

**BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT AND DEGROWTH THROUGH THE
STRATEGY OF GOAL-SETTING**

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Abstract

With the world reaching environmental crisis times, this thesis challenges the presumed incompatibility between sustainable development (SD) and degrowth (DE). In light of SD's recent adoption of the strategy of goal-setting for its political implementation through the new 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this research raises the question regarding the usefulness of this strategy for DE and the possibility of bridging the two through goal-setting. Employing an International Relations theoretical approach and using document analysis and interviews with experts from both paradigms, the thesis argues that goal-setting can also be useful for DE and that the differences between SD and DE ideationally can be overcome on the level of political implementation through goal-setting. By taking the 17 SDGs as a reference point, the thesis shows that DE is compatible with all goals, except SDG8 on economic growth. Nevertheless, the research argues that this difference can also be bridged through instruments of goal-setting, like targets and indicators.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Degrowth, Goal-Setting, Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs

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Introduction

The environmental crisis caused by human activity is intensifying. Scientists are warning that humans have provoked, amongst other environmental impacts, the sixth mass extinction in the planet's history.¹ They call this current extinction a “biological annihilation,” as up to half of all individual animals have been lost during recent decades.² They warn that this “will obviously have serious ecological, economic and social consequences” for which all of us will “pay a very high price.”³ What led to this crisis is humanity's dominant global model of development that works on the premise of continuous economic growth as a key component towards a better future. Continuous growth is achieved through the exploitation of natural resources and excessive pollution. This model is impossible to sustain on a planet which is limited in terms of resources and absorption capacity. The need to transition to a model which takes the limits of our planet into consideration is becoming gradually acknowledged in the international arena. Since the first United Nations (UN) Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972, discussions on the environment and development have increased, leading to the emergence of different paradigms which address the issue of transition.

Sustainable development (SD) and degrowth (DE) represent two different approaches in the current context of transition. While both are critical of the dominant model, they engage with it differently in their common aim of changing it. On the one hand, SD is critical of the system from within and it engages with it by adopting the strategy of goal-setting for its political implementation. This resulted with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030

¹ Gerardo Ceballos, Paul R. Ehrlich, and Rodolfo Dirzo, “Biological Annihilation via the Ongoing Sixth Mass Extinction Signaled by Vertebrate Population Losses and Declines,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 2017, E6089–E6096.

² Ibid., E6089.

³ Ibid., E6095.

Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015.⁴ On the other hand, DE is reluctant to engage with the current system and it does not adopt a clear strategy for its political implementation, choosing to remain an alternative movement of scholars, practitioners and activists.⁵

Even though SD and DE seem to be pursuing a very similar central goal, specifically to initiate a change of the current dominant model of growth to one which takes the limits of our planet into account, the communication between the two has been limited. On the one hand, SD does not see the possibility of DE meeting its objectives due to its refusal to engage politically with the mainstream and the dominant model.⁶ On the other hand, DE does not recognize the possibility of change through SD, because it does not see it as substantially different from the dominant model.⁷ Nevertheless, not all degrowthers are reluctant to engage with SD, as some recognize value in participating in a dialogue, especially under the framework of the new SDGs.⁸ The 17 SDGs are an opportunity to reset and reconfigure the global agenda, creating a space for new ways of tackling the transition to a better model. The main question that arises in this context is whether this represents an opportunity for the two to cooperate.

⁴ United Nations General Assembly, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/57b6e3e44.html> [accessed 21 May 2018], 14.

⁵ Federico Demaria et al., “What Is Degrowth? From an Activist Slogan to a Social Movement,” *Environmental Values* 22, no. 2 (2013): 191–215; Joan Martínez-Alier et al., “Sustainable De-Growth: Mapping the Context, Criticisms and Future Prospects of an Emergent Paradigm,” *Ecological Economics* 69 (2010): 1741–1747.

⁶ Personal interview with Felix Dodds, March 21, 2018; Personal interview with Alan AtKisson, March 27, 2018.

⁷ Martínez-Alier et al., “Sustainable De-Growth: Mapping the Context,” Ashish Kothari, Federico Demaria, and Alberto Acosta, “Buen Vivir, Degrowth and Ecological Swaraj: Alternatives to Sustainable Development and the Green Economy,” *Development* 54, no. 3–4 (2014): 362–75; Adrián E. Beling et al., “Discursive Synergies for a ‘Great Transformation’ Towards Sustainability: Pragmatic Contributions to a Necessary Dialogue Between Human Development, Degrowth, and Buen Vivir,” *Ecological Economics*, (2017): 1–10; Federico Demaria and Ashish Kothari, “The Post-Development Dictionary Agenda: Paths to the Pluriverse,” *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 12 (2017): 2588–2599.

⁸ André Reichel, “Re-Taking Sustainable Development for Degrowth,” Blog, *André Reichel: Sustainability and Postgrowth Research* (blog), November 7, 2015, <http://www.andrereichel.de/2015/11/07/re-taking-sustainable-development-for-degrowth/>; Jürgen Kopfmüller et al., “Postwachstumsökonomie Und Nachhaltige Entwicklung – Zwei (Un)Vereinbare Ideen?,” *Zeitschrift Für Technikfolgenabschätzung in Theorie Und Praxis* 25, no. 2 (2016): 45–54.

This question of cooperation directly addresses the issue of compatibility between SD and DE on the level of political implementation. It has not been addressed yet in the literature, since previous attempts of analyzing the compatibility between the two have focused only on the ideational level.⁹ SD's adoption of goal-setting as its main strategy of political implementation, opens the question regarding DE's stance on this strategy and on the SDGs, especially since DE has not adopted a clear strategy yet.¹⁰ While there might be some differences between the two on the ideational level, the question arising is whether on the level of political implementation, specifically on the level of goals, the divergences disappear.

Inspired by this context, this thesis addresses the following research question: *To what degree are SD and DE compatible from the perspective of goals, and can goal-setting as a strategy bridge the gap between them?* Analyzing this question requires a brief outline of the historical emergence of the two as distinct paradigms which are critical of the dominant model of growth. SD was brought into the mainstream through the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission) entitled "Our Common Future."¹¹ The Commission was appointed by the UN in order to develop long-term environmental strategies for the world and to find a solution to the polarized debate of the time known as the "North-South divide."¹² This debate between the developed countries (Global North) and the developing ones (Global South) was centered around the right of the South to development. The South argued for their right to adopt the industrial practices and the model of economic growth without having to take into account environmental limitations, similar to

⁹ Grégoire Wallenborn, "Degrowth vs. Sustainable Development: How to Open the Space of Ontological Negotiation?" in *Proceedings of the First International Conference on Economic De-Growth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity*, ed. Francois Schneider and Fabrice Flipo (Paris, 2008), 227–31.

¹⁰ Giorgos Kallis, Giacomo D'Alisa, and Federico Demaria, "Introduction: Degrowth," in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 14.

¹¹ World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹² Sumudu Attapatu and Carmen G. Gonzalez, "The North-South Divide in International Environmental Law: Framing the Issues," in *International Environmental Law and the Global South*, ed. Shawkat Alam et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1–20.

the way in which the North had also done since the Industrial Revolution.¹³ The North-South divide emerged around the 1970s as a result of the growing concerns over the disastrous effects of the growth model on the environment. These harmful effects were highlighted through scientific publications, civil society movements, non-governmental organizations, the media and the first green political parties.¹⁴

SD was introduced in the international arena in this polarized atmosphere between the need to conserve the environment and need to pursue human development in the sense of improving living conditions.¹⁵ The main problem here was that the two were seen as mutually exclusive, since development was considered achievable through the model of continuous economic growth, which had ecological consequences. This strong belief in development through economic growth can be traced back to the material improvement experienced in industrialized countries in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution.¹⁶ The considerable improvement in the quality of life after the 1760s became a central element of that time's Enlightenment narrative of historical progress. This narrative portrayed humanity as permanently advancing towards a better future through its mastery of science.¹⁷ The belief in development through growth enabled by technological advancement and open market industrial capitalism was strengthened after the economic growth miracles of the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁸ The optimism of that time's promise of continuous improvement through growth, measured in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) since the 1930s, was hit by the mentioned recognition of the environmental limits to growth.¹⁹

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Jacobus A. Du Pisani, "Sustainable Development – Historical Roots of the Concept," *Environmental Sciences* 3, no. 2 (2006): 83–96; Donella H. Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth* (London: Earth Island Limited, 1972); Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1962).

¹⁵ Du Pisani, "Sustainable Development," 84-87.

¹⁶ Ibid., 84-87.

¹⁷ Ibid., 84.

¹⁸ Ibid., 84-87.

¹⁹ Ibid.

SD was perceived as the solution to the dichotomy between the environment and development. The Brundtland Commission defined SD as “development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”²⁰ It represents an attempt to bring the economic, social and environmental dimensions of the global model together without having to trade-off one in favor of the other. SD has come to play an increasingly important role in the international arena, constituting a key element of the framework of all major international conferences and reports on environment over the past three decades.²¹ It has managed to bridge the North-South divide and to create a constructive space for discussions around the environment.²² Furthermore, SD helped lay the broader groundwork for changes in practices that lead to tangible outcomes, for example through green certification systems and standards. The most ambitious effort of implementing SD politically has been done recently through the strategy of goal-setting. Through the 17 SDGs the paradigm is developing into a new type of goal-based regime, as all members of the UN agreed to voluntarily pursue the goals in an attempt to participate in the transition to a more sustainable model.²³

However, there are also voices critical of SD, which consider that it has not brought enough or adequate change.²⁴ DE is among those voices, representing a younger paradigm, which emerged in the beginnings of the 2000s, as an activist movement and an approach in academia.²⁵ DE emerged in France, slowly spreading to other European countries and becoming an international social movement of activists, practitioners and academics, who share a similar

²⁰ World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*.

²¹ Kanie Norichika et al., “Introduction: Global Governance through Goal Setting,” in *Governing through Goals: Sustainable Development Goals as Governance Innovation*, ed. Kanie Norichika and Frank Biermann (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 1.

²² Ibid.

²³ Norichika et al., “Introduction: Global Governance,” 2-3; Pamela S. Chasek et al., “Getting to 2030: Negotiating the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda,” *Review of European Community & International Environmental Law* 25, no. 1 (2016): 5–14; United Nations General Assembly, “Transforming Our World”.

²⁴ Du Pisani, “Sustainable Development,” 93.

