Our common metrics? Our Common Agenda report and the epistemic infrastructure of the Sustainable Development Goals
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Governance in the post-pandemic world is one of the greatest challenges since the Second World War, as progress against poverty, inequalities and climate catastrophe has slowed down or even reversed. In this context, Our Common Agenda, the flagship report of the UN Secretary General António Guterres is set to offer a critical contribution by developing shared political imaginaries for both present and future challenges. The report—released in September 2021 and then adopted by the UN General Assembly in November 2022—outlines a possible renewal of a commitment to multilateralism in governing global public goods with a focus on future generations.

The 12 commitments of the Agenda are developed on top of another UN project, with a very similar future-forward transformative mission—namely the Sustainable Development Goals. And indeed, the relationship between the two is clear from the outset. Our Common Agenda opens with a disclaimer: ‘All proposed actions are in line with and designed to accelerate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals’ (UN, 2021, p. 6). The report refers to the SDGs as one of the central ‘blueprints for a better world’ (UN, 2021, p. 18) and—significantly—mentions the SDGs nearly 40 times. The report itself explains this relationship between the Agenda and the SDGs as follows:

Many of the actions proposed in this report thus seek to accelerate achievement of the Goals, not least in the light of gaps and delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Actions already under way to achieve the Goals will, in turn, be key for the implementation of Our Common Agenda.

(UN, 2021, p. 18)
Therefore, unpacking this circular relationship between the two programmes is central to understanding the role and implicit logic of Our Common Agenda—but also the broader relationship between governing programmes in the increasingly quantified political environment. Both the SDGs and the Agenda are explicitly future-oriented and yet they approach the future differently. In “Transforming Our World” (the foundational document of the SDGs), the future features prominently; for example:

The future of humanity and of our planet lies in our hands. It lies also in the hands of today’s younger generation who will pass the torch to future generations.

(UN, 2015, p. 12)

Nevertheless, the utopian vision of the 17 goals set up in the SDGs (promising a world without poverty, hunger, disease or inequalities) is in stark contrast with the more dystopian tone of the post-pandemic Our Common Agenda. Consequently, the Agenda is not only a future-oriented project, but rather is inherently an inter-generational project in which future generations are seen as a stakeholder of global collective action.

Against this backdrop, two questions emerge: What is the relationship between the two frameworks? And what are the broader implications of this interdependency? By addressing these two questions, this Policy Insight paper unpacks the broader (knowledge) politics of Our Common Agenda by identifying the key mechanisms through which governing programmes become both expansive but also often limited in their transformative potential.

2 | TRANSFORMATIVE INFRASTRUCTURES?

This paper mobilises the theoretical lens from the sociology of quantification, specifically the notion of an epistemic infrastructure of measurement (Bandola-Gill et al., 2022; Merry, 2016; Power, 2015). There is a growing scholarship on the politics of numbers showing how quantification became the central mode of knowing global problems (Best, 2014; Desrosières, 1998; Porter, 1996; Rottenburg et al., 2015) and an implicit ‘logic’ of governing the global (Merry, 2016). This omnipresence of numbers in global politics can be partially explained by the inherent qualities of metrics as epistemic objects: as argued by Hansen and Porter (2012), numbers provide order, mobility, stability, combinability and precision, making them ideal epistemic and political tools for governing global challenges.

More recently, a theoretical lens of epistemic infrastructure started to gain prominence in the literature on the politics of numbers (Bueger, 2015; Tichenor, 2022). The concept of an infrastructure—initially developed in Science and Technology Studies (Ruhleder & Star, 1996)—moves the theoretical lens from numbers and their specific effects to broader systems of knowledge production (cf. Bueger, 2015). As my collaborators and I explored elsewhere (Bandola-Gill et al., 2022) epistemic infrastructure could be understood as an interplay of three levels: (i) materialities—which involve objects for collecting, analysing and communicating data; for example, indicators, their evaluative frameworks (i.e. tier system), reports, strategic documents, declarations etc.; (ii) interlinkages—including networks and communities that mobilise metrics and transform them into governing tools; and (iii) governing paradigms providing broader frameworks for political action.

This Policy Insight paper focuses on the level of materialities and traces how the Agenda becomes infrastructuralised in the broader framework of the SDGs. In particular, it explores how the process of ‘infrastructuralising’ this report with the SDGs impacts its propensity for change. As such, it links the debates on quantification with ones on transformative change in the context of global challenges (e.g. Chambers et al., 2022; Scoones et al., 2020). The transformative change could be defined as ‘fundamental changes in structural, functional, relational, and cognitive aspects of socio-technical-ecological systems that lead to new patterns of interactions and outcomes’ (Patterson et al., 2017, p. 2). Therefore, such change requires going beyond the atomisation of problem-based silos and instead taking on a more systemic approach to re-thinking problems, knowledge and institutions (Abson et al., 2017)—an approach which is, as I show in this paper, contradictory to the logic of quantification.

