individual SDGs to place their reporting into context (Government of the Kingdom of Belgium 2017). In the third category (*few-strong*), four countries make only a few, but very strong references to the EU. Spain, for example, makes a few sporadic references, but then also states that ‘within the EU it is necessary for the EU MS and European institutions to bring to bear their political leadership in order to place the SDGs at the center of the European project’ (Government of the Kingdom of Spain 2018, 115). Finally, there are seven EU MS (*many-strong*) that made such references both strongly and often. Sweden is one of these seven, stating that it makes an effort to place the 2030 Agenda at the core of EU policy and throughout the report

emphasizing its support for both internal and external EU policies to achieve the SDGs (Government of Sweden 2017, 67).

In terms of horizontal coordination within EU MS, efforts from EU MS to ensure coherence across policy areas for the SDGs have been more prominent. Most notably, all EU MS have put in place some kind of coordination mechanism on the SDGs, although to varying degrees of institutionalization and inclusion, and with different leaderships (European Parliament, 2019b, pp.31-38). In 13 EU MS, the Head of State and Government (typically the Prime Minister or Deputy Prime Minister) has taken the lead on coordination functions for the SDGs. In other countries, the lead role is taken by designated ministries (often, the ministry linked to the environment and the ministry linked to development share the lead). In a number of countries, focal points within ministries are also designated to support collaboration and the mainstreaming of the SDGs into different policy areas. In Germany for example, 'Ministry coordinators' have such functions. Besides, the majority (17) of EU MS have coordination mechanisms on the SDGs that involve all ministries. For the remaining 10 EU MS that do not involve all ministries, there is still a coordination mechanism in place, typically taking the form of coordination groups of Ministers or interdepartmental working groups, sometimes institutionalised into Councils or Commissions. In a few cases (Ireland, Netherlands, Poland and Sweden), a dedicated coordination mechanism was created to ensure policy coherence for the SDGs. While this looks like a positive initiative, it also comes with a risk of 'siloeing' the SDGs rather than mainstreaming them across policy areas.

#### 4.1.5.2 Vertical Coordination: From EU to MS

As highlighted above, so far the EU and especially the European Commission has been a bit reluctant to take the lead on the SDG agenda. Notably, there is no formal and dedicated mechanism at the EU level for coordination on the SDGs, although existing and well-established soft law practices among EU institutions ensure it to a certain degree, through the 'Open Method of Coordination' or expert groups for example (European Parliament, 2019b, p.73). With the coming into power of the new Commission, the coordination role of the European Commission might nonetheless be strengthened through integrating the SDG agenda in the European Semester. Current President von der Leyen's assigned to the Commissioner for Economy Paolo Gentiloni the role of "contribut[ing] to turning the European Semester cycle of economic governance into an instrument that integrates the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals". As a result, since 2020, the European Semester integrates the SDGs. The European Semester mechanism might become an important coordination mechanism for the EU.

Introduced in 2010 by the European Commission following the financial and sovereign debt crises and to implement the Europe 2020 Strategy, the European Semester is a multi-annual discussion which enables EU Member States to coordinate their economic policies and to monitor progress at specific times throughout the year. It covers 3 blocks of economic policy coordination:



- structural reforms, focusing on promoting growth and employment in line with the Europe 2020 strategy;
- fiscal policies, in order to ensure sustainability of public finances in line with the Stability and Growth Pact;
- prevention of excessive macroeconomic imbalances.

The European Semester brings together various EU governance instruments into a single policy coordination cycle. Each year in October, the European Semester starts with the 'Autumn package': EU MS submit drafts of their budgetary plans and, importantly, the European Commission releases the Annual Growth Survey (AGS), a document analyzing the most recent trends in economic and social policies in the EU and providing policy guidance for the upcoming year. The Alert Mechanism Report, submitted by the Commission to the Council, the European Central Bank, the Parliament and the European Economic and social committee, identifies and addresses risks of macroeconomic imbalances and determines Member States that need an in-depth review as they face or may face macroeconomic risks. The Joint Employment Report (JER) is also released and outlines important developments in social and employment matters in the EU. In the 'Winter package', from December to February, the Commission publishes Country Reports, which underline, for each Member State, the economic situation and forecasts, the progress regarding the implementation of the Country-specific recommendations (CSRs) addressed by the Council in the previous years, and the reform priorities that the country needs to endorse. They include a detailed analysis of the challenges that the country's economy faces, as well as policy suggestions for tackling these challenges. In the 'Spring package', from March to May, EU MS submit their National Reform Programme to the Commission and the Council, which involves a detailed project of economic reforms that the country will implement, as well as the reforms that have been taken to implement the CSRs of the previous year. EU MS also submit their Stability or Convergence Programme<sup>22</sup> which sets out the orientation and objectives of the country's budgetary policies for 3 years. In May, the Commission sends its proposals for CSRs to the Council, containing macroeconomic, fiscal and budgetary policy guidelines for each country. Finally, in the 'Summer package', the Council debates and adopts the CSRs, which EU MS are supposed to take into account in the elaboration of their national budget for the next year. Financial sanctions can be applied in case of recurrent non-compliance with

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<sup>22</sup> Stability Programme for Eurozone countries; Convergence Programme for non-Eurozone countries



CSRs.<sup>23</sup> The European Semester 2020, as aforementioned, is marked by the inclusion of the SDGs. First, the release of the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy (instead of the Annual Growth Survey) in October shows a shift in priorities and stresses the transition towards a sustainable and inclusive economy.<sup>24</sup> Besides, the Country Reports, published in February 2020, explicitly integrate the SDGs: SDG-relevant policies and challenges are identified across the Country Reports, and a new annex sets out the individual Member States' performance on achieving the SDGs, including a 5-year trend based on Eurostat data.<sup>25</sup> A first glance into the 2020 country reports shows however that the links between policy developments and the SDGs are not systematically made, and when they are, are typically formulated as "policy \*\* contributes to SDG \*\*", without further analysis or link to specific SDG targets. One could interpret this as the Commission barely integrating SDG language where relevant rather than elaborating the country reports with an overarching and systematic SDG lens. Yet, both the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy and the newly-designed Country Reports show proactive efforts to put sustainable development on the agenda.

The European Semester is a potentially powerful mechanism to strengthen both horizontal and vertical coordination on the SDGs in the EU. While the European Semester was initially set up to coordinate economic policies across EU MS, it has been gradually 'socialized' between 2011 and 2016 as increasing emphasis was put on social objectives. In 2020, with the formulation of the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy and the inclusion of the SDGs in Country Reports, the European Semester is adopting a true sustainability approach including the environmental dimension in addition to the economic and social ones. This therefore contributes to horizontal coordination on the SDGs. Besides, the European Semester has great potential to strengthen vertical coordination on the SDGs by its very nature, since its first aim was to coordinate EU MS' economic policies under EU guidance. Integrating the SDGs in the process will therefore improve vertical coordination on the topic. SDGs could be further used, for example, as tools to assess the impacts of public spending cuts, or to define public spending priorities. They could be integrated into Country-specific recommendations and in the Annual Growth Strategy, with

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<sup>23</sup> For a visual representation of the European Semester's timeline, see: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/semester\\_sdgs\\_timeline.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/semester_sdgs_timeline.pdf); for a full description of the timeline, see: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/european-semester-timeline\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/european-semester-timeline_en)

<sup>24</sup> European Commission (COM(2019)650). Commission Communication of 17 December 2019 on the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy 2020.

<sup>25</sup> To consult 2020 European Semester Country Reports, see: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2020-european-semester-country-reports\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2020-european-semester-country-reports_en)

the EU thereby providing general guidance on the SDGs to all EU MS.

While future developments in this respect remain to be seen, the integration of the SDGs into the European Semester can help progress towards the SDGs. It can help identify potential synergies or tradeoffs in policies within and across countries, and may provide additional and coordinated impulses to make progress on the SDGs under the lead of the Commission.

Just as for vertical coordination, there is no one dedicated EU mechanism for horizontal coordination on the SDGs between the EU institutions, but several practices among EU institutions ensure it to a certain degree (European Parliament, 2019b, pp.69-72). The Commission's First Vice-President (FVP) has a lead role on coordination on sustainable development. Besides, the FVP created the Sustainable Development Project Team, where sustainable development topics are discussed and to which interested Commissioners can participate. With the lead of the Secretariat-General, an Inter Service Group on the SDGs was also established to gather Directorates General on cross-sectoral topics. Moreover, the Council created a 'Working Party (WP) on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' in November 2017 to improve horizontal coordination, in particular to bring together the external and domestic dimension. It aims to 'ensure proper follow-up, monitoring and review of the implementation at EU level, across internal and external policy sectors, of commitments under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'. Its recommendations are forwarded to the General Affairs Council (GAC). It is composed of representatives from each Member State and chaired by the delegate of the country holding the rotating six-month presidency of the Council, and countries are encouraged to have representatives from the internal and external policy dimensions participating. This WP has already shown new initiatives, energy and agreements.

In terms of coordination, while each EU MS has its own more or less developed mechanism to coordinate across policy areas at the national level, the EU has been increasingly involved in horizontal coordination at EU level and in vertical coordination. Through the lead coordinating role of the Commission's First Vice President, the Sustainable Development Project Team, the Inter Service Group on the SDGs, and the Council's Working Party on the 2030 Agenda, the EU plays a horizontally coordinating role. Besides, there is a potentially important role to be played by the EU in vertical coordination through the inclusion of the SDGs into the European Semester.