²⁵ Kallis et al., “Introduction: Degrowth,” 2-3.

critique of today's economic growth-based system. There is no single definition of DE, as the approach requires a holistic understanding of its critique of the current system, which highlights the impossibility of endless growth on a limited planet.²⁶ It advocates for “the abolishment of economic growth as the ultimate social objective” and argues for a different organization of life around human and social values.²⁷ So far, there has been no clear strategy of promotion and implementation of DE, especially because it is a wide-spread and diverse movement consisting of scholars, practitioners and activists from different countries who have different views on how DE should evolve.²⁸

Given the urgent need to address the intensifying environmental crisis and SD's development into the new SDGs regime, this thesis analyzes whether the two can be brought together on the level of political implementation through goal-setting. The analysis is undertaken through a novel approach from an International Relations' (IR) perspective. So far IR has not addressed the theme of global transition from the dominant model of growth to a more sustainable one. Environmental issues are not perceived in the discipline to have the potential of triggering systemic changes. These are mostly analyzed through an institutionalist perspective, as collective-action problems, which states can solve by cooperating through regimes.²⁹ The findings of these studies provide an extensive classification of regime-types that

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 3.

²⁸ Matthias Schmelzer, “Spielarten Der Wachstumskritik: Degrowth, Klimagerechtigkeit, Subsistenz – Eine Einführung in Die Begriffe Und Ansätze Der Postwachstumsbewegung,” in *Atlas Der Globalisierung: Weniger Wird Mehr* (Berlin: Le Monde Diplomatique/tazVerlags- und Vertriebs GmbH, 2015), 116–29.

²⁹ Oran R. Young, *International Cooperation: Building Regimes for Natural Resources and the Environment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); Peter M. Haas, Robert Keohane, and Marc Levy, *Institutions for the Earth: Sources of Effective International Environmental Protection* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993); Oran R. Young, *International Governance: Protecting the Environment in a Stateless Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Oran R. Young, ed., *Global Governance: Drawing Insights from the Environmental Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997); Robert Keohane and D. G. Victor, “The Regime Complex for Climate Change” (Harvard Project on International Climate Agreements, 2010), https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/Keohane_Victor_Final_2.pdf; Oran R. Young, “Effectiveness of International Environmental Regimes: Existing Knowledge, Cutting-Edge Themes, and Research Strategies,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 108, no. 50 (2011): 19853–60.

are useful for explaining how to better address single specific environmental problems. However, they face limitations when applied to the complex case of global transition where multiple issues need to be addressed simultaneously and interconnectedly. Therefore, they fail to grasp new phenomena in the system that are developing in accordance with this complexity, like SD. These limitations stem mainly from the discipline's state-centrism. With certain exceptions,³⁰ the role of non-state actors in the emergence, functioning and effectiveness of environmental regimes is ignored, preventing the analysis of cases like SD and DE. This thesis addresses the outlined gaps in IR, contributing also to SD and DE literature.

The argument proposed in this thesis is that *goal-setting can create an enabling space for a possible cooperation between SD and DE, the two being bridgeable through goals, targets and indicators*. For this purpose, the research is structured in two chapters. The first one develops the theoretical framework through an IR theoretical perspective on ideas, strategies and regimes. The central argument presented here is that in order for ideas of a paradigm to become influential in the international arena they need to be implemented politically through strategies or regimes. By applying this argumentation on the case of SD, the chapter argues that it is developing into a new type of goal-based regime through the strategy of goal-setting. In the case of DE, it highlights possible implications of adopting goal-setting, showing that from a theoretical perspective, the strategy could also bring value to DE, helping it advance its aims, especially if connected to the already internationally recognized SDGs.

In the second chapter, these theoretical suggestions are assessed through the analysis of the compatibility of SD and DE on the levels of ideas and of political implementation. The focus is on the strategy of goal-setting and the potential of bridging the two through this

³⁰ Paul Wapner, "Governance in Global Civil Society," in *Global Governance: Drawing Insights from the Environmental Experience*, ed. Oran R. Young (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 65–84; M. J. Peterson, "International Organizations and the Implementation of Environmental Regimes," in *Global Governance: Drawing Insights from the Environmental Experience*, ed. Oran R. Young (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 115–51.

strategy. The assessment is realized through a merger between document analysis of the two paradigms' key academic literature and official documents of conferences, and semi-structured, open-ended interviews with experts from both. The chapter highlights how on the level of ideas SD and DE converge and diverge in a convoluted manner. The argument presented here is that the nuanced differences from the ideational level tend to disappear on the level of political implementation through goal-setting. Furthermore, the chapter shows that DE is compatible with goal-setting and with the SDGs, the only exception being SDG8 on economic growth. However, this divergence can be bridged through instruments of goal-setting like targets and indicators.

Chapter One: The Role of Ideas, Strategies and Regimes in the Functioning of the Global Model

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework necessary for understanding the argumentation of this thesis. The analysis is approached from an International Relations (IR) theoretical perspective that explains how changes in the model of the international system can occur. This approach is particularly suitable, since sustainable development (SD) and degrowth (DE) are two paradigms that are based on a set of ideas of how to initiate the transition from the current dominant model of growth to one which takes the limits of our planet into account. The first section of this chapter engages with IR approaches on the role of ideas in shaping the functioning of the international arena. It presents the argument that ideas of paradigms, like SD and DE, can influence the behavior of actors and produce changes in the model, if they are translated into norms and implemented politically through strategies or regimes. The second section continues this argumentation through IR approaches on regimes. It highlights how SD is developing into a new type of goal-based regime through the strategy of goal-setting. Furthermore, it analyzes whether from a theoretical perspective goal-setting can be useful also to DE and whether a possible connection to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the internationally recognized SD would be of value to DE.

1.1. The Role of Ideas

In IR the central question of whether ideas and norms can influence world politics represents one of the main contention points between different traditions of the discipline. Realism and institutionalism as two of IR's most dominant approaches consider ideas and norms to play a very limited or no role at all in shaping the behavior of actors and initiating

changes in the system.³¹ Both traditions are state-centric, meaning that they disregard the role of non-state actors in the international arena. Furthermore, they depart from the assumption that the international system is anarchic which implies that it is in a state of disorder and rivalry, as states act mainly based on their own interest.³² On the one hand, realism portrays a more negative view of the world where only the material power of states matters, the most powerful ones imposing the rules of the game and structuring the model of the system in a way which serves their interests of power maximization.³³ On the other hand, institutionalism presents a more optimistic view that acknowledges the ability of institutional settings to shape the behavior of states from one guided solely by self-interest to one of cooperation for the mutual benefit of multiple actors.³⁴

Both approaches are useful in explaining the important role of material aspects and of considerations of interests and power in shaping the behavior of states. Institutionalism also provides an important insight into how interstate cooperation can be fostered through institutional arrangements which set rules of behavior and hereby shape state conduct. However, they face limitations in explaining new phenomena in world affairs, like SD and DE, that go beyond a state-centric and anarchy-focused perspective and that cannot be explained through arguments of material interests and power, but where ideas and norms are central.

Firstly, understanding SD and DE requires a perspective that takes non-state actors into consideration. In the case of SD, even if the 2030 Agenda and the 17 SDGs were primarily

³¹ Jason Charrette and Jennifer Sterling-Folker, "Realism," in *International Organization and Global Governance*, ed. Thomas G. Weiss and Rorden Wilkinson (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 93–101; David P. Forsythe, "Neoliberal Institutionalism," in *International Organization and Global Governance*, ed. Thomas G. Weiss and Rorden Wilkinson (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 118–31.

³² Ibid.

³³ Kenneth Neal Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 1979); Robert Gilpin, "The Theory of Hegemonic War," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, no. 4 (1988): 591–613.

³⁴ Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 10–11; Oran R. Young, *Governance in World Affairs* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 6–7.

negotiated between states, non-states actors were given formal standing in the process.³⁵ For example, representatives of civil society and other stakeholders were able to express their view on the agenda. The Co-Chairs of the Open Working Group (OWG) on the SDGs met with these representatives every day before the sessions of negotiations, while the post-2015 intergovernmental negotiations also had mornings allocated for dialogues with these actors.³⁶ This is seen as rather unique, because even though the negotiations were primarily taking place among states, non-state actors also participated in the process. However, the extent of their influence on the actual outcomes remains a matter of debate. DE in itself represents a social movement which cannot be grasped without acknowledging non-state actors, as here states play a very limited role, if any at all. Secondly, an anarchy-focused perspective which implies that the international system is governed by rivalry between states, and where ideas and norms are insignificant, is limited in explaining the case of SD. This limitation is particularly highlighted by the voluntary commitment of all members of the UN to pursue SD and its SDGs in a common attempt to participate in the transition to a more sustainable model.³⁷

Constructivism, as a third major approach in IR, seems to provide a more adequate explanation through its critique of the anarchy bias and its emphasis on the importance of ideas in world politics. Constructivists argue that “shared ideas, expectations, and beliefs about appropriate behavior are what give the world structure, order and stability,”³⁸ unless the ideas are specifically intended to promote instability. This implies that anarchy does not necessarily mean rivalry, but it can also mean cooperation based on partnership, like in the case of the SD

³⁵ Johan Rockström et al., “Sustainable Development and Planetary Boundaries” (High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, Sustainable Development Solutions Network: A Global Initiative for the United Nations, 2013), 17; Chasek et al., “Getting to 2030,” 13.

³⁶ Chasek et al., “Getting to 2030,” 11.

³⁷ Norichika et al., “Introduction: Global Governance,” 2-3.

³⁸ Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, “International Norm Dynamics and Political Change,” *International Organization* 52, 4 (1998), 894.

regime through the SDGs.³⁹ Furthermore, constructivists highlight that ideas are central to the identity of actors, shaping their interests and actions in accordance with the reputation they wish to uphold or to acquire.⁴⁰ Through this line of argumentation it becomes possible to understand why states that wish to be associated with a specific reputation, like being environmentally friendly or adhering to particular values like equality, would commit themselves to the SDGs.

Through this emphasis on the importance of ideas in the international arena, constructivism does provide a useful insight for SD and DE, that represent paradigms based on a set of ideas which aim to change the dominant model of growth of the international system. Constructivist approaches which appear as particularly relevant for the two are those explaining that ideas can influence world affairs when they are translated into norms which represent standards of behavior that can shape the conduct of actors.⁴¹ However, this constructivist argument of the ability of norms to influence actors' behavior and therefore initiate changes in the system also faces limitations in the case of SD and DE. The two require an approach which goes beyond the constructivist lens and which highlights that norms need to also be implemented politically through strategies or regimes in order to bring changes in the system. SD is not only a simple norm or a set of norms, but a new type of goal-based regime, and DE as a non-state actor is not even addressed in this literature.

Jennifer Hadden and Lucia Seybert analyze SD by conceptualizing it as a norm and arguing that it has failed to initiate adequate change in the behavior and in the priorities of states, the change occurring only at the level of their discourse.⁴² While this argument might be generally right, in the absence of goals for measuring the implementation process before the SDGs, it is hard to assess whether the progress achieved was adequate or not. Hadden and

³⁹ Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, 2 (1992): 391-425.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 397.

⁴¹ Finnemore and Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics," 887-917.

⁴² Jennifer Hadden and Lucia A. Seybert, "What's in a Norm? Mapping the Norm Definition Process in the Debate on Sustainable Development," *Global Governance* 22, no. 1 (2016): 249-68.