3 | DATA, INDICATORS AND SCENARIOS

Every infrastructure requires building blocks—measurement and data objects that make quantification possible. In the SDG framework, these materialities include the elaborate system of goals, targets and indicators but also reports, scorecards and briefing papers that discuss and build on the quantified framework (Bandola-Gill et al., 2022). As seen through this theoretical lens, Our Common Agenda is a new material artefact that both reinforces the epistemic infrastructure of the SDGs but also expands on it. Throughout the report, both the challenges and the commitments to solving them are articulated by using the SDGs—their goals, targets and even specific indicators. As such, the Agenda reinforces the almost implicit framing of the SDGs as a logic for knowing and acting upon global problems (cf. Kanie & Bierman, 2017).
This outlook reflects insights from the sociology and anthropology of infrastructures (Larkin, 2013; Star, 1999), which argue that one of the sources of power (and efficiency) of the infrastructure is precisely it is taken for grantedness. The infrastructure becomes visible once it breaks down (Star, 1999)—and perhaps unsurprisingly, the indicators that are most ‘visible’ in the report are ones that require change, for example an alternative to GDP in Commitment 1 or the new measures of adaptation, resilience and environmental-economic modelling in Commitment 2. This visibility/ invisibility dynamic of the infrastructure is particularly evident in the former case, as discussed in the Agenda:

We must urgently find measures of progress that complement GDP, as we were tasked to do by 2030 in target 17.19 of the Sustainable Development Goals. We know that GDP fails to account for human well-being, planetary sustainability and non-market services and care, or to consider the distributional dimensions of economic activity. Absurdly, GDP rises when there is overfishing, cutting of forests or burning of fossil fuels. We are destroying nature, but we count it as an increase in wealth. (UN, 2021, pp. 33–34)

Despite this critique, GDP is highly infrastructuralised: the report itself acknowledges that the debates over GDP are decades old and the Agenda itself uses GDP throughout, for example to evidence the economic consequences of gender inequalities (UN, 2021, p. 31) or climate breakdown (UN, 2021, pp. 56). Therefore, the report is both critiquing and using GDP as a key metric. How can we make sense of this contradiction? Even though the report is an expression of intent to move beyond GDP, it does not propose new materialities to replace GDP within the infrastructure and thus it does not engage directly with the politics of such replacement. Changing a metric is a political project aimed at dismantling existing structures of knowledge and power and without recognising it as such, there is a low probability of success.

On the other hand, Our Common Agenda expands the material underpinning of the epistemic infrastructure of the SDGs in new directions. Perhaps one of the most significant qualities of the report is an explicit acknowledgement of future generations as valid stakeholders of contemporary global politics (e.g. UN, 2021, p. 73). And this political aspiration is represented in the new materialities that create conditions for inter-generational knowledge-making: the report is built around two overarching (quantifiable) scenarios—one of a breakthrough and one of a breakdown (UN, 2021, p. 3).

The ‘breakdown’ scenario shows a world with deadly pandemics, an uninhabitable planet and destabilising inequalities. This scenario is envisioned through ‘warning signs’ expressed predominantly through numbers, for example the cost to the economy of unequal access to vaccinations (9.2 trillion dollars), the extinction rate or the growing rate of conflicts (UN, 2021, p. 15). On the other hand, the document proposes a ‘breakthrough’ scenario with sustainable recovery, healthy people and planet and trust and social protection. This scenario is envisioned through ‘signs of hope’ (UN, 2021, p. 16): 146 million people lifted out from extreme poverty, technological solutions to carbon emissions or economic benefits of transitioning to a low-carbon economy. Creating the two alternative visions of the future allows the Agenda not only to propose (and thus infrastructuralise) the key metrics of progress but also to create a narrative of urgency around them.

This utopic/dystopic quality of quantification is most evident in the visualisations of alternative pathways of the COVID-19 pandemic in the years 2000, 2020 and in the future, showing how differently it could have gone depending on the levels of cooperation. These scenarios are imagined through three metrics: time to vaccine development, loss in GDP and total death toll. Thus, the report uses the well-known metrics but frames them in new ways through its use of scenario-building. This layering (cf. Star, 1999) of materialities in the infrastructure points to the particular ‘machineries of knowledge production’ (Knorr-Cetina, 2007) in the context of global challenges. Quantification is a site of co-production of knowledge and politics (St Clair, 2006) whereby the policy ideas are both reflected in and enabled by measurement. What is measured, could be imagined and governed—and the infrastructure of measurement is setting the limits to the political imagination of how the unprecedented challenges at the heart of the Agenda could be managed.