#### 4.1.6 The European Union and the Monitoring Role

In terms of the monitoring and reporting role of regional organizations, the Parliament first urged the Commission "to develop effective monitoring, review and accountability mechanisms for the



implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and to report back to Parliament on a regular basis”.<sup>26</sup> As a response, the Commission committed to conduct regular reporting on EU Member States’ progress on the SDGs as of 2017 through the Eurostat,<sup>27</sup> which was indeed officially mandated in 2017 to do so. Yet, in its report (2019a), the Parliament then underlined that the EU’s reporting framework contains gaps on some SDGs and on their interlinkages, and lamented the lack of reporting on the spillover effects of the EU on other countries. Similarly, the Council welcomed the Eurostat reports as key documents for measuring EU’s progress on the SDGs, but expressed the need to continue developing indicators to monitor the EU’s progress as well as the need for continuous review and improvement of the database, in addition to strengthening and accelerating action on key policy areas through the elaboration of an implementation strategy, objectives and concrete measures.<sup>28</sup>

Besides, several calls have been made to integrate the SDGs into the European Semester, a framework for socioeconomic policy coordination across EU Member States (see coordination section). In June 2017, the Council “call[ed] upon the Commission to carry out detailed regular monitoring of the SDGs at EU level, including where relevant in the context of the European Semester, and to develop a reference indicator framework for this purpose drawing on existing indicators and data provided by the Member States, institutions and international organizations, and accompanied by a qualitative assessment of the progress made; and call[ed] on the Commission and where appropriate Member States to use this indicator framework to assess progress and trends and to inform evidence-based decision-making”.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, in July 2017 and again in March 2019, the Parliament underlined the necessity to integrate the SDGs into the European Semester and to ensure the Parliament’s involvement in the process.<sup>30</sup> The Parliament repeated such call in a report (2019b), in which it also stated that monitoring by the Eurostat does not tell where the EU stands, what to do in priority, at what pace to achieve the SDGs, and

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<sup>26</sup> European Parliament (P8\_TA(2016)0224). Parliament Resolution of 12 May 2016 on the Follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda.

<sup>27</sup> European Commission (COM(2016)739). Commission Communication of 22 November 2016 on the Next steps for a sustainable European future – European action for sustainability.

<sup>28</sup> European Council (14835/19). Council conclusions of 10 December 2019 on Building a sustainable Europe by 2030 – Progress thus far and next steps.

<sup>29</sup> European Council (10370/17). Council Conclusions of 20 June 2017 on A sustainable European future: The EU response to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

<sup>30</sup> European Parliament (P8\_TA(2017)0315). Parliament Resolution of 6 July 2017 on EU Action for Sustainability; European Parliament (P8\_TA(2019)0220). Parliament Resolution of 14 March 2019 on the Annual strategic report on the implementation and delivery of the SDGs, p.13.

highlighted the lack of targets in many areas. Additionally, the Multi-stakeholder Platform on the SDGs (2018) also called on the Commission to integrate the SDGs into the European Semester (infra).

While the former Juncker's Commission has not answered such calls, the new Commission recognized their relevance and expressed the Commission's commitment to refocus the European Semester into an instrument that integrates the SDGs in President von der Leyen's Political Guidelines (2019). In the 2019 Mission Letters, she assigned to the Commissioner for Economy Paolo Gentiloni the role of "contribut[ing] to turning the European Semester cycle of economic governance into an instrument that integrates the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals".<sup>31</sup> As a result, since 2020, the European Semester indeed integrates the SDGs, with each country report presenting an overview of what has been done and identifying the main challenges that the country faces with regard to achieving the SDGs. A dedicated annex also sets out the individual Member States' performance on achieving the SDGs and a 5-year trend based on Eurostat data. The integration of the SDGs in the European semester might constitute an important step which also contributes to the strengthening of the coordination role of the EU in achieving the SDGs. We discuss the European Semester in the next section.

The monitoring on the EU level is complemented with monitoring on the level of the EU MS since for many of its datasets, Eurostat relies on the data provided by these individual statistical bureaus. The vast majority of EU MS relies on their own domestic statistical institutions for data and monitoring achievements on the SDGs. These efforts are guided by guidelines on SDG reporting by the UN Statistical Commission. Some also align their reporting practices with guidelines provided by the OECD.

The EU is therefore fulfilling a monitoring role in the governance of the SDGs by governing through indicators, both through the mandate of the Eurostat and through the integration of reviews on the SDGs into the European Semester Country reports – themselves based on Eurostat data.

## 4.2. The Case Study of ASEAN

### 4.2.1. The Historical and Institutional Context of ASEAN

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is the main regional forum for dialogue and coordination on regional issues in Southeast Asia. ASEAN was founded in 1967 by five leaders from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Brunei Darussalam joined later on in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, Lao PDR and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999. ASEAN emerged from the

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<sup>31</sup> European Commission (2019). Mission letter: Paolo Gentiloni – Commissioner-designate for Economy, p.4.

need of developing countries in Southeast Asia to promote regional stability and cooperation in order to focus on their domestic politics and economic development. As newly independent states caught in the middle of the Cold War, however, there was distrust and suspicion toward external powers. Moreover, these states also had conflicts with each other. Therefore, when they eventually decided to establish a regional cooperation, they designed it in the way that it would not interfere with their own affairs. Hence, ASEAN was established as an intergovernmental organization where member states retain full power in relations to others within the organization.

This character could be seen in the organizational structure of ASEAN where the highest decision-making body is the ASEAN Summit that is held twice a year to set the direction of ASEAN. The ASEAN Annual Meeting of Foreign Ministers (AMM) and other ministerial meetings are also convened every year to initiate and review policies agreed by the Summit. To support this political process, ASEAN has a secretariat headed by a Secretary General and functions as the administrative body responsible for the follow up of the Summit and the Ministerial Meetings as well as the day-to-day activities of ASEAN. Given the character of cooperation in ASEAN, however, the ASEAN Secretariat (ASEC) has limited funds and staffs, and strengthen the dominance of interstate political process among ASEAN members. This has not mentioned the set of fundamental principles adopted by ASEAN which also reflects the strong intergovernmental character of ASEAN. The first three fundamental principles of ASEAN, for example, are “mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity of all nations; the rights of every state to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion, and coercion; and non-interference in the internal affairs of one another” (TAC, 1976) (Amer 2008). In addition, ASEAN also has the so-called ASEAN Way in decision-making that is based on *musyawarah mufakat*, or consultation and consensus. ASEAN generally could only make decision if all members agree, or otherwise they agree to disagree (Narine 1998, 202).

ASEAN's institutional arrangement has undeniably contributed to regional stability with no major open military conflict occurring among ASEAN members since the establishment of ASEAN. ASEAN member states have also developed various regional cooperation that have contributed to their improved social condition and economic development. However, challenges resulting from globalization and membership enlargement have proven that strict non-intervention principle and shallow regional integration do not always work. There are also criticism pointing on the elitist character of ASEAN, the limited intra-regional compared to extra-regional economic exchanges, and the emerging economic competition rather than cooperation patterns among ASEAN members. Therefore, in 2003, ASEAN member states declared their vision of establishing an ASEAN Community by 2020 which later accelerated to 2015. By ASEAN Community, ASEAN aims to become “politically cohesive, economically integrated, and socially responsible” (ASEAN Community Blueprint). In 2015, ASEAN member states officially started a new phase in their regional cooperation with the establishment of ASEAN Community consisting of three



pillars – the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio Cultural Community (ASCC).

The APSC is responsible for developing a peaceful, just, democratic, and harmonious interstate relations in ASEAN (ASEAN 2009, 6). The AEC is responsible for creating a single market and production base, equitable economic development, and a highly competitive region that is fully integrated into the global economy (ASEAN 2008, 5). Lastly, the ASCC is responsible for promoting “human development, social welfare and protection, social justice and rights, ensuring environmental sustainability, building the ASEAN identity, and narrowing the development gap” (ASEAN 2009, 1). After the establishment of the ASEAN Community, there has also been organizational adjustment at the ASEAN Secretariat which now has a Community Council for each pillar, and it has the APSC Council, the AEC Council, and the ASCC Council. Under their supervision are directorates along with their divisions on various issues relevant to each pillar. For example, under the APSC Council are the Political Security Directorate and the External Relations Directorate (ASEAN 2016). Under the AEC Council are the Market Integration Directorate and the Sectoral Development Directorate. Under the ASCC Council are the Sustainable Development Directorate, responsible for environment, culture, and disaster management, and the Human Development Directorate, responsible for youth, gender, poverty eradication, education, health and labor issues.

Relating to the focus of this paper on the SDGs, ASEAN, with its current institutional design, has the potential to contribute to the governance of the SDGs in Southeast Asia. Not only is ASEAN the main avenue for interstate cooperation in the region, but each of the ASEAN Community pillar is relevant to the SDGs. The areas covered by the ASCC are aligned with the social and environmental pillars of the SDGs, those covered by the AEC are also aligned with the economic pillars of the SDGs, and even the APSC with its focus on peaceful, just, democratic, and harmonious interstate relations is important in enabling the achievement of the SDGs in general. In fact, the ASEAN Community Blueprint 2015 and the latest ASEAN Community Vision 2025 makes explicit reference to the SDGs. The question is whether ASEAN also lives up to its potential role. The following part will provide an overview of progress on the SDGs in ASEAN member states before it examines the actual role of ASEAN in the governance of SDGs in the region.