Seybert explain that the SD norm has failed due to its definition process, arguing that “the lack of specificity and agreement about the norm content” prevents it from influencing the behavior of actors.⁴³ However, this earlier problem of SD was addressed through the targets and indicators of the SDGs which offer specificity.

To conceptualize SD as a norm and to evaluate it accordingly is misleading, because SD represents a paradigm which has been continuously evolving since its emergence in the international arena through the Brundtland Commission. The complexity of SD through its three distinct dimensions – social, economic and environmental – make its conceptualization under one single norm inadequate. Even though there was no unified conceptual framework when the most recent attempt of SD’s implementation through the SDGs started, the resultant goals highlight how each of its three dimensions is comprised under a different set of norms expressed through the global goals. Hence, conceptualizing SD as a single norm and judging its effectiveness through this lens misses its complexity and misinterprets its nature.

The following section provides the theoretical explanation of IR theories on regimes which is necessary for understanding how SD is evolving into a new type of goal-based regime through the strategy of goal-setting. Moreover, it analyzes whether it can be useful for DE to also adopt goal-setting and to connect to the SD regime through the framework created by the SDGs. Again, the purpose is to highlight that ideas of paradigms like SD and DE can initiate changes in the system if these are translated into norms which are then implemented politically through strategies or regimes.

1.2. The Role of Strategies and Regimes

Regimes constitute a central theme in IR, being generally understood in line with Stephan Krasner’s definition as “a set of implicit or explicit principles [ideas], norms, rules,

⁴³ Ibid., 250.

and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given area of international relations."⁴⁴ Krasner argues that the ideas and norms of a regime constitute its "basic defining characteristics," which determine its way of functioning and shape all its other elements.⁴⁵ This point is central to the main arguments of this chapter, specifically that ideas and norms can influence world politics when they are implemented through regimes. Furthermore, it is particularly important for understanding how the political implementation of the SD paradigm through a goal-based regime can initiate the sought change of the dominant global model of growth to one which takes the limits of the Earth into account. In addition, it is also relevant for understanding whether this strategy can be useful also in the case of DE.

In order to understand the argument that the new SD regime is unique, mainly due to the adoption of goal-setting as a strategy for its political implementation, it is important to briefly outline how regimes have been conceptualized in IR. Similar to the case of ideas and norms, regimes constitute the object of debate between distinct IR traditions, the main contention point being whether and how they matter in the international arena. Like in the previous case, realism disregards the role of regimes in the system and their potential to initiate changes.⁴⁶ Realism perceives regimes only as instruments of the most powerful states to advance their own interests, without having the ability to shape states' behavior. Realism is useful for explaining how superpowers like the US comply mostly with regimes which are in line with their interests, as a result of their power status.⁴⁷ However, it is limited in explaining regimes that emerge and function through a different logic than the one of power, but where

⁴⁴ Stephen D. Krasner, "Structural Causes and Regime Consequences: Regimes as Intervening Variables," *International Organization* 36, no. 2 (1982): 186.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁴⁶ Susan Strange, "Cave! Hic Dragones: A Critique of Regime Analysis," *International Organization* 36, no. 2 (1982): 479–80.

⁴⁷ Eric Posner, "Think Again: International Law," *Foreign Policy*, September 17, 2009, accessed May 22, 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/09/17/think-again-international-law/>.

shared ideas and norms of the involved state and also non-state actors play a central role, like the one of SD.⁴⁸

Institutionalism does recognize the importance of regimes in the international system, emphasizing that states play the central role in their functioning. Institutionalism sees regimes as established by states in order to serve their own interests, but contrary to realism, it does recognize the potential of regimes to shape state conduct through their ability to “constrain [states’] activity and shape expectations” in specific contexts.⁴⁹ Examples of such contexts are common problems or cases of interdependence, when the action of one state affects others, because regimes enable interstate cooperation for the purpose of reaching common solutions for the mutual benefit of all involved actors.⁵⁰ Hence, regimes are generally seen as establishing the rules of the game for states on specific issues, the general presumption being that these rules are set through negotiation which are influenced by the most powerful states. Institutionalism does provide a useful extensive categorization of regime types, highlighting which ones are more appropriate for addressing certain problems.⁵¹ However, through its state-centrism and focus on the importance of power, it is limited in explaining the emergence and functioning of the new type of goal-based regime of SD.

As a global consensus among all member states of the UN, the SD regime cannot be seen as a reflection of power, making constructivist arguments again central. Constructivism highlights that regimes need to be understood through the underlying ideas which shape them and that they can influence the behavior of actors and the functioning of the system.⁵² John Ruggie explains that the power of states is not enough to determine the “content” of a regime,

⁴⁸ Chasek et al., “Getting to 2030,” 11.

⁴⁹ Robert Keohane, “Multilateralism: An Agenda for Research,” *International Journal* XLV (1990), 732.

⁵⁰ Young, “Rights, Rules, and Resources in World Affairs,” 4; Young, *Governance in World Affairs*, 18.

⁵¹ Young, *Governance in World Affairs*, 6-7.

⁵² John Gerard Ruggie, “International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order,” *International Organization* 36, no. 2 (1982): 380.

as this needs to serve also particular legitimate purposes.⁵³ This can be seen in the SD regime which is based on shared ideas about what constitutes legitimate social, economic and environmental purposes, which are reflected in the SDGs.⁵⁴ However, the SD regime is different from traditional types assessed in IR literature not only through the importance of shared ideas and norms compared to considerations of power. But, it differs also through the adoption of goal-setting as its strategy of political implementation, which gives a distinct dynamic to its process of emergence and shapes its functioning mechanism.

In the stage of its emergence, the negotiation-process of the SDGs differs to a great extent from traditional regime-formation. The way in which the negotiations were conducted was shaped by the international norm of “universal participation in negotiations.”⁵⁵ This ensured an inclusive character of the process, as states participated equally regardless of their status in terms of their power.⁵⁶ The SDGs were negotiated through the Open Working Group (OWG) which democratized the process by achieving an equal participation of developed and developing states, overcoming the North-South divide, and ensuring that the approach is “transparent” and inclusive.⁵⁷ This inclusive character of the negotiations is highlighted also through the involvement of non-state actors, like the ones from the private sector, advocacy, civil society and science groups, whose input was taken into consideration in the OWG negotiations.⁵⁸ Hereby, the SDGs were not only the result of state negotiations, but also of a “grassroots process, which began with input from a broader range of advocacy groups and citizens.”⁵⁹ Furthermore, the implementation and funding of the goals depends on a “multi-

⁵³ Ibid., 382.

⁵⁴ Chasek et al., “Getting to 2030,” 8.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 8-11.

⁵⁸ Johan Rockström et al., “Sustainable Development and Planetary Boundaries,” 17; Felix Dodds, David Donoghue, and Jimena Leiva Roesch, *Negotiating the Sustainable Development Goals: A Transformational Agenda for an Insecure World* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017).

⁵⁹ Chasek et al., 9-13.

stakeholder collaboration between Member States, civil society, the private sector, the scientific community, UN entities and other stakeholders.”⁶⁰ In addition, by adopting the strategy of goal-setting as opposed to the more traditional rule-making, it was possible to achieve a consensus on the SDGs between all participants. A different strategy, like rule-making, which in IR theory is generally regarded as more effective in ensuring compliance, would have failed to bring the necessary global consensus on the goals.⁶¹

At this point it is important to acknowledge the unique logic of functioning of a goal-based regime which aims to guide behavior, as opposed to a rule-based one which attempts to constrain it.⁶² Through goal-setting the SD regime functions on a logic of voluntary engagement which differs from rule-making through its assumption that actors follow the goals out of belief, not out of fear of consequences of non-compliance.⁶³ Here, the importance of ideas and norms outlined in the previous section becomes again central. Sakiko Fukuda-Parr explains that goals are “prescriptive norms” which aim to initiate behavioral change through a mechanism of “self-regulation,” establishing incentives for actors to set their priorities in line with the goals.⁶⁴ Hereby, the central aim of the SDGs is to coordinate the efforts of all actors in pursuing sustainable development. This aspect of coordination is particularly important because the specific targets and indicators that matter for implementation will be selected further down at the country and subnational levels in order to fit each context. The voluntary character is criticized for diminishing the effectiveness of the SDGs, suggesting that actors commit only discursively to them.⁶⁵ However, at this stage it is too early to determine this and the alignment

⁶⁰ Chasek et al., 9-13.

⁶¹ Oran R. Young, “Conceptualization: Goal-Setting as a Strategy for Earth System Governance,” in *Governing through Goals: Sustainable Development Goals as Governance Innovation*, ed. Norichika Kanie and Frank Biermann (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017).

⁶² Ibid., 33.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, “Global Goals as a Policy Tool: Intended and Unintended Consequences,” *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 15, no. 2–3 (2014): 120.

⁶⁵ Young, “Conceptualization: Goal-Setting,” 34.

of many states, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, multinational companies and civil society groups with the SDG represents a start in the right direction.⁶⁶

In addition, goal-setting ensures that the functioning mechanism of the new regime reflects the complexity of the SD paradigm, which requires an approach that integrates its social, economic and environmental dimensions holistically. The SDGs institutionalize and implement norms of the three mentioned dimensions in a complex and interconnected manner, with the specific purpose of ensuring that no aspect is disregarded in favor of another.⁶⁷ This complexity is especially highlighted through the recognition of the interlinkages between the different goals, targets and indicators, not just from the diversity of the goal set. Hereby, the goal-setting strategy attempts to “[manage] trade-offs and maximize synergies” between the targets of the goals, that are meant to be implemented at different levels in an integrated manner, not through cherry-picking of single ones according to preferences of actors.⁶⁸

Another characteristic of goal-setting that shapes the functioning mechanism of the new SD regime is the setting of clear priorities. The purpose of prioritizing is to guide the behavior of actors in a coordinated manner for achieving sustainability. Goal-setting establishes “well-defined priorities” that are coded in an “explicit” language of specific goals, that maintain the attention and resources concentrated on their achievement, which is measured through an established tracking mechanism.⁶⁹ Through goal-setting and the SDGs, the new SD regime enables a clear determination of the most pressing priorities that the world needs to address together. This prevents a loss of focus and a fragmentation of efforts in the attempt to initiate a

⁶⁶ Business and Sustainable Development Commission, “About,” accessed May 22, 2018, <http://businesscommission.org/about>; European Commission, “The Sustainable Development Goals,” International Cooperation and Development, accessed May 22, 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/policies/sustainable-development-goals_en; United Nations, “Sustainable Development Goals Report 2017,” United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs, accessed May 22, 2018, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/publications/sdg-report-2017.html>.

⁶⁷ Griggs et al., “Sustainable Development Goals for People and Planet,” *Nature* 495, (2013): 305-307.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 307.

