

Utrecht, 5 November 2018

Global Environmental Governance in Times of Global Mistrust

Keynote Remarks of Prof. Joseph Alcamo

Professor and Director of Sussex Sustainability Research Programme, and former Chief Scientist of the United Nations Environment Programme.

Friends and Colleagues,

My thanks to Frank Biermann and the other organisers of this event for their kind invitation for me to give these remarks.

I'm not a global political scientist

But I am a scientist who worked in global politics

And as someone who has worked in global environmental politics I have some advice for you younger academics aiming for a career in global environmental governance –

If you think you are in for an easy ride – Forget it!

If you think the world thinks it needs more global governance – Forget it!

If you think the average citizen of The Netherlands, Germany, UK wants more global governance – Forget it!

And my colleagues in science or politics -- Have you ever seen a more daunting time for global thinking?

Cancelled treaties, neglected obligations, frozen negotiations. Brexit, Nationalism, Isolationism.

Did you know that the US rejected the Paris Agreement almost exactly 100 years after it rejected the League of Nations?

I have gotten so sick of the bad news in the morning that I follow Paul Simon's advice and now just listen to the weather forecast.

Yes, the international arena is going to be a tough place for global thinkers for the next few years

So, is it time to give up?

Well, my message today is, “no”, not at all, because I believe earth sys governance has a very important role to play in protecting the planet over the coming years.

But it will be a time for serious, determined people.

And serious, determined people need a good strategy

And here it is in four letters (and an article) – the SDGs. The Sustainable Development Goals.

You know 2015 was a big year for global environmental treaties. Countries agreed on:

The Sendai Targets for reducing the impacts of natural disasters

The Paris Climate Agreement

And in Sept. 193 countries adopted the 2030 Development Agenda featuring the Sustainable Development Goals.

So, was this the **last wave of Environmental Globalism**? Just under the wire of national retrenchment?

Will the SDGs be overwhelmed by a deluge of nationalism -or be a lifeboat that'll help us survive the deluge?

Barack Obama said that the SDGs are something “we must commit ourselves to because in doing so, we recognize that our most basic bond -- our common humanity -- compels us to act.”

So if you agree with Barack Obama that the SDGs are worth fighting for, then how are we going to stop them from being thrown into the dustbin of history? Isn't that what happens to treaties in times like these?

Indeed global goals do have a habit of being neglected.

A few years ago when I worked for UN Environment we reported that of 34 global goals we examined, 11 had shown no progress.

Today, e.g. the trend of global emissions of greenhouse gases not on the right track to stay under the 2 degree limit in the Paris Agreement, no less the 1.5 degree limit that the IPCC recommended in its recent report.

On the other hand, we have had some great successes in achieving global environmental goals – We have drastically reduced ozone-depleting substances, saved ourselves from a major health risk by removing lead from gasoline worldwide, increased the supply of safe drinking water; protected ourselves from the transboundary transfer of hazardous wastes.

And with the SDGs we also have the potential to achieve success, because I believe it's in the self-interest of countries and industries to make them happen.

How so?

First, because the SDGs provide rich countries with a convenient way to organise and prioritise their overseas development aid, which they will continue to provide for political reasons.

For example, in the UK where I now work, the government has packaged 1.5 Billion £ of its foreign aid into something called the “Global Challenge Research Fund” to support the implementation of the SDGs.

It is also in the self-interest of countries to implement the SDGs because it provides a convenient way for Member States to set priorities for the unwieldy family of UN agencies -- One sees a tendency of States to use the SDGs as a common framework for setting the work programmes of these organisations.

Those reasons aside, there's always the argument that there's money to be made ... and where there's money to be made, investment is never far behind.

The UN Conference on Trade & Development has estimated the price tag of the SDGs to be around 5-7 Trillion USD each year in additional investments between 2015 and 2030. For developing countries this figure is around 4 Trillion USD/year.

This is interesting since total foreign aid in the world amounts to around 140 B/Year, Sounds like a lot, but that is 0.14 Tr/year compared to 4 Tr /year needed to implement the Goals in developing countries. Where's the other 3.9 Tr/yr going to come from?

The UN and many countries are saying that most of it has to come from investments of the private sector.

And sure enough, some businesses are getting on board.

The Business and SD Commission last year estimated implementing the SDGs could open up 12 Tr /year in new economic opportunities

An organisation called Vision 2030 has published a very interesting 46 page report detailing how digital technology can help reach the various goals.

Now there's some important side issues that arise here – e.g. Will this increasing engagement of the private sector with global goals affect power relations w/in the UN system?

But for now let me just point out that this interest of the private sector might encourage the rich countries to give their attention to the SDGs.

So even though I personally believe – as did Barack Obama – that we are morally obliged to achieve the SDGs – there are probably not enough important people in the world feel the same way. But maybe, just maybe, they'll be enough self-interest in the governments of the rich countries and private sector to propel the SDGs forward ...

So if we assume and hope that the SDGs will proceed,

... then why should the global environmental governance community be particularly interested in them?

For me there are 2 main reasons:

First of all, they provide a platform for governance of the Earth System.