#### 4.2.2. Progress on the SDGs in ASEAN

ASEAN member states (ASEAN MS) are highly diverse culturally, economically, socially, and politically. With its 649.1 million population, ASEAN consists of more than 700 ethnic groups (Do 2018) who speak in more than 700 languages. Even though it is the sixth largest economy in the world (UNDP 2019), ASEAN comprises of lower income countries, such as Laos with a GDP per capita of only \$1,390, as well as high income countries, such as Singapore with a GDP per capita reaching \$57, 713 (World





Economic Outlook 2018 in IMF, 2018). Poverty rate in ASEAN has been halved from 17% in 2005 to 7% in 2013 (Beloe and Davis 2017). However, there are still significant gaps between the extreme poverty rate in Malaysia and Thailand, which amounts to less than 1% of their population, and the rate in Laos, which still accounts for 19.9% of its population (UNDP 2019). ASEAN's 61.8% productive working age population is a potential demographic dividend for its economy (ASEAN 2019). However, ASEAN MS are varied in terms of human development index with Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, and Malaysia being considered as having very high HDI, Thailand as having a high HDI, and the rest of ASEAN still having medium HDI (ASEAN 2019, 24). Malaysia has set a development goal of becoming a high income country by 2020, meanwhile Laos aims to graduate from the Least Developed Country (LDC) status in 2025 (Economic Planning Unit of the Government of Malaysia 2017; Government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic 2018). Added to this social diversity, ASEAN member states also adopt different political systems with Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines being considered as democratic countries, Singapore as semi-democratic, and Vietnam as non-democratic.

Given this diversity, ASEAN MS also have different prioritization in terms of the SDGs as can be seen in Table 4. Indonesia clearly mentions in the *Roadmap of SDGs Indonesia* that it will prioritize "health, education, social protection, food security and sustainable agriculture, infrastructure, ecosystem services and biodiversity, and financing for government's administration" (BAPPENAS n.d.). Malaysia also has identified nine SDGs priorities within its Eleventh Malaysia Plan (11<sup>th</sup> MP) consisting of health, education, clean energy, decent work, infrastructure, sustainable cities, life below water, life on land, and strong institutions (Misran 2016). Cambodia has six prioritized SDGs consisting of education, decent work and growth, reduced inequalities, climate action, peace and institution, and partnership (Royal Government of Cambodia 2019, viii). Brunei Darussalam does not mention explicitly its prioritized SDGs in its Wawasan Brunei 2035 or in its VNR, yet the input to questionnaire related to the SDGs by Brunei Darussalam's representative to the UN considers "poverty, societal and cultural cohesiveness, environmental degradation, population growth, climate and energy, access to information, and development-oriented research" as important priority areas in the SDGs (Permanent Mission of Brunei Darussalam to the United Nations n.d.). Wawasan Brunei 2035 also echoes this view except that it does not mention poverty and climate as part of its 13 key strategies to its development (Government of Brunei Darussalam n.d.). The rest of ASEAN MS - Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines –do not mention their prioritized goals either, but they have identified prioritized or relevant targets and indicators that are in line with their national development plans. Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, and the Philippines, for example, have narrowed their priorities to 30 targets, 115 targets, 152 targets, and 155 targets respectively (Government of the Kingdom of Thailand 2017; Ministry of Planning and Investment of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2018; Paloma, 2018; UNESCAP 2020; UNDP Indonesia 2020; ASEC 2020). In the case of the Philippines, however, only 68 targets have been incorporated in the Philippines Development Plan (PDP) 2017-2022, meanwhile in the case of Singapore, there are only available report

for the 59 targets based on its VNR 2018 (Commission on Audit of the Republic of the Philippines 2018). Myanmar, and Laos do not mention the number of targets they focus on, but Laos' Voluntary National Review reports that it has linked 60% of the 8<sup>th</sup> National Socio-Economic Plan to the SDGs (Government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic 2018). In addition, Laos along with Cambodia also adopt additional SDGs named as Goal 18 on Lives safe from unexploded ordnance (UXO) given its existing impact since the Indo China War (Government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic 2018). In essence, therefore, individual national development plans play a crucial role in shaping member states' SDGs prioritization in addition to their unique social, political, economic, and cultural contexts.

Table 4: SDGs Prioritization among ASEAN Member States

Country	SDGs																
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Brunei Darussalam																	
Cambodia																	
Indonesia																	
Laos																	
Malaysia																	
Myanmar																	
Philippines																	
Singapore																	
Thailand																	
Vietnam																	

Source: Author's compilation from individual member's VNR and national development plan

Note:

\* All ASEAN countries embrace the 17 goals of SDGs, yet some make explicit prioritization while others do not

\*Brunei Darussalam: lighter color refers to information from the questionnaire input related to the SDGs submitted by the Permanent Mission of Brunei Darussalam to the UN

\*The Philippines: Philippines adopted the 17 goals and 155 targets, but only 15 goals and 68 targets have been incorporated to the PDP 2017-2022

In implementing the SDGs, ASEAN member states cooperate with various stakeholders. Other than ASEAN, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN ESCAP) plays significant role in leading the implementation of SDGs in the region. UN ESCAP is the ECOSOC subsidiary body for the Asia Pacific and the largest UN regional commission and intergovernmental forum in the region, as it comprises of 53 member states and 9 associate members across Asia and the Pacific. In Southeast Asia, ESCAP has a Southeast Asia Regional Office which assists member states in implementing the SDGs in terms of: balancing the three pillars of the SDGs and providing recommendation to member states; creating regional roadmap for the implementation of SDGs; using integrated approach to support the member states; and offering capacity-building to member states (ESCAP, Interview, 2020). ESCAP support could be seen in the form of research and analysis, policy advisory services, technical assistance and capacity building particularly aimed to strengthen institutional capacities of its member states

(UNESCAP 2019). ESCAP focuses its work on macroeconomic policy and financing for development, trade investment and innovation, transport, statistics, social development, environment and development, ICT and disaster risk reduction, and energy sector. In tracking progress on the implementation of the SDGs, ESCAP has a knowledge management hub, SDG Progress Report, and Asia Pacific Gateway as the SDGs data gateway in the region. Interestingly, in its report, ESCAP preferred to adopt a regional approach instead of individual countries approach in reporting progress on the SDGs implementation. It demonstrates their understanding of the different contexts of individual countries so as not to focus on the competition among countries but rather on the collective goals that countries aim to achieve, as envisaged in the goal-setting model. Lastly, ESCAP also coordinates with other UN agencies to ensure policy coherence in the form of the Asia Pacific Regional Coordination Mechanism (UN APRCM) which consists of approximately 34 regional UN agencies that conduct coordination meetings twice a year (UNESCAP n.d.) (UNAPRCMa, n.d.). UNAPRM also has different thematic working groups which focus on different areas of SDGs and are led by different UN agencies. For example, the working group on education 2030+ is led by UNESCO and UNICEF with the participation of ESCAP, ILO, IOM, UNAIDS, UNV, and WHO. Meanwhile, the working group on poverty eradication is led by ESCAP, FAO, and UNDP with the participation of ILO, UNAIDS, UNCRD, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNODC, UN Women, and WHO (UN APRCMb, n.d.). This arrangement helps to map relevant actors, identify division of work, and ensure policy coherence which are important in the complex and crowd goal-setting model.

At the national level, ASEAN member states receive supports from country offices of the UN Agencies, particularly the UNDP country offices, which have partnered with each country for decades and have responsibility for assisting the government in development programs. This unique mandate of the UNDP also seems to fit neatly into the goal-setting model of the SDGs as, on the one hand, all UNDP country offices share similar mandate in assisting individual countries in development programs, and on the other hand, this mandate gives flexibility for the UNDP to adjust its program to meet the national context of individual countries. UNDP in Indonesia, for example, takes into consideration the agendas included in the national development plan, and also deals with environmental issues due to the absence of UNEP in Indonesia (UNDP Indonesia, Interview, 2020). The role of UNDP in this sense is complementing the role of the UN ESCAP. The UN ESCAP represents the UN in coordinating and monitoring the implementation of SDGs in the Asia Pacific region, while the UNDP country office supports each individual country to meet the SDGs. In implementing its role, the UNDP helps the national government in localizing and mainstreaming the SDGs at the national level and financing SDGs program under its mandate. Even though the ultimate purpose of the UNDP is to support the government, it also engages with various non-state actors in implementing the programs. UNDP Indonesia, for example, has an SDGs Academy to help mainstream the SDGs among youth and universities (UNDP, Interview, 2020).