⁶⁹ Young, “Conceptualization: Goal-Setting,” 33.

transition to a more sustainable model. At this point, the universality of the goals becomes essential, as the 17 SDGs reflect challenges that are faced on a different scale by all countries of the world, regardless if developed or developing.⁷⁰ This strengthens the aim of the SD goal-regime to coordinate and guide the efforts of all actors towards achieving the necessary transition of the model.

Given the usefulness of goal-setting for the political implementation of SD, it is important to also analyze whether, from a theoretical perspective, this strategy could also be useful for DE. Goal-setting translates “qualitative norms into quantitative, time-bound targets using selected indicators,” which have a higher influence on actors because they “simplify” abstract issues and make them appear more tangible and achievable.⁷¹ By adopting this strategy, DE could translate its current extensive, qualitative critique of the system into simpler, more concrete and specific goals, which would enable a clearer communication of the DE aims to other actors. Hereby, the current existing confusion around the actual aims of DE would fade, possibly allowing it to advance its aims more effectively. Moreover, IR literature provides an extensive documentation of the difficulty to initiate changes on issues which do not enjoy recognition in the international system.⁷² This implies that an attempt of DE to inspire a separate change from SD is difficult, the chances of initiating the necessary global transition being higher through a joint effort of the two. Goal-setting could clarify whether it is possible to bridge the two on the level of political implementation in their common effort of initiating the desired global transition to a better model. Furthermore, it would highlight whether bridging the two could be useful to both in the global effort of transition.

⁷⁰ Chasek et al., “Getting to 2030,” 8.

⁷¹ Fukuda-Parr, “Global Goals as a Policy Tool,” 119-121.

⁷² Haas and Stevens, “Ideas, Beliefs, and Policy Linkages: Lessons from Food, Water and Energy Policies,” in *Governing through Goals: Sustainable Development Goals as Governance Innovation*, ed. Norichika Kanie and Frank Biermann (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 138-139; Ernst B. Haas, “Why Collaborate?: Issue-Linkage and International Regimes,” *World Politics* 32, no. 3 (1980): 370-375.

This chapter highlighted that ideas of paradigms like SD or DE can generally only initiate changes in the international arena if they are translated into norms and implemented politically through strategies or regimes. It showed the usefulness of goal-setting as a strategy of implementing SD politically in a new type of goal-based regime through the SDGs. Furthermore, it outlined that from a theoretical perspective goal-setting could potentially also be useful for DE. This left the question regarding DE's stance on goal-setting and on the possibility of bridging the two through goals open. The following chapter continues the analysis of whether goal-setting is acceptable and considered useful also from a DE perspective and whether the two can be bridged through this strategy. For this purpose, it analyzes the compatibility between the two on the level of ideas and on the level of political implementation. Since this chapter has shown that ideas are the defining elements of regimes and strategies, the initial analysis of the compatibility between the two on the ideational level is essential. The reason for this is the theoretical implication that an irreconcilable difference between their ideas would prevent bridging them through goals on the second level of political implementation, since the goals reflect the ideas.

Chapter Two: Analysis of the Compatibility between Sustainable Development and Degrowth

This chapter offers an analysis of the commonalities and difference between sustainable development (SD) and degrowth (DE) on the levels of ideas and of political implementation. It assesses whether there are any irreconcilable differences between the two and analyzes whether goal-setting as a strategy can create a bridge between them. This is realized through a merger of document analysis and semi-structured open-ended interviews with experts from both, the data sources being outlined in the first section.

The second section presents the analysis on the ideational level. It highlights how the two paradigms are based on three key ideas upon which they converge and diverge in a convoluted manner. These three are: a finite planet, development and economic growth. The ideas were identified through the screening of the two paradigms' main official documents and key academic publications. The expert interviews complemented the findings of the document analysis. As explained in the previous chapter through the IR theoretical approach, ideas are defining elements of regimes and political strategies.⁷³ This directly implies that an irreconcilable difference between the ideas of SD and DE would translate on the level of political implementation, preventing the possibility of bridging them through goals. This section shows how the differences between the two consist in nuanced understandings of their main ideas, but these divergences are not irreconcilable.

The third section continues the analysis on the level of political implementation. This analysis is essential in light of the two paradigms' central aim of initiating a change of the global model to a more sustainable one. The reason for this was highlighted through the argumentation of the previous chapter which has shown that ideas of paradigms can only influence world politics if they are implemented through strategies or regimes. The section

⁷³ Krasner, "Structural Causes and Regime Consequences," 186-187.

focuses on the two paradigms' stance on strategies and regimes, with a particular emphasis on goal-setting. The usefulness of this strategy for SD, and its potential value also for DE has been outlined through the IR theoretical analysis in the last chapter. Therefore, this section continues this analysis of whether DE is also compatible with goal-setting. Furthermore, the IR theoretical approach showed that it is difficult to initiate changes in the international system on issues which are not recognized.⁷⁴ Hence, the section also analyzes the degree to which DE is compatible with the SDGs of the already recognized SD goal-based regime and identifies the opportunities which could arise for both by bridging them through goal-setting. In this section the document analysis focused on identifying how SD and DE perceive strategies and regimes. The interviews were essential for complementing the research and clarifying the lacking information from the documents, especially regarding DE's stance on goal-setting and the SDGs. The argument presented here is that DE is compatible with a strategy of goal-setting, and the differences between the two on the level of ideas can be bridged on the level of political implementation through goals, targets and indicators.

2.1. Data Sources

In the case of SD, the document analysis focuses on the main voices in this academic field.⁷⁵ Furthermore, it is centered on the second chapter of the Brundtland Commission's "Our Common Future,"⁷⁶ which offers the first official explanation of the concept, and on the 2030

⁷⁴ Haas and Stevens, "Ideas, Beliefs, and Policy Linkages," 138-139; Ernst B. Haas, "Why Collaborate?: Issue-Linkage and International Regimes," 370-375.

⁷⁵ Jeffrey D. Sachs, *The Age of Sustainable Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Griggs et al., "Sustainable Development Goals," 305-307; Rockström et al., "Sustainable Development and Planetary Boundaries," 1-45; Fukuda-Parr, "Global Goals as a Policy Tool," 118-113; Sakiko Fukuda-Parr and David Hulme, "International Norm Dynamics and the 'End of Poverty': Understanding the Millennium Development Goals," *Global Governance* 17, no. 1 (2011): 17-36; Frank Biermann and Norichika Kanie, eds., *Governing through Goals: Sustainable Development Goals as Governance Innovation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017); Dodds, Donoghue, and Roesch, *Negotiating the Sustainable Development Goals*; Chasek et al., "Getting to 2030."

⁷⁶ World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*.

Agenda that comprises the 17 SDGs.⁷⁷ The research was complemented through the interviews with Felix Dodds and Alan AtKisson held in March 2018 over Skype, and with Csaba Körösi held in April 2018 at his office in Budapest.

Felix Dodds has written extensively on SD and has played a fundamental role in the development of different ways of engaging stakeholders with the UN on SD. He was the Executive Director of the Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future from 1992 to 2012. Alan AtKisson is a senior advisor and author in the field of SD, being also a consultant to governments, leading companies, global NGOs and the UN.⁷⁸ He is the project director of 17Goals established by the global network of sustainability organizations, experts, and enthusiasts with the purpose of promoting the SDGs.⁷⁹ Csaba Körösi was the Permanent Representative of Hungary to the UN and co-chaired the Open Working Group (OWG) on the SDGs together with Macharia Kamau, Permanent Representative of Kenya, during the first year of the OWG process. He was replaced by David Donoghue, the Irish Ambassador for the second year after his term as Hungary's Ambassador to the UN expired. The negotiations through the OWG were fundamental to the SDGs. The co-facilitators managed to introduce a system which democratized the process through the way in which the participating states shared the seats on the group, through their order of speaking and through the transparency of the process.⁸⁰ The transparency was particularly enhanced through the civil society's and other stakeholders' opportunity to participate and express their opinions on the agenda.⁸¹

In the case of DE, the document analysis is also centered on the main academic literature of the paradigm.⁸² Moreover, it is focused on the only two declarations produced at the

⁷⁷ United Nations General Assembly, "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda."

⁷⁸ "Professional Profile," Alan AtKisson, accessed May 21, 2018, <https://alanatkisson.com>.

⁷⁹ United Nations, "17 Goals," Partnership for the SDGs, accessed May 21, 2018, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/partnership/?p=9651>.

⁸⁰ Chasek et al., "Getting to 2030," 10-12.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Martínez-Alier et al., "Sustainable De-Growth: Mapping the Context," 1741–1747; Giorgos Kallis, Federico Demaria, and Giacomo D'Alisa, eds., *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era* (New York: Routledge, Taylor &

international DE conferences, specifically the one from 2008 in Paris and from 2010 in Barcelona.⁸³ Key interviews were held in March and April 2018 with André Reichel over Skype, with Angelika Zahrt over telephone, with Joan Martínez-Alier through email exchange and with Vincent Liegey at his office in Budapest.

André Reichel is a researcher on sustainability and degrowth, being currently Professor for International Management and Sustainability at the International School of Management in Stuttgart.⁸⁴ Angelika Zahrt has published extensively on ecological tax reform, sustainability and post-growth and was active in the ecology movement and in local politics for over 30 years, receiving the German Environmental Award in 2009.⁸⁵ She was the Vice-President of Friends of the Earth Germany from 1998 to 2007, serving as Honorary Chairwoman since 2008. Joan Martínez-Alier has been Professor in the Department of Economics and Economic History at the Autonomous University of Barcelona since 1975 and is recognized as one of the main DE voices.⁸⁶ Vincent Liegey is spokesperson for the French DE Movement and the Degrowth Party, coordinator of the Budapest Degrowth Conference and co-author of the book “A Degrowth Project-Manifesto for an Unconditional Autonomy Allowance.”⁸⁷

Francis Group, 2015); Kothari et al., “Buen Vivir, Degrowth and Ecological Swaraj,” 362-375; Federico Demaria et al., “What Is Degrowth?,” 191–215; Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (London: Earthscan, 2009); Serge Latouche, “Sustainable Development as a Paradox,” 2003, http://www.rsesymposia.org/themedia/File/1151679499-Plenary2_Latouche.pdf.

⁸³ “Declaration” (Economic De-Growth for Ecological Sustainability And Social Equity Conference, Paris, 2008); “Degrowth Declaration Barcelona 2010” (Second international Conference on Economic Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity, Barcelona, 2010).

⁸⁴ André Reichel, “About Me,” Sustainability & Postgrowth Research, accessed May 21, 2018, <http://www.andrereichel.de/about/>.

⁸⁵ “Angelika Zahrt: Executive Profile,” Bloomberg, accessed May 21, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/research/stocks/private/person.asp?personId=78980207&privcapId=50209071&previousCapId=50209071&previousTitle=Oekom%20Research%20AG>.