Finally, the epistemic infrastructure is built in the specific context and through specific means. The SDGs are not purely a technocratic monitoring programme but rather were developed through a more democratic process of consultation and coalition-building (Bandola-Gill et al., 2022; Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2019). As such, the ‘epistemic virtue’ (Daston & Galison, 2007) of technocratic objectivity of numbers is replaced by a more democratic ‘collective journey’ of the SDGs (UN General Assembly, 2015, p. 1).

Thus, one of the key reasons why the SDGs were infrastructuralised lay in the fact that they managed to involve a broad coalition of actors in the seemingly technical process of developing indicators (Tichenor, 2022). The balancing act between democracy and technocracy of the SDGs has vast consequences—epistemic ones (in terms of the technical quality of the indicator frameworks) but also political ones (in terms of enhancing participation in the development of metrics beyond the narrow expert group of the IOs) (Bandola-Gill et al., 2022).
Our Common Agenda follows the SDG’s logic of participation (reflecting the broader paradigmatic changes in global governance, e.g. Jacquet & Jamieson, 2016; Best, 2014). For example, the report is described as an effect of a year-long ‘global listening exercise’ across ‘four tracks’ (UN, 2021, p. 84): Member States, prominent thought leaders, young people and civil society. It explicitly encourages the inclusion of non-dominant voices in global politics:

People wish to be heard and to participate in the decisions that affect them. Institutions could establish better ways of listening to people whom they are meant to serve and taking their views into account, especially groups that are frequently overlooked, such as women, young people, minority groups or persons with disabilities.

(UN, 2021, p. 24)

Nevertheless, as was the case with the SDGs (Bandola-Gill et al., 2022), the Agenda conceptualises participation through quantification. Re-thinking what and whose knowledge is seen as valid is one of the tenets of transformations (Abson et al., 2017)—and the transformative potential of participation is questionable when it is conducted through the same (quantified) means. A closer look at the materialities of the SDG/Our Common Agenda infrastructure shows that these seemingly transformative projects are in fact oriented towards merely selecting ‘the best’ indicators, rather than a deep rethinking of the governance of sustainability transitions.

4 THE LIMITS TO TRANSFORMATION THROUGH NUMBERS

This paper explored the relationship between the Our Common Agenda report and the Sustainable Development Goals. As argued in the paper, the interplay between the two frameworks goes beyond just intertextual relationships between documents (Farrelly, 2020) but rather is a manifestation of an emergent epistemic infrastructure for knowing and acting upon global challenges.

The theoretical lens of infrastructure helps to explain the relationship between Our Common Agenda and the SDGs but also sheds light on the limitations to their transformative potential. In this concluding section, I discuss the implications stemming from this ‘infrastructural’ turn to politics of quantification as evident in the Our Common Agenda report. As outlined in the introduction, transformative change requires system-level interventions to re-order the boundaries, strategies, stakeholders and solutions of the existing problems (Scooness et al., 2020). There are elements of Our Common Agenda that could potentially be transformative, such as the participation of multiple stakeholders in shaping the agenda, including new, non-dominant voices from developing countries or youth organisations and creating an opportunity for more critical engagement (as we know that co-production and transformation are closely connected: Chambers et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, the particular politics of infrastructure of quantification act as an important barrier to transformation. Here, I will focus on two aspects of the politics of infrastructure that are at play here: the blurred accountability lines and the tendency towards path dependency. Taken together, these two factors limit the transformative potential of Our Common Agenda to one of a ‘weak leverage point’ (cf. Abson et al., 2017) in a systemic change, meaning an intervention that is relatively easy to introduce but does not lead to radical change. The Agenda—and quantified statistical infrastructures more broadly—produce such weak leverage points because they limit the potential for change and the scope of intervention.

The first factor limiting the transformative potential of the quantified infrastructures is their ‘scaffolding’ politics. Within the infrastructure, the political responsibility is dispersed amongst multiple actors and networks without clear lines of accountability. Susan Leigh Star (1999: 382) in her foundational work on infrastructure claimed that its key feature is the lack of central steering power. Just like the 12 commitments of the Agenda report, the infrastructure centres around creating the conditions for political actors to come up with (preferable) solutions. Nevertheless, it is the measurement, not the solutions, that is creating the political momentum. The Agenda criticises some indicators over others, however, it still does not break the ‘measurementality’ (Turnhout et al., 2014) of the UN projects, whereby every political idea has to be expressed through numbers.

Such reliance on quantification as the core mode of knowing global challenges risks perpetuating the existing paradigms. This is due to statistical path dependency (cf. Bandola-Gill, 2022)—whereby existing measures are too entrenched in the existing reporting systems and where change would be so costly that the decision-makers usually opt for existing measures. This is evident in the persistence of GDP, despite its broad critique. Breaking this path dependency in itself would entail a political project—and without a clear agenda for doing so, the numbers will just yield more numbers.

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