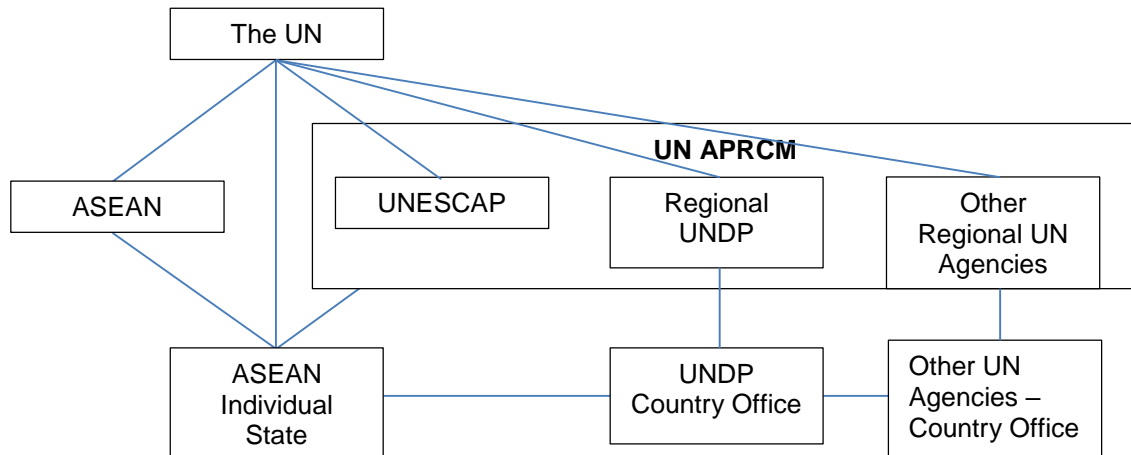
As far as the results are concerned, the implementation of the SDGs in ASEAN MS presents mixed results. The region demonstrated significant progress in 2019 on Goal 4 on education, Goal 7 on affordable and clean energy, and Goal 9 on industry, innovation and infrastructure (ESCAP, 2019). Southeast Asia, however, demonstrated slow progress on Goal 1 on poverty, Goal 2 on zero hunger, Goal 3 on Health, Goal 5 on gender equality, Goal 8 on decent work and economic growth, Goal 15 on life on land, and Goal 17 on partnerships (ESCAP, Interview, 2020; ESCAP SDG Gateway). It even demonstrated regression on Goal 10 on reduced inequalities and Goal 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions (ESCAP, Interview, 2020; ESCAP SDG Gateway, n.d.). Goal 16 is particularly sensitive because it deals with corruption, which is rampant in many countries in the region (ASEAN Secretariat, Interview, 2020). It is for this reason that ESCAP Report 2019 concluded that Southeast Asia and other subregions in Asia and the Pacific will mostly miss all goals by 2030 if the regression is not reversed and the progress is not accelerated (ESCAP, 2019). Among major challenges in implementing the SDGs in ASEAN MS is financing the program. The UNDP reported that there is an estimated \$ 150 billion financing gap each year for infrastructure only (UNDP, 2019). In addition, data availability is also very limited to better capture the progress and problems in the SDGs implementation. ESCAP (2019) for example noted that only 36% of the SDGs indicators data are available. Interestingly, lowest data availability was from developed countries in the region that is Singapore and Brunei Darussalam, indicating that data availability is not always related to the country's level of development. As explained earlier in the theoretical framework, monitoring progress is important in the goal-setting governance model because it is the key mechanism to ensure compliance in the absence of carrot and stick mechanism. Therefore, improving data availability and harmonization is a priority in the region. Finally, there are also policy and institutional problems such as a lack of awareness among governmental institutions on the SDGs, weak and incoherent regulatory frameworks, limited capacity among local governments, as well as transparency and accountability in many ASEAN MS that contributed to challenges in localizing the SDGs in the region (UNDP, 2019).

The implementation of the SDGs in ASEAN MS, as explained earlier, seems to be dynamic in terms of actors involved and the progress it demonstrated so far. The following question is where the position of ASEAN and what roles it plays in this regard. Figure 2 is perhaps a good starting point in understanding the position of ASEAN in the goal-setting governance model of SDGs before we delve into the four specific roles the ASEAN can play. The globally-driven implementation of the SDGs places actors from the UN system as drivers in the implementation of SDGs in ASEAN. Regional organizations, however, are envisaged to take part in the implementation of the SDGs in terms of facilitating the translation of the global agenda, regional dialogue, coordination, monitoring, and other supports requested by member states. Moreover, in the case of ASEAN, ESCAP as the subsidiary body of the UN in the region covers a very broad area of Asia and the Pacific, and support from regional organizations focusing on Southeast Asia will offer additional value for member states. ASEAN in this context is the only organic regional



organization in Southeast Asia which represents the bottom-up interest of member states rather than the top-down role of the UN agencies.

Figure 2: Key Actors in the Governance of SDGs in Southeast Asia



Source: Authors

#### 4.2.3 ASEAN and the Translating Role

The translating role of regional organizations involves facilitating the translation of the global vision to the regional context. As the SDGs are country-led in their implementation, ASEAN member states have been in most cases incorporating the SDGs and their principles into their national plans directly from the 2030 Agenda document. This process includes the establishment of national secretariats or committees on the SDGs consisting of various governmental institutions and other stakeholders to ensure the inclusive whole-of-government and whole-of-nation approach as envisaged by the SDGs. In Thailand, for example, the committee is called National Committee for Sustainable Development while in Indonesia it is simply known as the SDGs National Secretariat. This process is then followed by a mapping exercise on the complementarity between the SDGs document and the national development plan document which will be the foundation for the action plan or roadmap document on the implementation of SDGs at the national level. In Cambodia, for example, the mapping exercise between the SDGs document and the National Strategic and Development Plan resulted in 18 goals, 88 relevant targets, and 148 indicators adopted for the Cambodia SDGs (CSDGs). Meanwhile in Malaysia, the mapping exercise conducted in its 11<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan resulted in 99 prioritized indicators (Economic Planning Unit of the Government of Malaysia 2017). While some countries conducted a mapping exercise in consultation with their local NGOs, others also sought consultation and technical assistance from UN agencies, mainly the UNDP



and UN ESCAP. The agreed national action plan is then further translated to the subnational level such as the case with Indonesia's Roadmap of SDGs which has been adopted in 19 out of 34 local provinces (Ministry of National Development Planning of the Republic of Indonesia 2019).

Parallel with this process at the national level, there is also a translation process at the regional level facilitated by ASEAN. ASEAN has the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 as the post-2015 regional integration agenda after the establishment of ASEAN Community in 2015. ASEAN Vision 2025 aims to create a peaceful, stable, and resilient community based on the existing three pillars: the APSC, the AEC, and the ASCC (ASEAN 2015). The document has outlined the vision in each pillar, the targets, the means of implementation, and the review mechanism. Given the centrality of the document in the regional development agenda, it is important to draw linkages between the ASEAN Vision 2025 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development so that the two agendas could strengthen each other as a guideline for development agenda in the region and member states could better achieve the two agendas simultaneously. Moreover, the document itself clearly mentions sustainability as one of the visions of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, makes reference to the 2030 Agenda, and explicitly recognizes the complementarity between the two documents (ASEAN 2015, 105).

Therefore, in 2016, ASEAN held its special session of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting Focusing on Sustainable Development. It is important to note that this event was held along with the annual ASEAN-UN Ministerial Meeting that has started since 2010 as part of the growing partnership between ASEAN and the UN since the ASEAN-UN Summit in 2000. ASEAN has been granted observer status in the UN in 2006, and in 2011, ASEAN and the UN advanced their cooperation to a comprehensive partnership which allows for better coordination between the two parties especially through their secretariat-to-secretariat cooperation. Their joint declaration on the comprehensive partnership also took into account both the ASEAN Vision 2025 and the 2030 Agenda and for this reason provided a foundation for better coordination in the implementation of the SDGs.

Following this development, Thailand as the ASEAN coordinator for Sustainable Development Cooperation initiated cooperation between ASEAN Secretariat and the UN ESCAP to map complementarities between the ASEAN Vision 2025 and the 2030 Agenda, named as Complementarity Initiative. This complementarity mapping resulted in complementarity of goals, values, operational elements, and cross-cutting priority areas (UNESCAP 2017, 10). In terms of goals, both documents aim to promote shared prosperity in the language of ASEAN and well-being in the language of the UN, taking into account environmental sustainability. In terms of values, both documents adopt the principles of "people-centered (putting people first); inclusive (leave no one behind); sustainable (multidimensional and integrated); resilient, dynamic and innovative, peace, stability, and justice; and partnerships" (UNESCAP 2017). In terms of operational elements, the complementarity document conducts its analysis





on both documents by following the principles of commonalities, non-conflicting, no new goals, streamlined, synergistic, and uniting. Lastly, in terms of cross-cutting priority areas, the document identifies five priorities consisting of “poverty eradication, infrastructure and connectivity, sustainable management of natural resources, sustainable production and consumption, and resilience” (UNESCAP 2017, 15).

The document then proposes some initiatives to enhance the existing efforts to achieve the goals in each priority area, including how to develop capacity and instrument, mobilize financial resources, and measure progress in each priority area. For example, in the area of poverty eradication, the document proposes an initiative focusing on improving nutrition and stunting as both are prevalent in the region. In the area of infrastructure and connectivity, the document proposes to establish ASEAN Council for Sustainable Infrastructure. Other initiatives include the ASEAN Resource Panel to deal with resource management, ASEAN Risk Transfer Mechanism to promote regional resilience, and ASEAN Centre for Sustainable Development Studies and Dialogue (ASEAN-CSDSD) to strengthen the institutional mechanism (UNESCAP 2017). All of these initiatives are still under consideration, except the ASEAN-CSDSD that has been established in 2019 as part of Mahidol University, Thailand. This center is envisioned to be the center of excellence on research related to SDGs and is expected to produce quality input to policy making (ACSDSD n.d.). At this point therefore, ASEAN performs not only the translating role in the forms of the complementarity document as a regional guidelines for the implementation of SDGs but also taking concrete action to better localize the global vision to the regional context in Southeast Asia. Linking to the goal-setting model explained earlier, ASEAN translates the global goals to its regional context. ASEAN has operational capacity to facilitate the operationalization of this goal in the ASEAN context which has its own development agenda, bridging capacity due to its proximity to its member states, and expertise or knowledge on the needs, context, and challenges of implementing SDGs in the region as identified in the Complementarity document.