⁸⁶ “Joan Martínez-Alier,” Research & Degrowth, accessed May 21, 2018, <https://degrowth.org/2013/03/07/joan-martinez/>.

⁸⁷ “Vincent Liegey,” Green European Journal, accessed May 21, 2018, <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/article-author/vincent-liegey/>.

2.2. Level of Ideas

The analysis of the compatibility between SD and DE on the ideational level identifies the extent to which the two converge and diverge on their central ideas. The IR theoretical argumentation of the previous chapter has highlighted that ideas are the defining elements of regimes and strategies.⁸⁸ This directly implies that an irreconcilable difference between the ideas of the two would prevent their bridging through goal-setting on the level of political implementation. Therefore, the analysis of this section is essential, as it assesses whether there is any irreconcilable difference between SD and DE from a conceptual perspective. The document analysis identified three key ideas which lie at the core of SD and DE: a finite planet, development and economic growth. One of the central findings of the analysis is that not all three main ideas of the two can be adequately classified under common or different. On the one hand, ideas which at first glance seem to converge have sometimes nuanced differences. On the other hand, ideas which initially seem to diverge have common points. Hence, the argument presented in this section is that the convergence and divergence of SD and DE on the level of ideas occurs in a convoluted manner. The differences lie in nuanced understandings of the ideas, but these divergences do not seem to be irreconcilable.

Firstly, SD and DE converge on the shared idea of a finite planet. Their common understanding of this idea is that the planet is finite in terms of resources and absorption capacity of waste and pollution, and that this limitation needs to be taken into consideration in the global model of development. This idea can be traced back to the 1960s-1970s, when the belief that the economic growth model will solve the development problems of the world began to be challenged.⁸⁹ These challenges came from the increasing global awareness of the environmental harm caused by the dominant model of growth, highlighted in the scientific

⁸⁸ Krasner, "Structural Causes and Regime Consequences," 186-187.

⁸⁹ Du Pisani, "Sustainable Development," 91.

publications of that time.⁹⁰ Both paradigms share similar conceptual roots in the publications of that period. One which has had a particular influence on both is the “Limits to Growth” report of the Club of Rome.⁹¹ This report highlights the catastrophic effects of a global model which ignores the planet’s limits – “sudden and uncontrollable decline in both population and industrial capacity.”⁹² The discourse of the limits to growth initiated through this report has had a significant impact on both paradigms’ understanding of the idea that the planet is finite. It shaped their main premise that the dominant model of growth needs to be change in a way which takes the limits of the Earth into consideration.

Secondly, it is possible to distinguish similarities between the two paradigms’ understanding of human development in its general sense of increasing well-being and reducing inequality. Both recognize that the well-being of a society is not only determined by its material affluence and economic growth measured in GDP. They share a critique of using GDP as an indicator for well-being and support instead the usage of a wider range of indicators, like the Human Development Indicator.⁹³ They both consider the well-being of a society to be dependent on an equal and equitable distribution of access to means necessary for a fulfilling life.⁹⁴ Hereby, they share the belief that addressing inequality is essential for the purpose of increasing well-being. SD is based on a wide and comprehensive understanding of inequality. It includes not only inequality between and within countries based on income, but also urban-rural or gender inequality.⁹⁵ This becomes clear especially through the SDGs, as SDG10 specifically refers to inequality. Moreover, the integrated feature of the goals enables a tackling

⁹⁰ Carson, *Silent Spring*; Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth*.

⁹¹ Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth*.

⁹² Ibid., 23.

⁹³ Jeffrey D. Sachs, *The Age of Sustainable Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 14-16; Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (London: Earthscan, 2009), 4; “Declaration” (Economic De-Growth Conference, Paris, 2008).

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Sachs, *The Age of Sustainable Development*, 45-59; Rockström et al., “Sustainable Development and Planetary Boundaries,” 19.

of this issue also through other SDGs like the ones on poverty, hunger, health, education, gender equality or water and sanitation. In the case of DE, the importance of tackling inequality was particularly emphasized during the interview with Vincent Liegey, who emphasized that DE goals “should be on [reducing] inequality.”⁹⁶

However, there are different nuances in the two paradigms’ understanding of well-being or of what a fulfilling life represents. SD does not embrace a specific definition of well-being but emphasizes that decent standards of living for all represent a necessary precondition for its achievement.⁹⁷ DE is more focused on redefining well-being in the developed countries through notions of “simplicity” and “conviviality.”⁹⁸ Hereby, DE understands well-being as “prosperity” not in a sense of affluence, but in a sense of “bounded capabilities” that take the ecological limits of the planet into consideration.⁹⁹ This different focus in the two paradigms’ approach towards well-being needs to be understood through the different historical and political context of their emergence. SD is a direct response to the North-South divide on development and the environment. As explained in the introduction of the thesis, this divide consists in the debate between the Global North and Global South over the South’s right to also develop through the growth model without environmental constraints, as the North did for centuries.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, SD was specifically conceived in order to address the challenges of the South, like extreme poverty, hunger or access to water.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ Personal Interview with Vincent Liegey, March 16, 2018.

⁹⁷ Sachs, *The Age of Sustainable Development*, 11-13; Rockström et al., “Sustainable Development and Planetary Boundaries,” 19.

⁹⁸ Samuel Alexander, “Simplicity,” in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, ed. Giacomo D’Alisa, Federico Demaria, and Giorgos Kallis (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 133–36; Marco Deriu, “Conviviality,” in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, ed. D’Alisa et al. (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 79–82.

⁹⁹ Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet*, 45-47.

¹⁰⁰ Attapatu and Gonzalez, “The North-South Divide,” 9-10.

¹⁰¹ Personal Interview with Alan AtKisson.

DE, on the other hand, is a more radical response which emerged in the 2000s as an activist and academic movement.¹⁰² Its emergence was influenced among others by the belief that SD cannot solve the developmental problems of the South, as long as the North does not change its consumerist culture based on an excessive environmental footprint. Moreover, through its emergence as an activist movement and a critical approach in academia, DE also embraces the postcolonial critique of development.¹⁰³ According to this critique, development represents an imposition of the Western model of growth on the rest of the world. While SD does not engage in this type of critique, it is important to acknowledge that it also argues for the change of the dominant economic growth model and against attempts of replicating it.¹⁰⁴ This point was particularly emphasized by Csaba Kőrösi who explained that dividing the planet in the North and the South is counterproductive, because the planet is only one.¹⁰⁵ The geopolitical realities of the current time changed since the North-South divide of the 1970s-1980s. With the spread of the growth model some developing countries are becoming drivers of global consumptions, like China.¹⁰⁶ Kőrösi highlighted that allowing them to emit twice as much as the Global North on the notion that they are the South would be disastrous for the planet.

It becomes clear that at the heart of this discussion of the idea of development lies the third key idea of the two paradigms – economic growth. This represents the main differences between the two, because even though both are critical of the way in which economic growth is currently pursued through the dominant global model, they differ in the way they construct

¹⁰² Kallis et al., “Introduction: Degrowth,” 1-3; Martínez-Alier et al., “Sustainable De-Growth: Mapping the Context,” 1741-43; Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth*; Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, “Energy and Economic Myths,” *Southern Economic Journal* 41, no. 3 (1975): 347–81.

¹⁰³ Arturo Escobar, “Development, Critiques Of,” in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, ed. D’Alisa et al. (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 29-32; Demaria et al., “What Is Degrowth?,” 196-197; Kothari et al., “Buen Vivir, Degrowth and Ecological Swaraj,” 366-369.

¹⁰⁴ Rockström et al., “Sustainable Development and Planetary Boundaries,” 18-20.

¹⁰⁵ Personal Interview with Csaba Kőrösi, April 11, 2018.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

their critique. However, even in their different approaches towards the idea of economic growth, there are nuanced commonalities. SD perceives economic growth as a necessary component of the development model of the world but criticizes the way in which it is currently achieved. SD's critique is expressed through the argument of the quality of growth, which emphasizes the need to decouple economic growth from material flow. SD considers decoupling to be possible through new technologies which increase the efficiency of the economic and energy systems. In this sense, Csaba Kőrösi emphasized that economic growth in itself is not the problem and that it is necessary for achieving development.¹⁰⁷ He explained that the central issue is the quality of growth, meaning the material flow used to produce it, and highlighted that there is no physical law which shows that efficiency cannot be improved by at least 300% or more. Therefore, he argued that the focus needs to be on different ways of producing economic growth with less ecological footprint than the way it is produced currently through the linear system of the dominant growth model.

DE, like SD, also supports the argument of the need to change the quality of growth by reducing the material flow. However, the way in which DE sees this reduction possible differs from SD. DE does not consider decoupling to be scientifically possible on a global scale and criticizes the focus of SD on technological solutions to environmental problems.¹⁰⁸ This does not mean that DE rejects the value of technological advancements, but it does not consider the degree and speed of technological advancement to be sufficient in order to change the system to a more sustainable one.¹⁰⁹ Instead, DE emphasizes the importance of changing the dominant consumerist culture of the society, arguing that economic growth has become a “social objective” in itself, which has seized to be a means for achieving well-being.¹¹⁰ This critique is

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet*, 67-86; Personal Interview with Vincent Liegey.

¹⁰⁹ Personal Interview with André Reichel, March 15, 2018; Personal Interview with Vincent Liegey.

¹¹⁰ Kallis et al., “Introduction: Degrowth,” 3-5; Personal Interview with Vincent Liegey.

particularly addressed towards the Global North where the dominant consumerist culture is seen as having replaced people's search of happiness with a strive for positional goods. DE argues that the dominant consumerist culture needs to change by a reorientation of life around values like "simplicity" or "conviviality."¹¹¹ This is considered to lead to the necessary reduction of the material flow.¹¹² Hence, in contrast to its very name, DE does not advocate for the opposite of economic growth, as this would result in recession and have disastrous social consequences, but for a different organization of life in the society.¹¹³

Having clarified that DE is not against economic growth per se, but it is critical of the consumerist culture of the Global North, it is important to also highlight its stance towards growth in the South. On this point, it is again possible to see how SD and DE converge. Like SD, DE also acknowledges the need of "increasing economic activity" for the purpose of alleviating poverty, especially in the countries where this remains a great challenge.¹¹⁴ This view was emphasized by André Reichel, who explained that in his opinion DE would not oppose inclusive economic growth in the Global South.¹¹⁵ However, at the same time, DE supports approaches in the South which adopt different development paths than the ones through growth, like Buen Vivir in South America.¹¹⁶ Buen Vivir has been incorporated in the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia, but the extent to which it impacts their development models is contested, as some argue that its critical components are limited through other legislations.¹¹⁷

¹¹¹ Serge Latouche, "Imaginary, Decolonization Of," in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, ed. D'Alisa et al. (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 117–20; Alexander, "Simplicity"; Giacomo D'Alisa, Marco Deriu, and Federico Demaria, "Care," in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, ed. D'Alisa et al. (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 63–66; Marco Deriu, "Conviviality."