Now everyone here is more than aware that the protection of earth system has proceeded in fits and starts ...

Consider the story of biodiversity negotiations from the Convention on Biological Diversity in 1992 to Aichi Targets for Biodiversity in 2010.

Consider the history of the Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992 up to Paris Climate Agreement in 2015

And then there are wildlife protection treaties, O3 depletion, desertification treaties ...

In fact, one of the main characteristics of global environmental governance – as you well know – Is its organic nature (to put a positive spin on it), or its fragmentation as some of us like to complain.

Now unfortunately, the SDGs don't provide the harmonization and consolidation that would be useful of global environment agreements.

And they cannot in any way replace the treaties or multilateral environmental processes going on.

But they do take a comprehensive view of the Earth System and keeps this comprehensive view in front of policymakers and people in general –

They put goals for Land, Air, Water, Climate in one place, and shout out and remind policymakers about important parallel treaties:

Goal 14 on oceans refers to Law of the Sea

Goal 15 on Land is consciously consistent with the Aichi Biodiversity targets (would have been nice if they were identical, but it wasn't in the cards)

The Preamble of the SDGs refers to the Framework Convention on Climate Change

And it goes on

One stop shopping, so to speak, on global environmental governance.

Clearly it would have been better if the SDGs harmonized these agreements, but it is still very important that they put many of the most important goals for managing planetary health are in one place.

The other thing significant thing about the SDGs for this community is that it puts earth systems governance in good company.

Very good thing to see goals for freshwater, oceans, land amidst goals to reduce inequality, poverty, hunger, and disease.

This conveys a very critical message – That environmental protection and other societal goals are not a zero sum game, that we can have it all, in fact we can't have one without the other –

Frankly I can't believe that we are in 2018 and this has still not sunken in ...

In global governance this idea goes back to at least the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environ.

But this fallacy – this false dichotomy between economy & environment -- still has legs ... – Look at how easy it was for Trump to roll back environmental regulations in the US in what he said was the interest of removing barriers to business.

So I believe the SDGs are an important victory for earth systems governance because:

- **they provide a common home for many global environmental goals, and**
- **because they make the point that social & political goals go hand in hand with saving the planet.**

So assuming you are on board, and agree that the SDGs should be a high priority, how can the earth system governance community help out?

I personally believe you should have a very big role considering the SDGs have so much to do -- not only with local implementation -- but also with effective global governance.

But I'm coming at this as someone who has worked in global environmental politics, not as an earth system science scholar -- I'll just mention 3 things for your list of things to do ...

First, tell us how we can ensure that “no one is left behind”.

By this I mean, help ensure that the SDGs reach those who need them the most, the marginalised and poorest communities in the world. This is a serious and major concern in the development community. Consider that for all our efforts to combat hunger, FAO has just reported that the number of undernourished people in the world has increased to 821 M (and also increased percentage-wise).

My question to you: What kind of institutions can help ensure that no one is left behind by the SDGs?

How can the voices of the poorest be heard in national & global policy-making about the SDGs?

Many important governance questions here:

How effectively are donor organisations and global institutions soliciting input from the poorest?

How useful are so-called “donor platforms” in developing countries for reaching the poor? Most of these platforms are sector-specific, so are they useful for implementing the wide range of SDGs?

Some are broader, e.g. the Global Donor Platform for Rural Development. Could this be expanded and be used to get input from the poor on several SDGs?

How effective are UN offices in developing countries in soliciting input from marginalised populations?

There’s a project in Sussex in which the colleagues are experimenting with community radio in Ghana and other local means for giving a voice to the poorest in national SDG discussions.

What is the effectiveness of these and other participatory approaches?

Many challenging governance-related questions here.

So, help us find the right governance to ensure that no one is left behind as the SDGs are implemented.

Second, find out how we can fight global mistrust of the UN and its SDGs.

“Earth systems governance” is a beautiful set of words for the people in this cathedral, who greatly value the wonderful connectivity of things.

But to many people “earth system governance” is not beautiful, it is worrisome, it means loss of control over their lives, and this mistrust is a big part of the national retrenchment going on.

In talking about the UN, a couple of weeks ago Trump said that he was not going to give up American rights to an organisation made up of people who were not elected by Americans. And he’s reflecting the Zeitgeist, not us.

In 1990 the Pew Center found that 68% of Americans identifying themselves as Republicans had a favourable view of the UN. This was down to 44% last year.

And it’s not only Americans, a Human Rights Opinion Organisation also found low levels of trust in global institutions in many other countries including Mexico, Ecuador, Colombia, and Nigeria.

So what can we do to raise the trust of the citizenry in global governance and global institutions ??

How can we increase the support of regular citizens for the global institutions needed to implement the SDGs?

Now, I’m convinced there is latent interest in global governance.

When I was at the UN in July there were hordes and hordes of tourists; Over 1 M tourists visit UN headquarters each year.

One idea for engagement has been the local UN foundations. Are they effective?

Has UN cooperation with local civil society organisations, or on-line fora, or other means been a good way to gain the trust of citizens?

Are there other mechanisms and institutions we could try out?