#### 4.2.4 ASEAN and the Supporting Role

The supporting role of regional organizations is about mobilizing financial, technical, and policy support in the implementation of the SDGs in individual member states. Similar with the translation process, the support for the implementation of SDGs in ASEAN member states is provided mainly by governments as it is already incorporated in national development plans. Some member states, however, indicate the importance of external supports, and it is where ASEAN plays its role. Different from the translating role, which is shaped by relations between international organizations and the regional organization, the supporting role is shaped by the relations between the regional organization and its member states, as reflected in the institutional design of the regional organization.

In the case of ASEAN, the loose and minimum institutionalization of ASEAN has direct impacts on the



roles it performs, including on the SDGs. The area of finance has perhaps the most significant impact as the equality principle also applies to ASEAN budget allocation. In the beginning of its establishment, the Bangkok Declaration as the document establishing ASEAN made no mention on budgetary issues (Destradi, 2020). Only after the establishment of the ASEAN secretariat that ASEAN decided to finance its operation from equal annual contribution by member states determined in the ASEAN Summit (ASEAN Charter Article 30.2). Therefore, all countries, regardless of their power or economic development, will contribute equally in financing the ASEAN Secretariat. By doing so, ASEAN aims to avoid domination of certain countries and to maintain national autonomy of individual member states (Nguitrageol & Ruland in Destradi 2020). This scheme, however, has negative consequences on the financing role of the Secretariat as the amount of financial contribution by member states will follow the ability of the least developed country in the region. Therefore ASEAN Secretariat is often said to be underfunded with 1.5 mil USD in 2012 mostly to finance annual meeting and the operation of the Secretariat (Destradi 2020). For other projects, ASEAN prefers to build partnerships with external donors especially from the dialogue partners. Therefore, each ASEAN project has financial resources depending on the interest of the donor. For example, the European Union has supported ASEAN in terms of economic integration and the environment, Germany and the US on institutional development, and India and China on infrastructure (Destradi 2020). With regard to the SDGs, China has been supportive on poverty eradication (Goal 1), Switzerland on data and policy dialogue (Goal 16), and Korea on South-South cooperation (Goal 17) (ASEC, Interview, 2020).

Given this regional context, financing the SDGs in Southeast Asia relies on the individual member states. The broad goals of the SDGs however is not proportional with the financial capacity of ASEAN member states, particularly the CLM countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar) (IMF, 2018). Hence, there is a significant financing gap each year in implementing the SDGs (UNDP, 2019). UNDP reported that 39% of the financial sources come from domestic public, 32% from domestic private, 22% from international private, and 7% from international public (ASEAN 2017, 2). Closer look at this composition, revenue is the biggest source of SDGs financing in the region followed by the private sector. At the domestic level, the banking sector plays a particularly crucial role in financing SDGs in the region. Most Southeast Asian central banks are members of the Network for Greening the Financial System (NGFS) and have developed regulatory framework for sustainable banking (Peralta, 2020; Augoyard, 2020). Many development financing institutions (DFIs) in the region are also members of Association of Development Financing Institution in Asia and the Pacific (ADFIAP) and have offered both financial and technical assistance for sustainable development projects. International public, as the data indicates, is not is not major contributor in financing SDGs in the region. Only in Cambodia and Laos where international public disproportionately high, and even so, it is mainly from development assistance, other official assistance (OOF), and investment from China and the AIIB (ASEAN 2017).



This does not mean that ASEAN does not play any financing role. ASEAN has ASEAN Infrastructure Fund administered by the ADB to offer financing assistance for state and state-guaranteed infrastructure project in ASEAN. Even though it was formed in 2011 before the SDGs, it is in line with SDGs Goal 9, the Initiative for ASEAN Integration to narrow the development gap among member states (IAI), and the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025. To reach its objective, however, the AIF needs to reach more countries and sectors as so far, 67% of this fund is used for the energy sector and 75% of the fund borrower is Indonesia (ADB 2019, 5). If ASEAN is also understood as the sum of its member states, then Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand also contribute the biggest FDI within the region (ASEAN 2017). Singapore particularly contributes to more than 60% of the total investment within the region (ASEAN 2017, 33).

As of financing from international private sector, it is noted earlier that it contributes to a significant source of financing and is mainly in the form of investment. However, 70% of FDI in Southeast Asia goes to Singapore which account for only 1% of the total population in ASEAN (ASEAN 2017, 32). For the majority of ASEAN countries, borrowing shares significant proportion in the domestic and international public. The report noted that borrowing accounts for at least 10 percent of public financing in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam; and more than 20% in Cambodia (ASEAN 2017, 28). One question that needs to be considered in the implementation of SDGs in the region is whether this type of financing is sustainable given that it increases state's debt significantly. That is why resource persons from the ASEC, UN ESCAP, and the UNDP Indonesia also mention financing as one of the main challenges in the implementation of the SDGs in Southeast Asia.

While financing demonstrates ASEAN's limit in supporting member states, policy and technical assistance demonstrates ASEAN strength as convening power in the region. ASEAN rarely uses binding agreement to regulate the behavior of its member states. Rather, ASEAN uses declaration, guidelines, code of conduct, or policy recommendation to manage interstate relations which more or less reflects its preference for norms-setting rather than rule-making. Even to deal with Myanmar when it was under the military junta, ASEAN preferred to adopt constructive engagement rather than imposing sanction as adopted by the EU or the US. Despite its criticism, this approach has contributed to ASEAN gaining trust from Myanmar that helped ASEAN better engage Myanmar in its democratization process. Similarly in terms of the SDGs, ASEAN preferred to support member states through policy recommendation on how to better achieve the SDGs and the ASEAN Vision 2025 simultaneously through the Complementarity document. In a more specific area, ASEAN, for example, also adopted Bangkok Declaration on Advancing Partnership in Education for 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in ASEAN which aims to mainstream SDGs in ASEAN; promote Goal 4 on education; and advance partnership to achieve the SDGs (ASEAN 2019).

In mobilizing technical assistance, ASEAN has two mechanisms. The first is providing a venue for policy dialogue between ASEAN members and potential partners which is expected to offer mutual learning, share of best practices, and mobilize resources from this partnership. Among the well-established policy dialogue forum is the ASEAN-China-UNDP Symposium which has been held annually since 2016 (ASEAN, 2016; ASEAN, 2017; ASEAN, 2018; UNDP, 2019). The symposium is highly valued as it invites various stakeholders from member states, China, UN agencies, and other non-state actors to discuss various issues important for the implementation of the SDGs in the region. It also aims to connect China's expertise particularly on Goal 1, 9, and 13. In addition to sharing of best practices, the symposium has produced various policy recommendations such as a regional initiative on localizing the SDGs and Financing the SDGs in Southeast Asia. ASEAN has also started policy dialogue with the EU since 2017 through ASEAN-EU Dialogue on Sustainable Development which discusses various issues and possible cooperation in those areas. The second ASEAN-EU Dialogue in 2020, for example, focused on sustainable economy, climate and environmental issue, and development gap. It also has a more focused dialogue on gender equality and empowerment of women and girls. From the cooperation with the EU, ASEAN received 200 million euro of financial assistance between 2014-2020 and is prepared to receive another assistance to its ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance facility which is aligned with the European Green Deal (European Commission 2020).

In addition to policy dialogue with other countries, ASEAN also has forum with various UN agencies which are central in the implementation of SDGs in the region. In 2018, ASEAN held a sharing session on the SDGs with the IMF, the World Bank, and the UN Secretary General aimed to promote multilateral collaboration in the implementation of the SDGs in the region (ASEAN 2018). In 2019, ASEAN also used the Joint Review Meeting of ASEAN-UNICEF Framework Agreement of Cooperation to discuss possible joint action between the two organizations (ASEAN 2019). With the UN Women, ASEAN also cooperated on gender, peace, governance, and data to monitor the progress on the SDGs (ASEAN 2019). Even the High Level Brainstorming Dialogue on Enhancing Complementarities between the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and United Nations 2030 Agenda which are part of the process in translating the 2030 Agenda to the ASEAN context could also be seen as a forum for policy dialogue which offer various policy recommendation and initiatives to support the implementation of SDGs in the region.

The second mechanism for ASEAN in mobilizing resource is in the form of a more concrete technical assistance that ASEAN conducted to support member states even though this is also supported by partners. For example is the ASEAN SDGs Frontrunner Cities Program which aims to develop capacity of the selected ASEAN cities in promoting best practices on clean and green development (the UN n.d.). This program is sponsored by Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF) created in 2006 to support ASEAN integration. From this description, it could be seen that ASEAN approach in providing policy and technical support has been shaped by its financial scheme. ASEAN's limited financial capacity does not hinder the



organization to offer supports to its member states as they use the strategy of partnership to fulfill this role in the region. Hence, ASEAN also implements Goal 17 of the SDGs.

In the language of the goal-setting model, ASEAN adopts a supporting role by delegating or enlisting the help of other entities that have more financial and technical capacities to support member states in the implementation of the SDGs. In the words of our resource person from ASEC, ASEAN is like a 'knowledge broker' that link member states to potential sources of supports in implementing their SDGs.

#### 4.2.5 ASEAN and the Coordinating Role

The coordinating role refers to a regional organization leading or simply conducting coordination with other actors on the implementation of the SDGs, as both are important and contribute to a more coherent policy outcome. At the national level, each government through its national committee on the SDGs has the responsibility to monitor the implementation of the SDGs in the country. The national committee – named differently in each country - is usually led by the country's top leader (either the prime minister or the president), consists mainly of governmental institutions with participation of other stakeholders, and conducts regular national consultation on progress on the SDGs. This committee is usually attached to the Ministry of Development, except in Cambodia where it is attached to the Ministry of Environment. As the SDGs are broad and interconnected with various participation of not only domestic but also international stakeholders particularly from the region, the coordinating role at the regional level is also important. In this context, ASEAN also actively participates in the coordination of SDGs both horizontally and vertically.