¹¹² Kallis et al., "Introduction: Degrowth," 3-5.

¹¹³ Martínez-Alier et al., "Sustainable De-Growth: Mapping the Context," 1741-42.

¹¹⁴ "Declaration" (Economic De-Growth Conference, Paris, 2008); Martínez-Alier et al., "Sustainable De-Growth: Mapping the Context," 1743.

¹¹⁵ Personal Interview with André Reichel.

¹¹⁶ Kothari et al., "Buen Vivir, Degrowth and Ecological Swaraj;" Personal Interview with Vincent Liegey.

¹¹⁷ Eduardo Gudynas, "Buen Vivir," in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, ed. D'Alisa et al. (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 201–4.

The outlined analysis has highlighted the complex interlinkages between the similarities and differences of the two paradigms, showing how it is not always possible to draw clear commonalities or distinctions between the ideas of the two. While the central overarching idea of a finite planet represents the main similarity between the paradigms, the two converge and diverge on the nuanced understandings of the ideas of development and economic growth. While there are some differences in the way the two approach these ideas, it became clear that a deeper analysis also highlights commonalities and that the divergences are not irreconcilable. These findings enable the analysis of the convergence of SD and DE on the level of political implementation through the strategy of goal-setting, which is presented in the following section. The analysis becomes essential in light of the theoretical argument of the previous chapter that ideas of paradigms like SD and DE need to be implemented politically in order to initiate a change of the system, this implementation requiring an adequate strategy.

2.3. Level of Political Implementation

This section presents an analysis of the compatibility between SD and DE on the level of political implementation through the strategy of goal-setting. For this purpose, the first part outlines the general stance of both paradigms regarding strategies of political implementation. This is presented through an analysis of SD's development into the goal-based regime of the SDGs and of DE's diverse approaches towards its political implementation, DE not having a single strategy formulated yet. This analysis is essential because it emphasizes the usefulness of goal-setting for the implementation of complex paradigms like the two, particularly through the historical experience of SD. Hereby, it complements the theoretical findings of the first chapter, which highlighted the effectiveness of goal-setting for the implementation of SD through the goal-based regime of the SDGs and the potential usefulness of the strategy for DE, from a theoretical perspective.

The second part continues the analysis of whether goal-setting is acceptable and useful also for DE, arguing that DE is compatible with this strategy. The third section presents the final part of the analysis of the possibility of bridging SD and DE through goals and the mechanism of goal-setting. This is particularly important given the IR theoretical argument that it is difficult to initiate changes on issues which do not enjoy recognition in the international sphere – the SDG regime enjoys already recognition, while DE is an alternative movement. The argument presented here is that DE is compatible with all SDGs except SDG8 on economic growth, but this divergence could be bridged through other instruments of goal-setting, like targets and indicators.

2.3.1. General Approach towards Strategies

The document analysis and the interviews regarding SD's and DE's general stance on strategies of political implementation presents two main findings: goal-setting has come to be seen as the most useful strategy for SD so far and DE has not adopted a strategy yet. The finding in the case of SD needs to be understood through a perspective which takes into account the different attempts of implementing it politically, since it has been brought into the mainstream through the Brundtland Commission in 1987.¹¹⁸ The first attempt has occurred at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro through the Agenda 21, which is the first global non-binding action plan for the implementation of SD.¹¹⁹ The results of the Agenda 21 have been assessed as being rather limited during the 2002 Rio+10 Conference in Johannesburg, leading therefore to the

¹¹⁸ World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*.

¹¹⁹ World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*; Norichika et al., "Introduction: Global Governance through Goal Setting," 12; United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, *Agenda 21*, 3-14 June 1992, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. [New York]: [United Nations Department of Public Information], 1993; World Summit on Sustainable Development. *Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development and Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development: The Final Text of Agreements Negotiated by Governments at the World Summit on Sustainable Development*, 26 August-4 September 2002, Johannesburg, South Africa. [New York]: [United Nations Department of Public Information], 2003.

development of the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation as an effort to complement it.¹²⁰ An additional parallel effort to the previous two was the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), adopted at the 2000 UN Millennium Summit.¹²¹ However, the MDGs were focused mainly on the social and economic dimensions of SD, the emphasis being on ending poverty, because the environmental dimension expressed through MDG7 was only a last-minute add-on.

At the 2012 Rio+20 Conference again in Rio de Janeiro, it became clear that neither the Agenda 21, nor the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, nor the MDGs produced the necessary changes in the system for initiating a transition towards sustainability. A partial success was registered in the case of the MDGs, since over one billion people were taken out of extreme poverty, but not on MDG7 on environmental sustainability.¹²² On the contrary, the environmental degradation has been intensifying over the years, while challenges on the social dimension of development remained high.¹²³ In this context, the need for a different and more effective strategy for the implementation of SD became clear.

At this point, the mentioned success of the MDGs in the fight against poverty brought the attention to the effectiveness of the strategy of goal-setting.¹²⁴ The usefulness of goal-setting from the theoretical perspective outlined in the first chapter is reflected also in this case. Through goal-setting, the MDGs provided the necessary “specificity,” “concreteness” and clarity to the idea of eradicating poverty.¹²⁵ Furthermore, it enabled the coordination of all

¹²⁰ World Summit on Sustainable Development. *Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development and Plan of Implementation*.

¹²¹ Fukuda-Parr and Hulme, “International Norm Dynamics and the ‘End of Poverty’,” 18.

¹²² Catherine Benson Wahlén, “Final MDG Report: Gains, Shortfalls Point Way to Post-2015 Success,” *SDG Knowledge Hub*, July 8, 2015, accessed May 21, 2018, <http://sdg.iisd.org/news/final-mdg-report-gains-shortfalls-point-way-to-post-2015-success/>.

¹²³ Sachs, *The Age of Sustainable Development*, 48-49; IPCC, “Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report,” Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Geneva: IPCC, 2014); Johan Rockström et al., “Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity,” *Ecology and Society* 14, no. 2 (2009): 32.

¹²⁴ Sachs, *The Age of Sustainable Development*, 481-482; Griggs et al., “Sustainable Development Goals for People and Planet,” 306; Wahlén, “Final MDG Report.”

¹²⁵ Fukuda-Parr and Hulme, “International Norm Dynamics and the ‘End of Poverty’,” 18.

global efforts towards this common aim, by giving a clear direction and vision to all actors.¹²⁶

This strategy of setting clear priorities expressed through goals, whose achievement can be measured through quantifiable targets and indicators has been effective for reducing poverty.¹²⁷

Therefore, it inspired its adoption also for the case of SD, whose complex ideas also required a translation in the political language of clear and measurable goals. This was needed in order to coordinate the efforts of actors towards a common direction and vision of sustainability.

This argument of the effectiveness of goal-setting in the case of the MDGs inspiring the adoption of the strategy also for SD has been emphasized during the interview with Alan AtKisson.¹²⁸ He explained that the MDGs have been very effective in their impact on how investment got focused and how institutions were structured in accordance with these goals and, therefore, goal-setting has been very effective in getting actors aligned in the same direction. This led to the mentioned success in the case of the MDGs in reducing poverty. AtKisson explained that the MDGs could even be criticized for being “almost too good,” because their clarity shifted the focus of development into the categories of the goals, other issues possibly getting neglected. Hence, he explained that “goal-setting works as opposed to not having goals or clarity,” because “having very specific frames, even if you know that they are difficult [...] gets people and institutions aligned in the same direction.” Regarding the usefulness of goal-setting for SD, he explained that “prior to the SDGs, there was a very fuzzy understanding of what sustainable development means,” which hindered its adequate implementation. Through the MDGs, there was probably a new misunderstanding of what SD is, considering that the MDGs were focused on the social and economic dimensions, the environmental one being addressed only through MDG7 as a final addition.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 18.

¹²⁷ Wahlén, “Final MDG Report.”

¹²⁸ Personal Interview with Alan AtKisson.

Even though the adoption of goal-setting was inspired by the MDGs, the SDGs went beyond and developed into a new type of goal-based regime, as shown in the theoretical chapter. Firstly, the negotiation and formulation process of the SDGs was more complex. Unlike the MDGs, which were decided by the UN and imposed upon the developing countries, the SDGs were negotiated during a three-year long process. This process involved not only states but also non-state actors, like civil society, advocacy, and scientific groups, as well as the private sector and other stakeholders. This point was particularly emphasized by Felix Dodds, who argued that the SDGs were a result of the learning experience through the Agenda 21 and the MDGs, and that the SDGs are “more robust,” because “this time everybody was involved in the goal-setting and the choices and targets.”¹²⁹

Secondly, in contrast to the MDGs which were addressed only at the developing world and which focused on the social and economic dimensions, the SDGs are “universal” and include also the environment as an equal priority to the other two.¹³⁰ The SDGs incorporate the mission of the MDGs regarding developmental challenges but recognize that these are present in both developing and developed countries, even if on different scales.¹³¹ Therefore, they extend the mission to the entire world.¹³² The inclusion of the environmental dimension as an equal priority to the social and economic one is highlighted not only through the three SDGs specifically addressing it, but also through the integrated approach of the goals.¹³³ This approach recognizes the interconnectedness between the three dimensions, linking the different goals, targets and indicators in an attempt to prevent any trade-off between them.¹³⁴ Hereby,

¹²⁹ Personal Interview with Felix Dodds.

¹³⁰ Norichika et al., “Introduction: Global Governance through Goal Setting,” 20-21; Personal Interview with Felix Dodds.

¹³¹ Norichika et al., “Introduction: Global Governance through Goal Setting,” 11; Griggs et al., “Sustainable Development Goals for People and Planet,” 307.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Norichika et al., “Introduction: Global Governance through Goal Setting,” 13; Griggs et al., “Sustainable Development Goals for People and Planet,” 307.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

goal-setting proved to be a more effective strategy for the political implementation of SD than the previous mentioned attempts, like the Agenda 21 or the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation. Through the adoption of the SDGs at the 2015 UN Sustainable Development Summit, not as “stand alone goals” but as part of the 2030 Agenda, SD aims to initiate the necessary change towards a more sustainable future by providing a common vision and direction to all actors.¹³⁵

Having outlined how goal-setting has come to be recognized as an effective strategy for the implementation of SD, brings the research to the analysis of how DE has approached political implementation. Here, the document analysis and the interviews showed that DE has not formulated a strategy for its political implementation yet. In this case also, it is important to understand this finding through a historical perspective which takes into account the temporal development of DE. As already mentioned, DE emerged as an activist movement and as a critique in academia at the beginning of the 2000s.¹³⁶ As an activist movement, DE started in France through a series of demonstrations, spreading to Italy and Spain as a slogan for green and anti-globalization activism.¹³⁷ In academia, DE traces its conceptual roots similar to SD, dating back to the 1960s-1970s emerging idea of sustainability, the discourse on the limits to growth and to the publications emerging in its follow-up.¹³⁸ The academic debate on DE became popular at the beginning of the 2000s, especially through Serge Latouche,¹³⁹ and the establishment of the academic collective “Research & Degrowth,” which started organizing and promoting a series of biannual international conferences on DE.¹⁴⁰ These conferences bring

¹³⁵ Norichika et al., “Introduction: Global Governance through Goal Setting,” 2-3; United Nations General Assembly, “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda.”