So help us ensure that no one is left behind and help us fight global mistrust in the institutions we need for implementing the SDGs.

A third thing we need your help with is a bit more technical, and that is ...

Help us figure out how to efficiently implement the SDGs

What do I mean?

I already mentioned how expensive the goals will be, and so a big concern of countries is implementing the goals efficiently to save resources.

One problem here is that some actions to meet a particular goal may make it difficult to reach another:

If the energy goal is reached by scaling up/maintaining coal electricity power plants emitting vast amounts of GHGs it will be very difficult to reach the climate goal.

If conventional agriculture is used to boost food production we may reach the 'End Hunger' goal, but at the expense of the water, land and climate goals.

It's important for countries to avoid these trade-offs because they lead to an "inefficient", wasteful implementation of the goals.

But there are solutions – There are also many positive connections among the goals – **synergies** – that we can exploit.

For example implementing clean cook stove programs will help to drastically reduce indoor air pollution and thereby be a major step towards the health goal,

... and at the same time it will help advance the Energy, Land, and Climate Goals.

Sustainable agriculture programmes -- that build on ideas for smart management of nutrients, pesticide, and water -- will help meet the goal to end hunger and advance the water, land and climate goals at the same time.

So we have a chance here to save resources by taking actions that minimise trade-offs and maximise the positive connections among goals.

Now countries have already bought into this idea – The Ministerial Statement from the High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in NY in July said that it is essential to "pay particular attention to leveraging synergies and co-benefits across all dimensions of sustainable development."

The question now is how to go from statements to action.

The challenge, as you well know, is that our governments and industries are set up in silos, not to take advantage of actions that cut across portfolios and sectors --

-- energy ministries don't talk to agricultural ministries who don't talk to environment ministries who don't talk to economic ministries, and so on

Now don't want to exaggerate, and certainly big efforts here in NL and Germany and a few other countries to work across sectors,

But certainly, the level of cooperation across departments, ministries, sectors worldwide is not adequate to take advantage of all the synergies among the SDGs

So, questions to you:

– How do we get around institutional and other barriers to build cooperation among different departments in govt. and sectors in industry?

- What have learned up to now about how to promote cooperation across departments?

Please provide us with the governance knowledge needed for an integrative approach to the SDGs – one that takes advantages of the positive connections among many Goals – and allows governments to implement the goals efficiently.

Up to now I've been focusing on the SDGs because I think they have huge potential ... and need much more attention from the research and academic communities.

But of course, they are not **the only game in town** ... There are important wildlife, chemical, ozone depletion treaties,

and there is the biggest game in town – **the climate treaty**.

Just a few day ago the IPCC provided new scientific results that confirm that the 2 degree limit is not some magic threshold that will save us from climate change,

but that CC is already having an impact on SLR, droughts and floods, coral reefs, and in many other ways, and that these impacts will be getting substantially worse above 1.5 degrees.

And our only way out is a major transition in energy, land use, cities and industry -- which doesn't leave much out.

Much of this I think you know already,

But they also posed a burning question:

“How can climate and sustainable development policies converge, and how can they be organised within a global governance framework”?

I will leave this question with you.

I don't have any profound answers, but I do believe that ...

the SDGs reflect what people in poor (and rich countries) want and need, while the Paris Agreement aims to protect us from one of our greatest existential threats

– We have to find a way to bring them together. Politically, strategically, financially, and also with regards to earth system governance.

In closing ...

Friends and colleagues, we have to face it, this is an era of nationalist retrenchment, not an era of earth system governance, Things could change, and for the better, but we can't count on it.

Now you can give up, take a break, and go to the beach.

But chances are if you spend too much time on the beach you'll be threatened anyway by rising sea levels.

Or you can continue working hard for a global perspective on governance.

I see it as a time when the work of academics is needed more than ever to fight for what is right in society.

And please note, that although I focused on the SDGs today, I believe it is equally urgent to continue your hard work on all the other important streams of earth sys governance -- the Paris Agreement, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the wildlife protection treaties, the chemical conventions and many others ...

We have to continue with these ... and do what we can to support the SDGs.

It's true that the SDGs might be overwhelmed by the deluge of nationalism,

Or be our lifeboat through the deluge

As I've said today, I believe they are very important from the standpoint of global env governance because:

- They provide a platform for many important global env goals,
- and they show policymakers and stakeholders that combating hunger, disease, poverty and other pressing goals of society have to go hand-in-hand with saving the planet.

And I also believe the SDGs are likely to survive the assault on global governance because it's in the self-interest of many governments and the private sector to see that they survive.

But a lot needs to be done to support their implementation, to make them happen. –

-- A lot of politics, a lot of money, and yes, also a lot of research + expertise from your community.

You can help in many, many ways.

Three ways I've appealed for today are:

- Help ensure that the SDGs also reach the poorest and most marginalised communities in the world.
- Help find a way to combat global mistrust about the institutions needed to implement the SDGs, and
- Find out how we can promote the cooperation across sectors urgently needed for an efficient, integrative, not silo, approach to the SDGs.

It is a time for serious, determined people willing to work hard for critically important ideas ... that are not particularly fashionable.

Join in, let's do it.