Horizontally, ASEAN conducts coordination within ASEAN and between ASEAN and other actors at the regional level. Within the ASEAN Secretariat, Poverty Eradication and Gender Division (PEGD) is the coordinator for the SDGs. Their role is to coordinate, share updates, and follow up the complementarity document (ASEC, Interview, 2020). Other division will contribute in dealing with the SDGs depending on their issue areas. For example, the PEGD and other division under the ASCC will mostly deal with the social and environmental aspects of the SDGs, the AEC pillar will mostly deal with the economic aspects of the SDGs and develop SDGs economic indicator for the region, and APSC even though in a narrower scope work closely with Goal 16 of the SDGs (ASEC, Interview, 2020). One challenge in the internal coordination within ASEAN is the pillarization structure of the ASEAN Community. Though SDGs also has three pillars, but these pillars are not compartmentalized in separate goals. Rather they are incorporated in each goal of the SDGs. This means that there should be coordination among pillars in ASEAN particularly in tackling cross-pillar issues. So far, ASEAN has the ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) consisting of foreign ministers of ASEAN member states who meet twice a year to prepare the summit and coordinate the implementation of agreement of the summit. The ACC's role involves connecting the process at the Summit and the operations at the ASEAN Secretariat led by each ASEAN





Community Council. In doing so, the ACC is equipped with Joint Consultative Meeting (JCM) to facilitate cross pillar coordination among the Secretary General, Senior Officials from SOM (Senior Officials Meeting) and SEOM (Senior Economic Official Meeting), and the CPR (Committee of Permanent Representatives). In 2019, for example, ASEAN held a JCM to discuss cross-pillar issues for the theme “Advancing Partnership for Sustainability” which became a central issue under the chairmanship of Thailand.

In relations to other actors at the regional level, ASEAN appointed Thailand as the ASEAN Coordinator for Sustainable Development Cooperation. The role of Thailand here is to lead the agenda-setting and the mobilization of resources to promote SDGs in the region. As mentioned earlier, the complementarity document is the result of Thailand initiative to work with the UNESCAP to map the complementarity between the ASEAN Vision 2025 and the 2030 Agenda. Thailand also initiated Special Lunch on Sustainable Development attended by member states, dialogue partners, and the IMF to advance SDGs in the region (ASEAN-Thailand Secretariat 2019). With Thailand as the focal point, it is clear whom to contact when it comes to the SDGs in ASEAN and it strengthens the role of ASEAN as a regional organization as well, as in many cases, ASEAN is only seen as the sum of its member states. In addition to coordination initiated by Thailand with other countries, the ASEAN Secretariat also coordinates with UN agencies and non-state actors at a more technical level. As explained earlier, ASEAN has joint review meeting with the UNICEF and UN Women. ASEAN also has the ASEAN-China-UNDP Symposium which offers opportunities to have dialogue and conduct coordination with non-state actors participating in the forum. It is important to note here that it is common in ASEAN that one event or project serves multiple functions, for example in facilitating policy dialogue, mobilizing resources, coordination, and even monitoring and reporting. One event that is used as an example for the translating role might appear in the explanation of other roles.

As with regard to vertical coordination, ASEAN conducts coordination with the UN within the framework of ASEAN-UN comprehensive partnership which is guided by the ASEAN-UN five-year Plan of Action, led by the ASEAN-UN Summit, operationalized by the Secretariat-to-Secretariat cooperation, and supported by the UN representative to ASEAN and the ASEAN participation as an observer in the UN. A hybrid form of vertical coordination between ASEAN and the UN could be seen in the High-Level Brainstorming Dialogue (HLBD) on Enhancing Complementarities between the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which has started from 2017. Different from the ASEAN-UN Summit, the HLBD focuses on safeguarding the implementation of the Complementarity Initiative, meaning that it acts as a follow up of ASEAN translating role of the 2030 Agenda. It is hybrid in that it also invites UN regional commission and agencies and other key partners at the regional and international levels. The 4<sup>th</sup> HLBD in 2020, for examples, was attended by ASEAN, UNESCAP, UNDP, the ADB, the World bank, the EU, Switzerland, Germany, among many others. As





for ASEAN vertical coordination with member states on the SDGs, it is conducted through the ASEAN Forum on SDGs with National Development Planning Agencies. The importance of this forum is that it connects the coordinating institution in each individual member state as the forefront in the implementation of SDGs in the region. This forum could help national agencies have a regional view in looking at their achievement on the SDGs, coordinate efforts, and learn from other implementing bodies from other countries. As a recent initiative, this forum has been only conducted once in 2019 with planning to have the second forum in 2020.

Linking to the goal-setting model, ASEAN positions itself as an intermediary in coordinating and conducting coordination on the governance of SDGs in the region. As a regional organization, ASEAN has convening power as part of its bridging capacity to conduct coordination with member states, various actors at the regional level, and the UN as the driver of the SDGs.

#### 4.2.6 ASEAN and the Monitoring Role

The monitoring role of a regional organization involves facilitating or to conducting monitoring of the implementation of the SDGs at the regional level. Monitoring is important given that it is the only mechanism in the goal-setting model that ensures compliance in the absence of carrot and stick mechanism. There are three types of monitoring mechanisms in ASEAN. The first is internal monitoring by the national governments of ASEAN MS through their national committees on SDGs and assisted by the national statistics bodies. In Indonesia, for example, the National Secretariat of SDGs assisted by Statistics Indonesia (BPS) produced a Dashboard SDGs which shows the progress on the SDGs implementation at subnational level. The second is periodic monitoring based on the voluntary reporting from member states at the global level. As stated in the SDGs document, monitoring the progress of the implementation of the SDGs in individual state will be based on the Voluntary National Review (VNR). The report will be then reported annually to the High Level Political Forum on SDGs (HLPF) at the global level. However, the document also mentioned the importance of monitoring at the regional level which could be the foundation for monitoring at the global level. The document stated that “we encourage member states to identify the most suitable regional forum in which to engage. UN regional commissions are encouraged to continue supporting member states in this regards” (United Nations 2015). Monitoring at the regional level, therefore will depend on state’s preference, with the UN regional commission being envisaged to play bigger role in this regards.

In ASEAN, these countries seem to prefer reporting directly to HLPF at the global level to monitor their progress every year. All ASEAN MS are part of the HLPF, except Myanmar which will only join in 2021. At the regional level, the UNESCAP as the UN ECOSOC subsidiary body for Asia and the Pacific actually offers a venue for the reporting mechanism at the regional level through the Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD). However, while Myanmar joined the forum in 2014, not all Southeast



Asian countries use this regional mechanism to report their progress. Only Indonesia and Thailand who are consistently participating in this forum every year. There is also a sub-regional mechanism in Southeast Asia as the preparatory meeting for the APFSD but it could also be a venue for reporting progress in each Southeast Asian countries named as the Southeast Asia Multi-Stakeholder Forum on Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. In 2020, Brunei Darussalam, Lao PDR, Thailand, Myanmar, and Malaysia reported to this forum their SDGs implementation progress. As for ASEAN, it does not have a specific mechanism of reporting progress. However, its ASEAN Forum on SDGs with National Development Planning Agencies also serves the function of reporting progress in the individual member state even though for the purpose of brainstorming rather than forcing compliance (ASEC, Interview, 2020). ASEAN-China-UNDP symposium also serve similar function in a broader scale as it involves non state actors as well.

The third monitoring mechanism is the top down continuous monitoring mechanism by regional organization to track progress at the aggregate regional level in achieving the goals. In addition to the APFSD, the UN ESCAP also has various tools to track progress of the SDGs in the region such as the annual SDG Progress Report and the Asia-Pacific SDG Gateway. Even though ESCAP has been equipped with sufficient statistical tool to track report quantitatively and regularly, the data availability for the region is very limited and even less than half of the required data. This is rather different from ASEAN which is currently still developing indicators and tools to track changes quantitatively and which is also limited to the economic indicators only. It is for this reason that ASEAN relies on data from ESCAP for the quantitative monitoring. ASEAN however conducts various qualitative monitoring. Each division monitors the progress on the SDGs relevant to their issue areas. For gender issues, for example, ASEAN has the ASEAN Gender Outlook. It also has internal mechanism to monitor the implementation of declaration and other non-binding instruments issued by ASEAN (ASEC, Interview, 2020).

Linking to the goal-setting model, therefore, monitoring in the context of ASEAN is mostly performed by each member state and the UNESCAP which have more capacity to conduct quantitative monitoring of the progress of SDGs among ASEAN member states. ASEAN, however, maintains a qualitative monitoring mechanism through its dialogue forums with member states while developing its own quantitative monitoring mechanism.

## 5. Comparative Analysis and Recommendations

### 5.1 Comparative Analysis of European Union and ASEAN

The SDG framework constitutes an example of global goal-setting experimental governance in which all levels of governance are involved from the global to the local. In this paper we explore the role of regional organisations in the achievement of the SDG agenda. They potentially constitute an important ‘capacity-



builder’, ‘orchestrator’ or ‘benchmarker’ in the architecture of global governance for sustainability through the four roles they (can) play. We have analyzed these three modes of governance by focusing on four roles regional organizations can play in the SDG architecture. Table 5 compares the EU and ASEAN on the different roles identified in the paper.