¹³⁶ Kallis et al., “Introduction: Degrowth,” 2-3.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Martínez-Alier et al., “Sustainable De-Growth: Mapping the Context,” 1741; Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth*; Georgescu-Roegen, “Energy and Economic Myths.”

¹³⁹ Latouche, “Sustainable Development as a Paradox.”

¹⁴⁰ Kallis et al., “Introduction: Degrowth,” 2-3; Martínez-Alier et al., “Sustainable De-Growth: Mapping the Context,” 1742; “Research & Degrowth (R&D),” Research & Degrowth (R&D), accessed May 22, 2018, <https://degrowth.org>.

together the activist and the academic side of DE. Therefore, they are one of the most representative forums of DE, that is otherwise wide-spread with representatives from different countries, having different perspectives on how it should evolve.¹⁴¹

These conferences have been organized starting from 2008, but only the first two produced declarations which present an overall position of DE expressed through a single voice. However, the declaration of the first 2008 conference in Paris is the only one which refers to strategies of political implementation.¹⁴² Its 7th article states that DE “requires immediate steps towards efforts to mainstream the concept [...] into parliamentary and public debate and economic institutions,” as well as “policies and tools for practical implementation.”¹⁴³ The declaration of the second conference in 2010, in Barcelona, offers a summary of the different ideas of DE, some of which can be seen as policy proposals.¹⁴⁴ Some of these are also addressed and expanded in the DE literature, that presents the main proposals of the movement on “grassroots economic practices,” “welfare institutions without growth,” and “money and credit institutions.”¹⁴⁵ However, apart from these type of proposals, the DE literature consists of an extensive critique of the current system, lacking an overall strategy of political implementation of the paradigm for the purpose of achieving the transition to a different model.

In the DE literature strategies of political implementation are contested. Some degrowthers argue for bottom-up, grassroots and activist approaches, like different types of

¹⁴¹ Kallis et al., “Introduction: Degrowth,” 3; Demaria et al., “What Is Degrowth?,” 195.

¹⁴² “Declaration” (Economic De-Growth Conference, Paris, 2008).

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ “Degrowth Declaration Barcelona 2010” (Second international Conference on Economic Degrowth, Barcelona, 2010).

¹⁴⁵ Tim Jackson, “New Economy,” in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, ed. D’Alisa et al., (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 178–81; Samuel Alexander, “Basic and Maximum Income,” in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, ed. D’Alisa et al., (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 146–48; Kristofer Dittmer, “Community Currencies,” in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, ed. D’Alisa et al., (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 149–51; B. J. Unti, “Job Guarantee,” in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, ed. D’Alisa et al., (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 172–74; Mary Mellor, “Money, Public,” in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, ed. D’Alisa et al., (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 175–77; Juliet B. Schor, “Work Sharing,” in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, ed. D’Alisa et al., (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 195–98.

protests or community reorganization through cooperatives or eco-communities.¹⁴⁶ Others believe that the role of DE is to serve as an alternative when the current system reaches the point of collapse and that a transition to DE will occur similar to historical ones, like from feudalism to capitalism.¹⁴⁷ On the other hand, some recognize the need to engage with the political system, considering that DE should be part of the agenda of Left wing parties.¹⁴⁸ A “Degrowth Party” (DP) has been established in France, but it clearly differentiates itself from other political parties through its decision to remain within the opposition and not to attempt to increase its power.¹⁴⁹ The main aim of DP has been to repoliticize the debates, rather than to propose policies, because it considers that DE should occur through bottom-up approaches rather than top-down initiatives.¹⁵⁰ Others opposes the idea of a DE party.¹⁵¹

As shown through the IR theory, if the purpose of DE is to inspire or to contribute to the transition from the current dominant model of growth to one which takes the limits of our planet into account, then the political implementation of the paradigm is necessary. The theoretical chapter explained that ideas of a paradigm can only become influential in world politics if translated into the political sphere through strategies or through regimes. The bottom-up, activist and grassroots engagement of DE are important and a necessary contribution to the efforts towards transition. However, this does not need to imply that engagement with the SD goal-based regime through the SDGs should be avoided. The theory highlighted that attempting to inspire change on issues which do not enjoy recognition in the international arena is either very difficult if not impossible, making it essential for DE to link to the already recognized SD

¹⁴⁶ Kallis et al., “Introduction: Degrowth,” 14; Cattaneo; Johanisova, Suriñach Padilla, and Parry, “Co-Operatives,” in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, ed. D’Alisa et al. (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 152-155.

¹⁴⁷ Kothari et al., “Buen Vivir, Degrowth and Ecological Swaraj,” 372; Kallis et al., “Introduction: Degrowth,” 14-15.

¹⁴⁸ Baris Gencer Baykan, “From Limits to Growth to Degrowth within French Green Politics,” *Environmental Politics* 16, no. 3 (2007): 515.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 515-516.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

regime through the framework of the SDGs. This point was particularly highlighted by Felix Dodds who emphasized that without engaging in the political arena, this new approach “will never get recognized,” remaining “irrelevant” and talking only to its own audience.¹⁵² He explained that it took SD decades to reach the SDGs through a process of political implementation. Hence, a new paradigm by itself could not achieve that, “unless you have a society imploding on itself.” Given these arguments, the analysis in the following subsections identifies whether goal-setting as a strategy is compatible with DE and whether goals could bridge the gap between the two.

2.3.2. Usefulness of Goal-Setting for Degrowth

This section relies on the interviews with the DE representatives, which show that DE is compatible with goal-setting and that the strategy is seen as useful.¹⁵³ Vincent Liegey explains that goal-setting as a strategy is not the problem. He argues that defining goals is possible, but that these should touch upon the actual roots of the problems in the system, which he sees as the growth and energy dependency of the global model. The value of goal-setting for DE is highlighted by André Reichel, who explains that DE needs “to formulate goals of when we are there...when do we have enough degrowth.” Joan Martinez-Alier also argues that “the degrowth movement has nothing against quantitative goals.” He explains that “for instance decreasing CO2 emissions, decreasing other indicators of the social metabolism [...] decreasing the use of materials and fossil energies [...] by given percentages over the years” is useful. He emphasizes that “we could also have quantitative goals on other aspects of life (as the SDG) - for instance, increasing life expectancy, decreasing children mortality rate.”

¹⁵² Personal Interview with Felix Dodds.

¹⁵³ The interviews were held in March and April 2018 with André Reichel over Skype, with Angelika Zahrt over telephone, with Joan Martínez-Alier through email exchange and with Vincent Liegey at his office in Budapest.

Angelika Zahrnt also highlights the value of goals – “I think it is extremely necessary to have goals and indicators even if it is hard to realize them.” She explains that in the discussion on climate change the 2 degrees are “an extremely important figure and goal,” because “if you just have the goal ‘let’s stop climate change’ it worries nobody, but if you have the 2 degrees, then it means that you have to stop coal extraction and restructure your mobility system...it is not easy but if you would not have this concrete goal it would be impossible.” In this sense, she explains that “even if the political action does not stick to the goal, step by step there is an effect, because nice words do not have influence, if they are not concrete in figures.” Regarding DE indicators, she mentions that she was surprised when she realized that DE does not have any. She believes that DE has “more qualitative goals: people should be healthier, happier, do more things together,” but in a dimension of quantitative goals and indicators, she thinks one could be “to reduce the working time and this is a common ground for all [post-growth] concepts.”

Furthermore, the potential value of goal-setting for DE is highlighted also through the interviews with the representative of SD,¹⁵⁴ who point out that the current lack of clarity of DE regarding its aims and means for achieving them weakens the approach. Alan AtKisson explains that he sees DE as an “interesting and passionately held idea, certainly motivated by a clear scientific understanding of the situation in which the world is in,” but which is limited when it comes to providing solutions to practical challenges. He argues that sometimes DE comes across as “rhetoric and angry critique of the status quo,” which is “valuable and necessary as a broad collection of people working on a better future,” but that it needs “more practical effects.” Similarly, Felix Dodds emphasizes that “most academics and activists don’t have [a strategy] because they don’t understand politics,” he explains that making a big statement does not change the world, but that it comes down to diplomatic approaches and

¹⁵⁴ The interviews with Felix Dodds and Alan AtKisson were held in March 2018 over Skype.

political engagement “to get people into the right directions.” He highlights that such approaches are “very time consuming” and that “most people do not do it and therefore it makes it much more difficult to advance big theories.” In this sense, he argues that setting goals is very important and refers to the case of the SDGs, emphasizing that only passing “general policies without a goal and a set of targets and indicators is kind of meaningless.” These arguments complement the theoretical findings of the first chapter, which highlighted that goal-setting could simplify DE’s extensive academic critique of the system by transposing it in a language of clear and specific goals, that are measurable through targets and indicators. This could benefit DE by enabling it to send its messages and aims in a clear way to other actors, who would understand what the movement wants to achieve and how.

Through the arguments presented above, it became clear that goal-setting is an acceptable strategy also for DE. All its representatives recognize the usefulness of goal-setting as a strategy and some even argue for its adoption by DE, like André Reichel. Moreover, the argumentation showed that goal-setting could bring value to DE by clarifying its exact purposes and the means for achieving them. Given the argument presented in the theoretical chapter, that it is difficult to bring changes in the international system on issues which do not enjoy recognition, it now becomes essential to analyze whether SD and DE can be bridged through goal-setting.

2.3.3. Bridging the Gap through Goal-Setting

The analysis of whether goal-setting can create a bridge between SD and DE has focused on the compatibility of DE with the internationally recognized SDGs of the SD goal-based regime. The main finding of the analysis is that from the perspectives of goals the two are compatible. The nuanced divergences present on the level of ideas tend to disappear through the strategy of goal-setting, which transposes the complex ideas of the two in a language of

clear, specific and measurable goals. DE is compatible with all SDGs, the only exception being SDG8 – “Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.”¹⁵⁵ The key issue here is over economic growth which is measured in GDP through the first target of SDG8,¹⁵⁶ DE being critical of this approach. However, the key question here is whether this difference makes the two irreconcilable. On this point, the opinions of the interviewees differ, reflecting the nature of DE, which is wide-spread and diverse with members and sympathizers ranging from activists to practitioners and academics, who have different opinions on DE. However, the analysis shows that even in the case of SDG8 the difference can be overcome through instruments of goal-setting, like targets and indicators.

