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Global Ambition and National Differentiation in the Paris Agreement and the SDGs

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GRAHAM LONG, FEB 5 2016

In 2015, governments signed two prominent and ambitious international agreements; the UN sustainable development goals (SDGs) and the Paris agreement on climate change. Notwithstanding the differences between them, they share a common approach. Both address urgent global problems, and demand a universal response from all countries. But this global response, broken down, is composed of *particular* and *voluntary* national responses that might come together to fulfil this global ambition. Thus, the Paris agreement (see chapter 4) relies for implementation on country-generated 'Intended Nationally Determined Contributions'(INDCs), becoming more ambitious over time; the Sustainable Development Goals rely on "ambitious national responses to the overall implementation of this Agenda" (see 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', para 78), with progress tracked at yearly meetings of a new 'High Level Political Forum'.

There are obvious attractions to this model. It shortcuts the difficulties of securing binding agreement on exactly who should do what. Indeed, it is hard to see how uncoerced agreement could be reached on many of these matters, given the varied state interests in play. Devolving achievement and ambition to individual countries, as it is stated in paragraph 21 of Transforming Our World, "respects national policy space", leaving states in control. This allows a more ambitious agreement to emerge, at least on paper. States can sign up to the *letter* of an agreement full of aspiration and ambition, whilst maintaining their own reservations about all aspects of its *spirit*. It might be pointed out – for good or ill – that a *voluntary, national interpretation* of global ambition places barriers in the way of any system of global accountability. The pragmatic advantages for states, however, come at the cost of opening three significant gaps in these agreements.

The global achievement gap. First, the emphasis on the aggregation of voluntary national contributions means there is no guarantee that the overall response will be *enough*. Every country could achieve their own self-selected targets, but the global goal be missed nonetheless. This is (arguably) the current case with the Paris agreement, where combined INDCs do not reflect the level of ambition required to keep global warming below 2 degrees. In another scenario – and especially so with the more diverse SDGs – we might not be able to *tell* whether or not the global goal has been met. Trying to assess the aggregated ambition of all national contributions demands both the capacity and will to impose accurate and commensurable measurement.

The fairness gap. Second, there is no guarantee that a country's national response will reflect their *fair share* of efforts to achieve the global goal. Quite apart from the potential injustice of the world missing its collective goal – for example, the injustice done to the poorest and most vulnerable section of the world's present people, to nature, or to future generations – there is also injustice between parties where actors do less than they ought to do. That is, when their share of action does not align with their fair share of responsibility. The SDGs avoid allocation of responsibility entirely, preferring instead to (re)establish a "global partnership for sustainable development" (see SDG goal 17). In the climate change context, states' responsibilities are "common but differentiated" in light of their capacities and historical responsibility for climate change. The Paris agreement (see article 4, paragraph 3) indicates that this should be reflected in their INDCs. But *how* this should be done, and the interpretation of this principle itself – for example, whether it should be invoked on an individual or collective basis, or what kind of balance should be struck between these forward-looking and backward-looking considerations of responsibility and capacity – has not been

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worked out.

The coverage gap. Lastly, voluntary national responses risk undermining the comprehensive and universally applicable character of these agreements. The SDG agenda is, on paper, 'indivisible' – an especially important demand given the emphasis on environmental sustainability across the goals. But countries will choose to downplay the parts they find problematic. The UK, for example, has painted the SDGs as something to apply abroad, rather than at home. Where this happens, the SDGs are no longer universal and comprehensive, with all goals applying meaningfully to all countries. The Paris agreement faces similar issues with the coverage of mitigation, adaptation and compensation in particular countries' plans.

The apparent success in reaching these global agreements, then, should be treated with caution. In both cases, much will depend on whether processes and spaces become established that allow for these gaps to be minimised. In part, this can happen through effective measurement and review and the creation of a culture of high comparative ambition, *encouraging* those countries who could do more, *praising* those who do, and *shaming* those who fail to act. The prominence of a range of actors beyond national governments – a common feature of both contexts – might be vital to this exercise.

To draw out this common approach and its problems should not be taken as ignoring the differences in context, content, history, and scale between these two agreements. But assessing what works for each process, how they might reinforce, and what they have in common, will surely prove fruitful. Just as the relative success of the SDG negotiation process might have paved the way for agreement in Paris, so the model of INDCs might prove a template for generating national responses to the SDGs. Both of these agreements are founded on the same global-but-voluntary, universal-but-national compromise. The question is whether this is a flaw that leaves them both *compromised*.

About the author:

Graham Long is Senior Lecturer in Politics at Newcastle University in the UK. He teaches and researches on issues of global justice and human rights. For the last two years he has been researching the Sustainable Development Goals, focusing on ideas of universality, country differentiation, fairness and accountability, in collaboration with the Beyond 2015 global civil society campaign. His most recent publication is "The Idea of Universality in the Sustainable Development Goals".