Table 5: Roles of the EU and ASEAN in goal-setting model for the SDGs

Role	European Union	ASEAN
<b>Translating role</b>	No explicit SDG strategy	Complementarity Initiative linking ASEAN Vision 2025 and 2030 Agenda
<b>Supporting role</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multi-Stakeholder Platform on the SDGs (formerly)</li> <li>Inclusion of SDGs in Commissioners’ work</li> <li>Indirect financing through other EU financial instruments</li> <li>Call to integrate SDGs in Multi-Annual Financial Framework</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Financial support: ASEAN Integration Fund (AIF)</li> <li>Indirect (ASEAN-brokered) financial and technical assistance from dialogue partners</li> </ul> <p>Policy support: policy recommendation (ex. Bangkok Declaration on Advancing Partnership in Education for 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in ASEAN); policy dialogue: ASEAN-China_UNDP Symposium</p>
<b>Coordinating role</b>	<p>Horizontal coordination within the regional organisation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Commission’s First Vice-President as lead coordinator on sustainable development</li> <li>Sustainable Development Project Team</li> <li>Inter Service Group on the SDGs</li> <li>Council Working Party on 2030 Agenda</li> </ul> <p>Vertical coordination</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Open Method of Coordination</li> <li>European Semester as potential coordination mechanism</li> <li>Member States’ references to EU cooperation in VNRs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Poverty Eradication and Gender Division as SDGs coordinator</li> <li>Joint Consultative Meetings of ASEAN Coordination Council</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The High-Level Brainstorming Dialogue (HLBD)</li> <li>ASEAN Forum on SDGs with National Development Planning Agencies</li> </ul>

<p><b>Monitoring role</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Member States national statistical agencies</li> <li>• Eurostat</li> <li>• European Semester</li> <li>• VNRs at HLPF</li> <li>• Member States national statistical agencies</li> <li>• Development of an ASEAN monitoring mechanism and indicators (in progress)</li> <li>• UN ESCAP</li> <li>• VNRs and HLPF (preferred to APFSD)</li> <li>• Qualitative reviews from ASEAN divisions on progress on their pertaining SDGs</li> </ul>
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Table 5 shows that both regional organizations have put in place institutional mechanisms linked to the SDG framework. ASEAN and the EU have some similarities on how they engage with the SDG framework. First of all, concerning the translation role, both the EU and ASEAN are pursuing the SDGs through their existing policies and (internal as well as external) actions and are mainstreaming the SDGs in existing policies. However, ASEAN did develop a complementarity document for aligning the 2030 Agenda with the ASEAN Community Vision 2025. Overall, in the translation role regional organizations are playing a rather limited role. With regard to the supporting, coordinating and monitoring roles one can observe that both regional organisations have put in place several mechanisms and platforms, some only short-lived. They also significantly differ in approach and design as we detail below.

With regard to the EU, several conclusions can be drawn from the analysis. Concerning the translation role, we observe that there is no unified strategy towards the SDGs. This is partially a result of the complex institutional design of the EU in which the Commission, Council and European Parliament are involved in developing such a strategy. They do not hold similar positions vis-à-vis the SDG agenda. Firstly, one can observe that the Council's and the Parliament's positions on the SDGs are generally similar. Secondly, their position is often more ambitious than the Commission's (at least for the previous Juncker Commission), and they have been repeatedly calling on the Commission to make higher commitments and take more significant actions. Thirdly, as the IEEP (2018) notes, there is a "discrepancy between the [Juncker Commission's] declaratory support for sustainable development and the incremental tinkering with instead of transformation of existing mechanisms and policies when it comes to implementation". Essentially, the Juncker Commission followed the idea that the SDGs are already integrated in current EU priorities, policies and financial instruments. Concretely, the previous Commission did not reframe (translating role) its policies or instruments in SDG terms, even in areas in which the EU has exclusive competences. Rather, translation was largely left to the EU MS.

In terms of the supporting role and implementation of the SDGs, significant progress still needs to be made since the current frameworks to implement the SDGs remain underdeveloped on the level of the EU. The EU used the Multi-Stakeholder Platform on the SDGs as an intermediary to help on their

implementation, yet this platform does not exist anymore. The Commission has also mandated its Commissioners to mainstream the SDGs in their work, but how effectively this will happen remain to be seen. Besides, there have been repeated calls to integrate the SDGs into the EU Multi-Annual Financial Framework, but implementation of the SDGs in the EU remains indirectly and only partly financed by different EU financial instruments. The implementation of the SDGs is therefore to a large extent left to EU MS.

On the coordinating role, each EU MS has its own more or less developed mechanism to coordinate across policy areas at the national level. Yet the EU is increasingly involved in horizontal coordination at EU level and in vertical coordination. As of horizontal coordination within the EU, several mechanisms exist to coordinate on issue areas related to the SDGs or to sustainable development more generally, including through the coordinating role of the Commission's First Vice President, the Sustainable Development Project Team, the Inter Service Group on the SDGs, and the Council's Working Party on the 2030 Agenda, thereby using both orchestration and intermediaries. Besides, the European Commission under its current von der Leyen presidency seems to get increasingly involved in vertical coordination, as it is integrating the SDGs in the European Semester – although for now in a rather superficial manner. Future developments remain to be analyzed, but yet, the von der Leyen Commission seems more proactive than the previous Juncker Commission in integrating the SDGs into the Commission's work.

Lastly, on the monitoring role, the EU is more involved, especially as it has used the Eurostat as a means to govern through indicators, which also serve as inputs for the SDG reviews in the European Semester Country reports. Yet, EU MS are still playing an important role in monitoring the SDGs through national statistical agencies and their VNRs at HLPF.

Concerning ASEAN, the overall analysis on ASEAN's role in translating, supporting, coordinating, and monitoring the implementation of SDGs in Southeast Asia demonstrates the importance of institutional design, the regional landscape, and member states' preference. In terms of translating role, ASEAN has worked closely with the UN to identify complementarity between the ASEAN Vision 2025 and the 2030 Agenda in order to help member states to achieve both agendas at the same time. ASEAN thereby position itself as an intermediary in translating the SDGs to the regional context, a position which is shaped by its growing partnership with the UN in the past two decades and its comparative advantage as a regional organization with operational and bridging capacities as well as expertise on the region. This is different from ASEAN's supporting role which is very much shaped by its institutional design as an intergovernmental organization with limited transfer of power from the member states. As a result, ASEAN's role is more apparent in its norm-setting strategy and is very limited in financial and technical supports. ASEAN has introduced various policy recommendation and guidelines to help member states



in implementing the SDGs, such as the Bangkok Declaration on Advancing Partnership in Education. However, in terms of financial and technical supports, ASEAN positions itself more as a broker who helps connecting member states with potential sources of financing and expertise, as is the case with the ASEAN-China-UNDP symposium aimed to bring experts from China to supports SDGs localization in Southeast Asia. As for the coordinating role, ASEAN capitalizes on its bridging capacity as a regional organization/hub to conduct coordination horizontally with other actors at the regional level and vertically with the UN and member states. International coordination within the ASEAN secretariat is led by the Poverty and Gender Eradication Division (PEGD), meanwhile external coordination with other actors in the region is led by Thailand as ASEAN Coordination for Sustainable Development Cooperation. Vertical coordination with the UN is conducted annually through the High-Level Brainstorming Dialogue (HLBD), meanwhile vertical coordination with member states is conducted annually through the ASEAN Forum on SDGs with National Development Planning Agencies. Lastly, in terms of the monitoring role, ASEAN's role is shaped by state's preference to report directly to HLPF rather than utilizing regional mechanisms as medium that lead to global reporting. There are indeed regional mechanisms to monitor the progress of the SDGs qualitatively and quantitatively. However, they are still in the process of development. ASEAN so far prefers to act as a supporting organization by partnering with the UNESCAP which has more expertise and well-established monitoring system.

In general, the active involvement of both regional organizations, taking their specific institutional set-up into account, in the SDG architecture remains rather limited. At the start of each case study, we identified the progress made so far and observed that only on a few SDGs significant progress has been made. The EU shows strongest progress on Goal 16 while ASEAN has been weakest in this area. Both are lagging in terms of gender equality (SDG 5). For some SDGs it is very difficult to make an assessment in terms of progress made. COVID-19 will provide additional challenges on achieving several SDGs.<sup>32</sup>

## 5.2 Recommendations: Strengthening the Role of Regional Organizations in Global Sustainability Governance

It could be argued that, from the perspective of a global experimentalist governance regime, regional organizations currently underplay their potential in terms of orchestrating or benchmarking member states and contribute to a dynamic which would facilitate learning between member states. From this

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<sup>32</sup> For an overview of the SDGs and the impacts of COVID-19 on their achievement, see: <https://www.edx.org/course/the-un-sustainable-development-goals-an-interdisci>. This Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) is an interdisciplinary academic introduction to the SDGs and explores the challenges that each of them faces, also with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic.



perspective, certain existing approaches for more engaged coordination and cooperation could be strengthened in the EU and ASEAN, but probably also in other regional organizations. The goal-setting framework developed in this paper can be used for analytic purposes, but also for perspective purposes to identify policies which regional organizations can develop. The case studies in this paper are a-typical for regional organizations, since we focused on two leading regional organizations. However, several regional organizations can develop dynamics with regard to the translating, supporting, coordinating and monitoring roles. The degree to which they can play these roles will depend on their degree of cooperation and they will probably not be able to emulate the specific initiatives taken by EU and ASEAN. However, our case studies reveal several mechanisms and institutional set-ups by which these roles can be played and regional organizations can experiment with amended versions of these examples. Table 4 shows that both ASEAN and the EU set up and explore new mechanisms to play a role in the implementation of the goals as well as try to integrate the SDGs in existing mechanisms. Other regional organizations can consider similar options. Importantly, they need to search for mechanisms which would facilitate and allow for learning effects between the member states of the regional organization on how to make progress towards the achievement of the SDGs.