The following analysis relies on the interviews with DE representatives.¹⁵⁷ André Reichel’s and Joan Martinez-Alier’s answers suggest that SD and DE are compatible on the level of goals and that the difference on SDG8 does not make them irreconcilable, because it can be overcome if this goal is approached through indicators and targets that are appropriate from both perspectives. André Reichel argues that “a constructive connection to the SDGs” can be achieved. He explains that on the issue of SDG8 on economic growth, DE is critical but not against “inclusive economic growth in the Global South.” Reichel argues that “if you actually look at means on how to achieve certain things, DE people also like renewable energy and also need a circular economy”, therefore “maybe on the level of indicators and pathways we could have a fruitful discussion with each other.” For this purpose, he emphasizes that DE can have interesting suggestions for possible indicators on SDG8, like “alternative measures for

¹⁵⁵ United Nations General Assembly, “*Transforming Our World*,” 14.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁵⁷ The interviews were held in March and April 2018 with André Reichel over Skype, with Angelika Zahrt over telephone, with Joan Martínez-Alier through email exchange and with Vincent Liegey at his office in Budapest.

economic welfare.” This shows again that instruments of goal-setting, like indicators, can bridge the gap between the two on SDG8.

Similarly, Martinez-Alier clarifies that from a DE perspective the SDGs are “very good,” with the exception of SDG8 on economic growth. This goal is seen as “incompatible with environmental sustainability.” Hereby, he emphasizes that both SD and DE “can agree on many things,” like “eliminating world poverty” and that “on most of the SDGs, the degrowthers would agree.” However, he explains that “degrowthers would certainly disagree with SDG8 that recommends economic growth everywhere,” proposing instead “quantitative goals to diminish the social metabolism of today's economy.” This last point is particularly important because it shows that the difference on SDG 8 could potentially be bridged through goal-setting. For example, through the adoption of targets and indicators which include the measurement of the social metabolism and which refers to the material flow that both aim to reduce. As already explained in the previous section on the compatibility of the two on the level of ideas, SD's understanding of economic growth is one focused on the reduction of its material flow.

Angelika Zahrnt and Vincent Liegey show more skepticism and are more critical of the SDGs, but they did not perceive a bridge between the two as inconceivable. Zahrnt explains that SDG8 “is not just one within 17 goals, but it is in reality the dominant goal.” She argues that in her opinion the dominant goal should not be economic growth measured in GDP, “but to respect the planetary boundaries.” However, she emphasizes that if the society can be organized in a way which respects these boundaries and also increases the GDP, then there is no problem. This argument reflects the mentioned priority of SD to reduce the dependency of economic growth on material flow. Regarding the value of new indicators for SDG8, Zahrnt emphasizes that “discussing just new indicators will not bring us forward because we already have so many [...] but nobody cares about these proposals, because in the case of conflict, GDP is still the dominant one.” Hence, the issue is not simply what indicators to add, but also what

to leave out. In this sense, she explains that there is a need to replace the GDP: “the dependency of well-being on economic growth must be decoupled [...] people should stop believing in GDP and they should have the evidence that good living is possible even without GDP growth.”

Similarly, Vincent Liegey also argues that the indicators which are currently used “are not able face the order of magnitude of the challenges that we are facing” from an environmental perspective. Liegey explains that the SDGs should be “clearer”, for example “the main goal should be to invite every country in the Western world by 2030 to go under an environmental footprint” of less than one planet. This “means that we have to totally reconsider our consumption system, our economic institutions, our dependency on fossil energy” and “to really define meaningful goals and strategies” which reflect the environmental challenges. He explains that the value of a cooperation between the two consists of DE challenging SD by highlighting its internal contradictions, like the one between the environmental goals and SDG8. However, since the SDGs are not prescriptive, there is nothing preventing actors from prioritizing economic growth as a lower-level goal.

The issue of SDG8 and the possibility of bridging the two was discussed also with the representatives of SD.¹⁵⁸ These highlight that SDG8 needs to be understood through the integrated approach of the goals, which connects SDG8 to the other goals, attempting hereby to change the quality of growth. Furthermore, the interviews show that there is space in the SD goal-based regime for an engagement with DE that can be pursued through goal-setting. Alan AtKisson argues that SDG8 needs to be understood in the wider context of the other goals and in connection with the developing world, as a necessity in places where people are living in extreme poverty. He emphasizes that particularly due to the poverty argument, without this goal, the SDGs would have not been possible. Therefore, he argues that if DE “can provide pathways to growth, to prosperity, serious ones for people [in poverty] and if they can provide

¹⁵⁸ The interviews with Felix Dodds and Alan AtKisson were held in March 2018 over Skype.

models which alleviate some of the social and environmental impacts of GDP decrease,” then their approach would be very valuable.

Similarly, Felix Dodds emphasizes that SDG8 needs to be understood in the context of the other goals, which changes the quality of growth. He explains that if DE wants to contribute to the global transition, “they should look at SDG8 and put forward a set of indicators to move it in a positive way,” because the system of the SDGs has been set up “in a way which allows for that to happen.” Dodds highlights that the “process to set the goals was the most open that we ever had” and if the current goals and targets are perceived as “inadequate,” then “they are so because nobody bothered to engage and set up different ones.” However, he explains that the UN has set up a system to review the measurement instruments of the goals in 2020, and if DE considers some aspects of the agenda and the SDGs inadequate, then they have to engage in the political discussions. Hence, Dodds’ explanations reflect the argument presented in the first theoretical chapter, specifically that in order for ideas to become influential in the international arena, they need to be implemented politically through strategies. Furthermore, his answers also show that an engagement between the two should be pursued on the political level of implementation through goal-setting.

Through the argumentation presented in this part of the thesis, it becomes clear that DE is compatible with all SDGs, except SDG8 on economic growth. However, this difference does not make the two irreconcilable, because it is possible to bridge it through instruments of the goal-setting strategy like targets and indicators.

This chapter has presented an analysis of the commonalities and difference of SD and DE on the levels of ideas and of political implementation through the strategy of goal-setting. The analysis on the first ideational level has shown that the two converge and diverge in a convoluted manner on their three key ideas of a finite planet, development and economic growth. Hereby, on this level it is possible to distinguish commonalities, but also nuanced differences in how the two perceive these three ideas. However, the analysis on the level of political implementation has highlighted that the strategy of goal-setting minimizes these differences, because it translates the complex ideas of the paradigms into a language of clear goals. Therefore, on the level of political implementation through the strategy of goal-setting SD and DE converge.

Conclusion

In light of the urgency of the current environmental crisis, this thesis has analyzed the compatibility between sustainable development (SD) and degrowth (DE). Both are paradigms that tackle the transition from the dominant model of growth, which is causing the current environmental crisis, to a model which takes the limits of our planet into account. Both have the same central aim of initiating this transition, but they pursue this aim differently. SD engages with the dominant model and attempts to initiate a change through the strategy of goal-setting and its political implementation into the new goal-based regime of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). DE has not formulated a strategy yet and does not engage with the system, being an alternative movement of activists, practitioners and academics. Since the new SDGs-regime is an opportunity to reconfigure the global agenda on transition, the thesis has analyzed whether goal-setting can be an acceptable and useful strategy also for DE and whether the differences between the two can be bridged through goal-setting.

The argument presented in this research is that *goal-setting can create an enabling space for a possible cooperation between SD and DE, the two being bridgeable through goals, targets and indicators*. This finding has been identified through an analysis of the compatibility between the two on the level of ideas and on the level of political implementation. This analysis was realized through an International Relations (IR) theoretical perspective and through a merger of document analysis and expert interviews with representatives from the two. It has shown that DE is also compatible with the strategy of goal-setting and that the nuanced differences which exist between them on the ideational level can be overcome on the level of political implementation through the strategy of goal-setting. This strategy transposes the two paradigms' complex understandings of their three key ideas of a finite planet, development and economic growth into a language of clear, specific and measurable goals. Hereby, the specific analysis of the compatibility of DE with the SDGs, has shown that DE is compatible with all

SD goals, except SDG8 on economic growth. However, this divergence does not make the two irreconcilable, because it can be overcome through other instruments of the goal-setting strategy, like targets and indicators which are appropriate from the perspective of both.

The research showed that ideas of paradigms can only initiate a change in the international system if implemented politically through strategies or regimes. In light of this theoretical argument and of the highlighted compatibility of DE with goal-setting, the thesis argues that the adoption of this strategy can also be useful in the case of DE. Through goal-setting, DE could formulate its purposes and priorities in a language of clear goals, which are measurable through targets and indicators. Goal-setting would enable DE to send its messages and aims more effectively, preventing them from getting lost in DE's extensive qualitative critique of the current system, which unaccompanied by clear goals faces the risk of appearing as an angry critique of the status-quo.

The research highlighted the difficulty of initiating a change in the system on issues which are not recognized at the international level and without an adequate political strategy. Therefore, this thesis argues that engaging in goal-setting and connecting to the already internationally recognized SDGs can bring value to DE. Hereby, DE could promote its ideas and aims more effectively, rather than attempting to initiate a separate change of the dominant model. For example, DE could engage and participate in the SDGs' debates on means of implementation and on adequate targets and indicators for their measurement, attempting to shape the agenda in a way it considers adequate.

The argument proposed here might not be acceptable to all degrowthers. Some will continue to see the value in DE remaining outside the mainstream and refusing to engage with goal-setting and the SDGs. However, this thesis is inspired by the belief that a better global model for our future can only be achieved by bringing together the ones who work towards this aim, not by separating and fragmenting their efforts in an anyway difficult struggle against the

dominant model. DE is wide-spread and diverse, some of its members recognizing the value in an engagement with the SDGs. The thesis argues against a binary approach, which implies that DE's grassroots activism makes its engagement with SD through the SDGs incompatible. One approach need not exclude the other, because the transition towards a better model for our planet requires a strategy of action on multiple levels.

The thesis contributes to IR, SD and DE literature, through the novelty of the research topic and of the theoretical approach adopted. For IR, the novelty of the research consists in applying its theoretical approaches developed for state actors to SD and DE which are non-state actors. The analysis showed that SD is developing into a new type of goal-based regime which differentiates itself from the ones assessed in IR literature. This difference lies in the recognition of the increasing role played by non-state actors in the system, as well as in the different dynamic of functioning which the strategy of goal-setting provides to the goal-based regime. Therefore, the thesis argues that the IR discipline needs to go beyond its state-centrism in order to grasp new phenomena that influence the functioning of the international system.

For SD and DE, the compatibility between the two has not been assessed before on the level of political implementation through goal-setting and it has not been researched from an IR theoretical perspective. The outlined findings of this thesis open further important questions. Having shown that goal-setting can also be useful for DE raises questions regarding how the adoption of goal-setting would translate, specifically what the DE goals are and whether they are different from the SDGs. Furthermore, having outlined that SD and DE can be bridged on the level of political implementation through this strategy opens the question of how a possible collaboration between the two in their common aim of transition can occur.

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