Concerning the two case studies, further recommendations can be made. In the EU, specific focus could go to further developing the European Semester mechanism. The European Semester has expressed its experimentalist nature through its ability to change policy priorities through the AGS, its capacity to tailor CSRs according to the variety of challenges that EU MS face, and its gradual socialization since 2011. With regard to its socialization, Verdun and Zeitlin (2018) find that whereas some authors argue that social objectives are still subordinated to the economic imperatives of the European Semester, others point out to the positive trend towards a balanced and integrated socioeconomic coordination mechanism that the Semester is following and to its increasingly interactive, inclusive and less hierarchical decision-making processes. Indeed, not only have the AGS and CSRs been more socially oriented, but governance procedures of the European Semester have also been adapted to strengthen the role of social and employment actors (for a complete analysis of the socialization of the European Semester, see Zeitlin and Vanhercke, 2018).

The European Semester is also embracing the goal-setting model shared by the SDGs. In a way, each year, the AGS sets broad goals for social and economic policy in the EU. CSRs provide guidance to each MS on how they can fulfil these broad goals while taking national context and capacities into account.

We therefore argue that the European Semester, as an experimentalist and goal-setting form of governance, could be expanded into a governance mechanism for the SDGs in the EU. Similar to its socialization, the European Semester could be “greened” to add the missing environmental dimension to the social and economic ones and to fully integrate the SDGs. This existing mechanism could strengthen



the roles that the EU can play in governance for the SDGs. Firstly, it can help the EU fulfill the translating role by providing a clear strategy and guidelines on the SDGs through the AGS. Secondly, in redefining common guidelines and coherent CSRs, the European Semester can also leverage implementation means for the SDGs by recommending on budget allocation for the SDGs. The financial sanctions associated with recurrent non-compliance in the current European Semester framework might also contribute to more effective implementation of the SDGs if CSRs are oriented towards their achievement. Thirdly, this mechanism can reinforce both horizontal coordination within the EU with the inclusion of the SDGs into the European Semester, and vertical coordination between EU MS and the EU as they would have an annual procedure to exchange and align policies. Lastly, the European Semester can help fulfil the monitoring role both at EU level through the Alert Mechanism Report and at EU MS level through the Country Reports and the in-depth reviews. The European Semester might therefore be used as an intermediary by the EU to govern on the SDGs. Yet, integrating the SDGs into the European Semester needs to go hand in hand with governance structure adaptations, as occurred in its socialization, in order for the SDGs not to be envisioned solely through the prism of economic or socioeconomic policy. It therefore needs, in particular, to be careful on how environmental actors are involved in the processes so as to balance the three pillars of sustainability underpinning the SDGs.

As for ASEAN, there are two mechanisms that could be strengthened to enhance regional governance on the SDGs in Southeast Asia as both mechanisms cover internal and external as well as vertical and horizontal coordination mechanisms, and hence offer comprehensive tools for driving the governance of SDGs in the region. The first mechanism is the High-Level Brainstorming Dialogue (HLBD) on Enhancing Complementarities between the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This mechanism represents ASEAN external horizontal and vertical coordinating mechanism with the UN system and other actors from within and outside the regions. In addition to the large numbers of participants in the forum, the HLBD offers avenue a) to follow up the Complementarity Initiative aimed to identify commonality between the SDGs and the 2025 ASEAN Community Vision, b) to support the implementation of SDGs among member states through policy guidelines, policy dialogue, institutional supports in the form of the proposed ASEAN Council for Sustainable Infrastructure, ASEAN Resource Panel, ASEAN Risk Transfer Mechanism, and ASEAN Center for Sustainable Development, c) to coordinate policies of key stakeholders in the region from the UN System, Dialogue Partners, and Development Banks, and d) to monitor the progress of SDGs implementation in the individual member states. Hence, the HLBD is a potential avenue to help ASEAN live up the four roles in the governance of SDGs. In addition, the HLBD is also a potential mechanism to tackle the two main problems in the SDGs implementation in the region, i.e., data availability and financing. With the participation of various actors who have their own monitoring mechanism of the progress of SDGs in the region, the HLBD could be a forum for sharing data that could be aggregated to produce a more integrated and representative data on SDGs in the region. The HLBD could also be used



as a forum to mobilize resources from the participating stakeholders. As ASEAN has limited financial and technical resources and has been acting more as an orchestrator or a broker in connecting member states with potential sources of supports, the HLBD is a potential forum to meet this purpose. Some remaining tasks would be to align this forum with other existing fora to avoid redundancy and overlap as well to maximize policy coherence. For example, ASEAN has ASEAN-China-UNDP Symposium which also provides a forum for localizing, supporting, coordinating, and monitoring the implementation of SDGs in the region. There is also UNESCAP-sponsored Southeast Asia Multi-Stakeholder Forum on Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals which even though aims to help member states' preparation for the HLPF also serves as a venue for policy dialogue and monitoring progress. ASEAN also has ASEAN Infrastructure Fund which could be aligned with or at least engaged by the proposed ASEAN Council for Sustainable Infrastructure. Other task would be to manage the broad coverage of the HLBD. The broad coverage and participants of the HLBD pose the risk for the forum to fail to meet the expected outcomes as often times it has limited time for a meaningful dialogue among participants.

The second mechanism is the ASEAN Forum on SDGs with National Development Planning Agencies (AFSNDP). This mechanism represents ASEAN internal vertical coordination mechanism with its member states, particularly the National Development Planning Agencies as the forefront of the implementation of SDGs in the individual member states. As discussed earlier, national committees for SDGs in member states are usually headed by the top leadership such as the President or the Prime Minister. The SDGs focal points for each country are also often chosen from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or member states' mission to the UN. However, the actual implementation of the SDGs in individual member states are mostly led by their national development agencies. Therefore, it is important to build conversation between regional organizations as intermediaries for the global goals and the national development planning agencies as the implementing body. It is important for the forum to remain separated from the HLBD in order to avoid risking distraction and limited attention due to the broad agendas of the HLBD. In addition, different from the HLBD which serves as ASEAN external coordination mechanism with other key stakeholders and focuses on the broad picture of the SDGs in the region, AFSNDP focuses on a more technical implementation of the SDGs. It serves as a policy dialogue for mutual learning among member states while at the same time also help coordinating and monitoring SDGs-related policies within ASEAN. The AFSNDP, however, is relatively new compared to the HLBD as it is only convened once in 2019 and is planned to be, have its second forum in 2021. The AFSNDP, therefore, requires more regular meetings and institutional development to meet these potential purposes. Looking at these potentials, however, developing both the HLBD and the AFSNDP would help ASEAN maintain its centrality in the governance of SDGs amid limited sources and power transferred to this organization.



## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, we analyzed the role of regional organizations in the governance of the SDGs. We consider the SDGs as a new form of goal-setting global governance. We first introduced the origins and nature of the SDGs as a goal-setting form of governance and highlighted that regional organisations do have an important role to play in it as is also recognized in the founding document of the SDGs. Consequently, we focus on the role of regional organizations in the global governance for sustainability as an important bridge and broker between the international level and the level of member states.

We then developed a conceptual framework to analyze the role of regional organizations in a more global goal-setting model as a complement to rule-making and norm-setting. We conceptualize four different roles that international/regional organisations can play in such a governance model: the translating, supporting, coordinating and monitoring role. We also argued, following the four role framework, that goal-setting, and the SDGs in particular, could be analyzed from the perspective of global experimentalist governance which focuses on the importance of interactions between different levels of governance and feedback loops between different levels of governance which lead to improved implementation and achievement of pre-defined goals and targets.

Next the conceptual framework was applied to two case studies, namely the European Union and ASEAN as two leading regional organizations. We analysed how these regional organizations are engaging in each of the four roles identified for the governance of the SDGs in their respective regions. We then conducted a comparative analysis of the findings of the two case studies. We find significant differences in how the two regional organisations engage with the SDGs framework, which can mainly be explained by their different regional contexts and institutional design. Yet, we also argue that the role of the EU and ASEAN in the governance of the SDGs is underdeveloped and could be strengthened, especially in a context in which progress towards achieving the SDGs is slow. In particular, the two regional organisations could potentially play a more important role in supporting the implementation and coordination on the SDGs. This stronger coordination function could lead to learning effects between member states of the regional organizations. The degree to which progress on achieving the SDGs can be made will of course also depend on other political, economic and social factors not directly related to the design and implementation of the SDGs. Both regions are confronted with several challenges which might impede on achieving the SDGs such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its socio-economic consequences, increased economic inequality, democratic and rule of law backsliding in certain countries, global migration flows and the threat of extremism, just to name a few. Addressing these issues will pose significant challenges. However, the goal-setting model might be considered as one policy approach which might also be applied to these issues.



Finally, viewed from the perspective of global experimentalist governance, the SDGs constitute an incomplete design with insufficient interactions between different levels of governance, especially between the level of the regional organization and the level of the member states. This design could be strengthened. In the final part, we look at how this can be achieved through strengthening existing mechanisms such as the European Semester for the EU, and the HLBD and the AFSNDP for ASEAN.



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